

INTERVIEW WITH JODY ENDERS, PROFESSOR AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA BARBARA

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Currently a Distinguished Professor Emerita of French and Theater at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB), Jody Enders dives into her career, favorite French farces, and some of her published books. In the interview, we discussed a variety of topics ranging from her theatre experience in multiple high school productions of *The Music Man* to superstitions in theatre to her new project, coming this Spring.

We discussed two of her books: *Death by Drama and Other Medieval Urban Legends* and *Translating Teacher's Pest and Other Medieval French Farces for Actors, Scholars, and Students*, which will be available this Spring. *Death by Drama*, a text that Enders often referred to as her “favorite child of her lit-crit books,” focuses on urban legends and theatrical stories that many people believed to be true. Her new book is of a different genre than the lit-crit texts. She focuses on translating Middle-French plays for public use. *Translating Teacher's Pest and Other Medieval French Farces for Actors, Scholars, and Students* is her sixth volume of translations. Her new book focuses on plays with an educational theme.

In discussing her path to studying French Medieval theatre, Enders talks about her father's influence and the early experiences in her career that shaped her focus. We discussed the importance of theatre not only in our lives but also in broader society. From her first book, *Rhetoric and the Origins of Drama* (1992), to now, Enders' career has evolved with her. Over the course of her career, Jody wrote literary criticisms and eventually became a translator.

Q: So, I wanted to start off with some general questions. I first wanted you to introduce yourself, your name, what you do, and anything else you want to add to that.

I see, well, you already know me, right? I'm Jody Enders, my PhD is in romance languages, but I wound up in French as opposed to French and Russian, which was my other college major. Then somehow, medieval studies just really grabbed me, even though I didn't like it at all. I love to write, I love to argue, I love to think things through. So, the idea of writing these lit crit books about things that really mattered to me, questions that I thought were important. Where does drama come from? Why is it so violent? How do you know the truth when you hear it? And, what about intention? So those were the things that I thought really mattered. Then after that, things took a turn, and I started in the classroom, but I really wanted to teach one of my undergrad classes the farce of the far, and so I thought: well, how long would it take me to just do this myself? And it turns out, it doesn't take that long at all to do something serviceable, and then one thing led to another, and now I'm a translator, and then the fifth volume, I should have proofs on any day.

Q: That's great. My next question was going to be about your path to theatre and academia. I feel like you talked about that, but is there anything else you would like to add?

Because I was in the generation where most people in English departments didn't really understand the performance angle of theatre and my first book, *Rhetoric and the Origins of Drama*, was very well reviewed, I mean it got a prize. But, it got some critique from people in theatre who said: "Well, I'm not sure she really understands performance." And I thought about it and started going to theatre conferences. It was a revelation.

So, the other really cool thing about it was that my father was actually a filmmaker and I have three siblings and my two sisters totally have the cinema-bug. I thought, oh what a shame, I missed that visual gene. But I didn't! So, once I learned something about theatre, I do this sort of directing in my head, which is something I never imagined.

Q: Why is it important to study medieval theatre and history? What can it tell us about today?

Oh, well, hit me where I live, why don't you? I feel like I've spent the past, gee, well, it's a number of decades now, just arguing that it's not some distant past and that all the things that we care about, or should care about, are rehearsed, there elegantly, obsessively, foolishly. Yeah, I'm trying to think about the book that got you to ask me that. Where *Death by Drama* lived was the notion that people are

interested in the past and we want to learn it, ideally, so we don't make some of the same mistakes, but there's this intuition that a lot of medievalists have that just because something has been written down or preserved, it's true. That's not the case. In fact, one of the more interesting things that happened lately is, I guess it was maybe two years ago, I taught an undergrad class on these urban legends and I thought there's never been a greater time to teach people a healthy skepticism. I mean, how do you know whether what you're reading is the truth or if it's a lie?

Q: I have two questions about *Death By Drama*. How would you, personally, pitch the book to undergrads and students?

