



The Guide

A Theatergoer's Resource

Edited by Brandon Woolley for the
Education & Community Programs department
at Portland Center Stage

Bust

Written and Performed by Lauren Weedman
Directed by Allison Narver

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PCS's 2010/11 Education & Community Programs are
generously supported by:



with additional support from

Oregon Arts Commission
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Synopsis

BUST is Lauren Weedman's semi-autobiographical work built around her experiences working as a volunteer advocate in a Southern California prison for women. With one foot in Hollywood and the other in jail, the former Daily Show correspondent careens wildly between the two worlds, taking us on a hilarious, poignant, and completely unforgettable ride.



About the Artist



Lauren
Weedman

Lauren Weedman made her television debut on Comedy Central's Emmy Award-winning *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* in 2001 as

a featured Correspondent. It was at that same time that Lauren was a regular on NPR's national, political satire show, *Rewind* and appeared in her solo show, *Homecoming*, Off-Broadway at the Westside Theatre. The New York Times said of Lauren and *Homecoming*, "Like Bob Newhart in his early stand-up routines, she's particularly good at making her points—and making us feel clever. Most important, she's just plain funny, physically and verbally". For two years, Lauren was also a cast member for the long running local-turned-national comedy show *Almost Live* for Comedy Central.

After studying, writing and performing in Amsterdam for five years, Lauren returned to the States with a bang. Her first play, *Homecoming*, began as a 15-minute performance art piece that grew into a full-length show that ultimately toured with the Seattle Repertory Theatre. Later that year, *Homecoming* was featured at HBO's U.S. Comedy Arts Festival in Aspen, Colorado and later found its way to New York City. *Homecoming* earned Lauren the honor of being published in *Women Playwrights: The Best Plays of 2002*.

In the fall of 2002, The Empty Space Theatre in Seattle premiered her latest solo work, *Rash*, directed by Trip Cullman with music by David Russell and produced by Arielle Tepper Productions. Later that year, *Rash* was recognized by The Seattle Times' Footlight Awards, with nods for both Best New Play and Best Solo Performance. Both *RASH* and Lauren received tremendous reviews including "Weedman comes so very close to celebrating indulgence rather than just contemplating it that when she manages to do both things at once, it's dizzyingly brilliant: She ends up hitting all her targets—including herself (Seattle Weekly) and "Since first turning up on Seattle stages in the early 1990s, Lauren Weedman has proved herself one terrifically funny gal. And more people know that since she moved to New York two years ago and earned some well-deserved breaks in TV and Off-Broadway (The Seattle Times)."

In 2004, Lauren's show *Wreckage*, was selected for The NOW Theatre Festival at the REDCAT Theatre at The Disney Music Hall after a successful run at the Upright Citizens brigade theatre in Los Angeles. It was a LA weekly pick of the week describing Lauren and her work as "breathtaking...a female Robin Williams."

Last year, Lauren's most recent performance, *Bust*, was voted Best of the Arts by The Seattle Times, Seattle Magazine and Boise Weekly. Her performance of the show landed her on the cover of LA Weekly's Comedy Issue. It was her work in *BUST* that led to her to receive the Alpert Award in the Arts for Playwriting. The award took her to a six week fellowship at the Macdowell Artist Colony in New Hampshire.

About the Artist (continued)

Her newest show *No...You Shutup* (aka *Off*) directed by Jeff Weatherford was commissioned by Boise Contemporary Theater and was featured as a part of Los Angeles's REDCAT Theater New Works festival in the summer of 2009.

Lauren currently lives and performs in Los Angeles. She has appeared multiple times on *Reno 911* for Comedy Central, as well as *Curb Your Enthusiasm* for HBO. She also starred opposite Eddie Griffin in *Pryor Offences*, a Showtime pilot based on the life of Richard Pryor.

Last year, Sasquatch Books released her first book, a collection of comedic essays, *A Woman Trapped in a Woman's Body (Tales from a Life of Cringe)* which the Kirkus Review identified as one of the Top Ten Indie Books of 2007. Lauren recently appeared on the HBO series *Hung* as "Horny Patty", as well as opposite Eddie Murphy in *Imagine That* for Paramount. She will next be seen opposite Steve Carell and Tina Fey in the Fox feature *Date Night*.

