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LAist Interview: Director/Adaptor of *Voices from Chornobyl*, Cindy Marie Jenkins

While searching for a one-act play to direct at an upcoming director's festival, playwright, dramaturge, adaptor, and director Cindy Marie Jenkins stumbled across a collection of interviews from individuals affected by the Chernobyl disaster. Deeply moved by the stories of these survivors, Jenkins immediately began adapting the interviews for the stage. *Voices from Chornobyl* premiered at [Open Fist](#) and was later showcased at L.A.'s annual theatre festival, [EdgeFest](#). Now in its third incarnation, *Voices from Chornobyl* will be a part of the [Empty Stage's New Voices Series](#) Sept. 30th and Oct. 14th.

What was it about the stories of these individuals that compelled you to compile them into a play?

CMJ: There was such poetry in their descriptions. Conflicted feelings about being interviewed, about their land, and ultimately radiation. They are tied to their land and their homes in ways that I had never experienced. The beauty in their horror and how they went on living their lives. How they were treated. Who knew what. Also, before I read the book, if you had asked me about Chernobyl, I barely would have been able to mumble out "nuclear-something-or-other." I wondered how many other Americans knew little about the event? How many Los Angeles residents knew where the nearest nuclear plant or landfill was? I sure didn't. At that time, the misinformation about the WMD's was uncovered, so the themes of leadership and ignorance rang true in me.

On a purely theatrical side, I love working with a play like an orchestra, and storytelling through sounds only. Then opening my eyes and matching the physical environment with the words, all in a very close collaboration with the actors and designers. When I'm processing a new adaptation (we're on Draft 13 and 3 fully-produced productions), I re-read the entire book and find a unique way of record-keeping, which sounds very clinical, but I need to process the entire book again before finding the new voices for a new adaptation.

What is the overall theme of *Voices from Chornobyl*?

CMJ: Living. How do you live within radiation? How do you live away from home? How do you live in your home when the earth betrays you? Survival of the mind and of the body. The subtitle is "Chronicle of the Future" and that is really the theme - how do we survive in this world we've created, and how will our children survive?

One of the voices in the play talks about being a "Chernobyl person." What is a "Chernobyl person"? Can this term be more broadly applied outside the world of the play? If so, to whom?

CMJ: A Chernobyl person is one who is labeled. We all know how easy it is to label people and then not regard them as anything but the group into which they've been put. People are afraid of Chernobyl people (I am speaking of the people interviewed in the book) and afraid that they glow in the dark. Young children and adults alike are labeled. Family members won't allow Chernobyl people to live with them when they were evacuated. That quote "You are a normal person. A regular person. You go to work, you go on vacation once a year, you eat dinner with your family. Then one day all of a sudden you become a Chernobyl person. A freak." I've heard that sentiment expressed by cancer victims, new mothers, anyone who can be labeled. A label lets society remain ignorant. "They" have to deal with it and no one else. "We" don't have to deal with their issues.

But we do! The more I immerse myself in Chernobyl-land, the more I realize that we all have to deal with "their" issues. We all breathe the same air. We all live on the same planet. Just because it happened in the Ukraine doesn't mean that we don't feel the ramifications of it. For instance, every day I receive headlines that have the words "Chernobyl power plant" in the title. Anytime that the word "nuclear" is even brought up, someone uses Chernobyl as a tool against nuclear power, when it's actually nearly impossible for the accident to occur in that same way.

Those 2 examples might appear to contradict each other. That is because I have never set out for this piece to be anti-nuclear, anti-Soviet or anything like that. I want people to walk away from it with their own stories and to just be more aware and active in supporting their environment.

How has *Voices from Chornobyl* been received by L.A. audiences?

CMJ: Very well, but we need more exposure. After the original production, I had the book in the lobby and they sold like hotcakes. People said they wanted to go home and learn more about it. That is what I want. After the Edgefest production, strangers came up to me and wanted to know more; that is actually how we were invited to be part of the Empty Stage Theatre's New Voices Festival, from someone seeing the show at Edgefest.

We are working on more exposure, linking our website www.voicesfromchornobyl.com to Chernobyl websites with more traffic, working closely with the publisher. A charity in the UK wants to host a reading on the anniversary of the accident in 2008. That's great, but I don't want to preach to the converted. I want to convert and I want the converted to take a long hard look at their world and find out what they can do to save it.

What are you hoping audiences will take away from the play?

CMJ: I saw a great bumper sticker today: "Ignore the environment. It will just go away." I want people to walk out of the theater and for the images and the words to seep into their actions. Walk to the store and bring your own bag; let cyclists who are obeying the rules of the road to share the roads with you. Arrange your life around the world and not the other way around. Keep your perspective wider than the dashboard. Instead of labeling, listen to people and their experiences and learn what you can. We are all part of the same world and must work together.

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