Oh! Well, I just tried. I mean, it was pretty much what I briefly alluded to, right? Do you think you're the only people out there who are living in a world where it's difficult sometimes to figure out what's true and false? Isn't one of the jobs of the university to help you figure out how to do that, distinguish truth from lies? Well, guess what? If you happen to be interested in theatre, as I am, there's a whole subculture where theatre is the way for people to talk about what's true and what's false, because certainly today, you could argue that it's one of the few mediums both relentlessly true and in your face and false at the same time. Real bodies, real space, real time, false fictionalized. Plus, the stories are fantastic. I mean, I didn't even know what an urban legend was. Just by chance, I think it was in an issue of *Psychology Today*, it was some magazine I was reading for pleasure, and I read about the alligators in the sewers and things like that. Things that I believed growing up. So, that's what I would do. Plus, the stories are fun. The exam I did in class was kind of fun. I gave them three narratives that I had translated from French, and the exam was using the tools you've learned in class. Tell me which one of these is true and which one is an urban legend. It almost didn't matter. If they had a good rationale for thinking one of the things was true. But yeah, a couple of them got it. So, it's actually a super important thing to know how to do now. Look for the telltale signs of falseness. I mean, there are some telltale signs for urban legends. Does it have the notorious friend of a friend? Does the evidence somehow always seem to disappear just when you are on the edge of proving it? Is it full of some generalization that's practically become a motto? So I mean, there are certainly red flags that a lot of them picked up on. But it was sort of a fun exercise. It was fun; you could still do really well on the exam if you got it wrong. It was more impressive if you got it right.

Q: The section that specifically stood out to me was the "Madness and Method Acting Section." How does the story of Ajax impact modern ideas of method acting and theatre?

Let me ponder for a moment. Well, one of the most obvious things, I guess, is this loss of control. You are so taken up by the role that you lose yourself, and there were a bunch of examples in that chapter. I

don't remember whether I talked about it in the chapter or not, but the actor Evan Handler, who was in a fight scene with Nicol Williamson, a notorious drunk, went off the fight choreography. It was one of these great incidents where somebody's loss of control, someone's just giving himself over, actually caused a real danger. Then, if you think about something like the curse of *MacBeth* where actors will still say "The Scottish Play" or something like that. It is part of this mystique of theatre. In toying with forces unseen, whether it's God or the Devil or the dark recesses of your mind, if you mess around with that, you're in danger. For giving yourself over to the pleasure of the play, right? Which is what my late colleague Burt States called it. Personally, I've always been interested in all that's unseen. What things are dangerous to tap into? We tend to think of it for the Middle Ages: "Oh yes, of course, everything was dangerous because the church was going to come." The church did plenty of nasty things, but the church was also part of the feast of fools and carnival. It's never "the church." I mean, it's one really horrible bishop who did this horrible thing to this particular community, so the darkness is not just from the usual villains. The nasty hegemonies that I'm sure you've learned all about at Smith. It's more than that. Sometimes the danger is within. Anything else in that chapter struck you? It's probably the one that is one of the least medieval. The Ajax example is classic, but the legislation is real. You don't want women to go to the theatre and lose their babies. They clearly believed it enough to legislate who could come in and see the theatre. It's pretty amazing stuff, especially when you can find these actual documentations, which is probably the most historical thing that I do. There's not that much evidence of performance, unfortunately. Probably something you were going to ask me again.

Mary: Yeah, I was laughing when you started talking about *Macbeth* because I wrote the question framing it with *Death By Drama* and *Macbeth*. I was like, "What if she doesn't want me to say it?" I can't say it because what if? So I went a different way. Then, you said it.

Oh well, you know. I haven't been on the stage as an actress in decades and decades and decades. I thought the curse only held if you were actually in the play.

Mary: I think so. I think it's about people in the theatre. But I didn't want to take chances, so I went a different way.