The World of the Play

LAUREN WEEDMAN

Writes What She Sees & Says What She Means

by Maria Dahvana Headley

The idea of putting me on the phone with Lauren Weedman is, in theory, a good one. We're both playwrights who've worked at Boise Contemporary Theater. We're both girls. We're both funny. Or, at least, we try to be, which could mean (especially in a world where a *Vanity Fair* cover article entitled "Why Women Aren't Funny" can be taken seriously) that we are also both neurotic. There is only one real problem, and that is that we both talk like we write—throwing random things out until they coalesce and (hopefully) make sense. Generally, we end up somewhere, even if this somewhere is not where we initially planned to go. We feel fine about this. Never mind the insecure jokes. Unfortunately, our hour and a half on the phone, Lauren in Los Angeles, me in Seattle, resulted in five single-spaced pages of transcribed conversation, plenty of which make exactly no sense.

Lauren Weedman is the author and star of a newly commissioned play at Boise Contemporary Theater. She is (to take on another stereotype) a funny girl who isn't

remotely funny looking. There is no physical something that forced her to develop her sense of humor. No wandering eye, no skewed once-broken nose. Weedman has longish wavy blonde hair, blue eyes and awesomely toned biceps. I eyed them jealously for two hours the last time I hung out with her. She belongs to that rare class of writer—the kind who is attractive enough to get mistaken for an actor. Of course, Weedman is an actor, and she's in a rare class there, too—the kind who is skillful enough to be mistaken for someone else, using no props, and no special costumes, just a precise gift for embodying the things that make each character human.

Bust, a semi-autobiographical account of Weedman's volunteer gig in a women's jail in Los Angeles juxtaposed against her less-than-charmed life in Hollywood, ran at BCT in January 2007 to rave reviews. In *Bust*, Weedman transformed herself into a slew of different characters, including the editor of *Glamour Magazine*, an incarcerated fraud-practitioner and a tough guard who had a lot to say about just how much contraband can fit into one man's ... I'll just leave that alone.

Weedman uses the raw material of her life and relationships to create something thoroughly unique. This is a woman who has no problem saying the things that girls aren't supposed to say. We all want to be the prettiest girl in the room. (OK, so not all of us have

The World of the Play *(continued)*

volunteered in jails in order to ensure that ratio). We're all mad, bad and desperate for love, and plenty of us have the same one-sided crush on Jon Stewart that Weedman did, though I can safely say most of us have never hopped up and down in front of him crying, "I just want to please you!" Though we might, given the chance. Still, most of us are not brave enough to admit publicly to our flaws, our lies and our obsessions.

That's why I dig her, and I'm not alone. She has a resume that includes stints as a featured correspondent on *The Daily Show*, a regular on NPR's political satire show *Rewind*, an off-Broadway run of her solo show *Homecoming*, and a book, *A Woman Trapped in a Woman's Body*. Lately, she's been writing *Inappropriate Girlfriend*, (working title) a TV adaptation of four of the stories from her book, for Imagine Entertainment, 20th Century Fox and the Fox Network, and working on a new play for BCT. Unlike *Bust*, which premiered in Seattle and went through some evolution before it hit the boards at the Fulton Street Center for the Arts, the new play will debut here, giving Idahoans the chance to impact the final product. As in, if you're laughing at her jokes, she might keep them. If not, things could change. Suddenly.

"I improvise in performance," says Weedman. "I want to be affected by the audience's response. I'll try something for two or three nights and then add it to the script if the reaction is good."

"In Boise, I was able to find out a lot about *Bust*, because ... Matt [Cameron Clark] has built an audience that really wants to be there, watching theater, and BCT



does challenging and diverse stuff. I've never felt audience engagement so strongly as when I've been there. Normally, I like the whole event of live theater. I like to feel like we're all listening, like it's a conversation ... and then I can change my performance to fit the audience. In (unnamed city of woe), though, I had to find a way that I wouldn't be bothered if

someone's wheelchair brake went off and they glided onstage next to me, still asleep! Or if they, like, died in the first row. I had to disengage from the audience and put up a really strong fourth wall."

Weedman has mentioned that most of her work comes out of whatever she's obsessed with, and that lately, as in the above story, her predominant emotion can be encapsulated by the phrase, "What is wrong with these people?"

Frustration with the rest of humanity is a venerable vein for comedy, and plenty of comics have made entire careers using that single punchline. The thing I love about Weedman's work, however, is that it goes deeper than simple irritation. It attacks the aggravations and injustices of the world through the filter of Weedman's impatience with herself.

"That's what I mean," she says. "People are starting to look at me in a worried way, like I'm a grouchy old man. And they've started to call me ma'am. It's not good. No one can tell whether I'm complaining or joking."

It seems, however, that frustration is part of what fuels Weedman's creative process.

"How I used to write a new work, was that it was all obsessions. If I was obsessed with the fact that crazy people seemed to be really attracted to me, I'd write that down and make a show out of it. Even the jail thing was organic, because I knew I was going to volunteer anyway. I'll start writing moments of stuff, things that have been intense, characters, people, and then music that I've been digging, or art, even ... but I always want to find a story. To find a story is hard if it's not there right on the surface in my life.

Bottom line, Weedman doesn't want to be "doing the Lauren Weedman thing" with every show. She's interested in using herself to talk about other things, rather than doing a show that is "all about me. Even if it is, on the surface, all about me. After performing *Bust*, I had a discussion with two ladies who came up and wanted to talk about women and the media and jails and I was like, 'This is what I want to do!' I want to know that I'm talking about something that goes beyond me."

At one point during our call, Weedman said, of the

The World of the Play *(continued)*

impetus that drives her to create new work, “I have to find people who believe in me more than I believe in myself.” Then she said that it sounded creepily needy. I don’t think so—every performer wants an audience that is really listening. An audience that is laughing. An audience that is (please, please, please) awake. And hopefully, an audience that wants to learn something from someone who knows something interesting. Not that Lauren Weedman sees herself as a teacher. She’s more likely to tell you that she’s as lost as anyone else.

Still, she says, “I have one moment in *Bust* that I have tweaked through the shows. There’s a quote in the prison chaplain’s office, something about how it’s the little steps that we take that will change humanity. I go on to say that I feel like I’m taking little steps, but side to side. I used to say this line like a joke, but lately, I’ve started saying it directly to the audience, like a preacher, to make people respond. ‘We have to take little steps!’ It feels good to act like I really know something.”

Personally, I think she does. And even if she’s joking, the best jokes are rooted in truths. Lauren Weedman is that kind of funny.



SEATTLE TIMES REVIEW A Horrific, Hilarious Journey into Prison Hell, L.A. Fluff

By Misha Berson

Trust Lauren Weedman to know this: When you try to do something for someone else, you reveal a lot about yourself.

Weedman’s new solo piece *Bust* is rife with hilarity and home truths gleaned the hard way. The still-evolving stage memoir is partly about the admirable impulse to do good in the world (in this case, by volunteering as an advocate for indigent female prisoners), yet it smartly leaves sentimentality and self-congratulation out of the equation.

Such is typical of actor-performer Weedman, the Los Angeles-based self-portraitist who honed her impressive talent at Empty Space Theatre and returns on this occasion to inaugurate the company’s first season in its new home, the Lee Center for the Arts.

For artistic director Allison Narver’s mounting of *Bust*, the stage is quite bare — apart from day-glo stripes on the floor like police markers at a crime scene, and striking slashes and squares of illumination in Jessica Trundy’s fierce lighting design.

But Weedman fills the void with take-no-prisoners insights and colorful, confrontational characters. These range from hard-knocks women inmates and macho guards at the Los Angeles County Jail, to narcissistic gym buddies sharing diet tips and pet causes. (The latter include a dog-lover who, in a biting funny riff, shares her passion for rescuing abandoned dachshunds.) As in previous solo outings (*Rash*, *Amsterdam*) Weedman portrays herself as a klutzy, insecure cut-up who charges into situations that quickly become overwhelming — and self-revealing.

She jests about volunteering with the prison-advocacy group Friends Outside to get “a shot at being the prettiest girl in the room,” for once, in beauty-obsessed L.A. But the stark truths of incarceration are driven home during a scared-straight tour of the jail.

The World of the Play

(continued)

In a long, gripping sequence that veers from hilarious to harrowing, we hear and see what Weedman takes in: The clanging of cell doors. The warnings of guards not to “coddle” wily, hard-core prisoners. The spectacle of seven people crammed into cells built for four.

The indigent inmates Weedman is assigned to are drawn in specific strokes. An illiterate, homeless prostitute and meth addict pathetically grateful to be offered help — but well beyond its reach. A drama queen whose urgent neediness pushes every one of Weedman’s do-gooder, people-pleaser buttons. And a frightened young first-offender, lacking the legal or financial resources for a defense.

Weedman’s intense depictions of, and responses to, these women are contrasted with a society of Hollywood wannabes obsessed with such weighty concerns as snagging a role in a soft-drink commercial.