And now you know, I'm not as superstitious as the superstitions of the theatre. I think my favorite story in *Death by Drama* is the second one. The man who manifestly fell in love with another man dressed as a woman. Oh! And of course, the Snuff story is where it all started for me. It was unbelievable, but too believable. It also gives you a sense that maybe in this urban legend, it was potentially easier to talk about some of these things, like queer attraction and things like that.

Q: I wanted to talk about the new book you have coming out, too. I've read that part of its goal is to make lesser-known French theatre more accessible through translation. What do you hope or want people to take away from the new book?

In a way, it was the most natural fit for college campuses, which is where all of this started for me. They're all about education. The difficulties of it, the unfairness of it, the challenges of it, that need to be acted out about it. Including: what's the point of it? I mean, if it gets people to look at all the ways in which we learn about, not just what's in the book, but learn about yourselves and your culture. It's sort of a point of mine that, I mean, a pet peeve about education in the US, but I'll use my farce mouth. I always thought that obscurantism was just bullshit. Education is supposed to be accessible and approachable. It's supposed to facilitate communication, not the opposite. Not cut off people into a cultural elite or an ivy tower. It's supposed to be a more community-modeled enterprise where we're all in it together. The plays in that book pretty much do that. Some of them will show you who the enemies are, like the ones who didn't like women having an education. The politics of some of them are absolutely fascinating, but the bottom line is: who wants to get educated? Who is trying to stop them? If one kind of education doesn't work, is there another one for them? So, that's what I'm hoping! Then, if the other thing that comes out of it is that the Middle Ages and these Medieval satiricists seem a little bit more forward-thinking than some people in their bubbles on either side of the political spectrum are today, then I say so much the better! It's actually something that I've always hated about academia. That's why this is the perfect project for me. I think you can still deal with incredibly difficult, critical thinking, and have a foul mouth.

Q: How did you come about your project in particular?

It's not very scientific. I had my favorites. Except for the first volume, I try to find a connective tissue for everything. I knew I had all these education ones, and that took me back to what I thought I was going to have my career in, which was the history of rhetoric. Medieval pedagogy and persuasive speech are where I started intellectually. But a strange thing did happen in that book. I had maybe five other plays that were originally part of it, and I had good first drafts of, specifically about education, but the volume was feeling too bookish. I didn't want it to be the kind of book that only an academic will love. So, I expanded the notion of education to peasants trying to make their way in the world. I saved some of these other ones for another volume. I probably have eight in me. *Trial by Farce* took me back to rhetoric and the origins of drama, and the lawyerly aspect of it. This one took me back to where it all began. Medieval writers were obsessed with pedagogy. The Medieval Ages is one of the most

pedagogical periods of France. Honestly, the other thing is I'm just glad people can still publish a book at all today because I don't know how much longer that's going to last.

Q: Do you have any advice for anyone beginning their career as a Medievalist, Historian, or Academic?

Always be prepared to answer the question: so what? And I imagine you're prepared because it was essentially the first question you asked me. Why should we care about any of this stuff? And it has to be more than "it's relatable," which wasn't a word when I was in college. So, be prepared to answer the question: so what? What are the advantages and disadvantages? How do you go about it? Be prepared to argue that point using something other than your feelings because we've been cultivating these personal narratives for decades, and I have nothing against personal narratives. I think we're only now starting to see the nefarious results of what happens when everything is expressed in terms of feelings. They can never be disputed because they are your feelings. Instead of having argumentation and civil discourse be at the crown of civil society, there's a very negative valence attributed to disagreement at all. Argument has become a bad thing. So, revive the art of civil argumentation. So, those are the two things. Figure out what's true and argue about *so what*. A good memory helps, so does luck. Even if you don't have a good memory, you have to have a good nose as a historian. Some of the coolest things I've found were from reading a footnote and thinking there's more going on here, and I have to look at the original source. And the original source was often an archive for lit crits. You find all sorts of things.