Bust excels in its vivid prison segments and its soft-target but rib-tickling satirical



snippets and is on track to be one of Weedman’s best shows. And it’s a fine opener for the new digs of Empty Space, a company long devoted to making us laugh, cringe and ponder.

INSIGHT INTO WOMEN’S CORRECTIONAL FACILITIES

Meeting the challenge: positive culture in women’s facilities

Women’s facilities offer many opportunities for correctional systems to change how offenders view the criminal justice system and their reaction to the environment. The institutional culture, which is based on safety and security, must be constantly managed and several management systems must be in place. In this article, safety and security does not refer to the technology, fences and routine security practices but rather relates to the culture within the institution. Creating a professional atmosphere is an ongoing challenge for staff.

Culture is established within any correctional setting by the actions of management and staff. These actions are particularly important in women’s facilities because this will create the first line of communication and increase the flow of information between the staff and offenders. The credibility of staff is paramount to this effort and female offenders must believe their issues will be heard and dealt with. All staff have a role in creating a positive environment and training staff is one key component to developing their understanding of this and other issues.

Staff and Offender Communication

Training is one important aspect of creating a positive professional culture within the Denver women’s facility. Another critical piece is the expectation of staff and offender communication throughout all levels of staff. The appropriate response by staff to

The World of the Play *(continued)*



offender communication is either verbal or written. The presence and continuing availability of staff in the living unit was essential in establishing the foundation of communication. Case management and supervisory staff are also vital links in the communication cycle.

Written communication is important to the process of open communication. Interview requests addressed to supervisory staff are answered in a timely fashion and written communication from offenders to the warden's office is distributed to appropriate staff. Offenders understand that they will receive a response when submitting written or relaying verbal communications, including grievances.

The DOC's grievance process has three steps. Regardless of the number of steps in the process, the goal is to fulfill an offender's expectation of being answered by staff. Issues outlined in grievances must be taken seriously and investigated for legitimate concerns. Tracking grievances and issues is a way to evaluate the culture in the facility; it provides insight into the communication systems. The more grievances that are resolved at the lower level, the better the system. Periodic review of data regarding

the number and types of grievances filed is done by the management team to assure the process is working appropriately.

Management by walking around is also critical to the open communication in the facility. Supervisors are expected to be in the living units and available to offenders throughout the day. Also vital to the flow of communications is the relationship between the criminal investigators and the facility. The establishment of weekly meetings among the warden, criminal investigators, facility-intelligence staff, and security and housing managers has provided routine and consistent communication. The meetings are an opportunity for participants to offer feedback on issues that are being investigated and to develop strategies for monitoring new information. Other agenda items include evaluating information from confidential reports or telephone-monitoring activities and reviewing mail-watch information. All of these actions provide the pieces necessary to understand the networks and activities of the population. The strategies developed during these intelligence meetings include mass security strikes with shakedowns and random drug-testing of offenders.

Also discussed during these meetings are the results of monitoring the relationships that occur among the female offenders. The family units and relationships formed within the facility are sometimes a source of difficulty because they can result in violence. In female facilities, relationships often begin as support but the pattern of abuse, which the offender experienced in the community, can continue inside the facility. A review of the incident reports regarding fighting can provide valuable information about the offenders' relationships. Assuring the offender's safety is paramount, so all of the information from the review is used to ensure that appropriate housing and job assignments are made.

Discussion Questions & Exploration Activities

1. Lauren volunteered her time and effort in order to have better insight into the world of women's correctional facilities. What type of volunteer work have you experienced that has impacted your life or others lives as well?
2. Often in one woman shows there are many different characters that will be portrayed by one actress. How much harder is it for one person to embody multiple characters and make it believable for an audience? Is this type of theatre more impactful at times or that much harder to relate to?
3. Lauren uses comedy as a means to entertain and also enlighten audiences, but her work is also moving and insightful. After viewing *Bust*, how has Lauren changed your opinion or opened your eyes in regards to women's correctional facilities?
4. Challenge yourself and those around you to volunteer at a social service organization for 2 to 3 weeks and document the process along the way. Share and discuss with friends your findings after this unique experience.

Original Sources & Links to Further Research

Synopsis

<http://www.laurenweedman.net/documents/BUSTKit.pdf>

About the Artist

<http://www.laurenweedman.net/bio.html>

An Interview with Lauren

<http://www.boiseweekly.com/gyrobase/improvisations-and-obsessions/Content?oid=937863&mode=print>

Seattle Times Review

<http://www.laurenweedman.net/documents/BUSTKit.pdf>

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