

An Exclusive Interview with *Jane Austen's Northanger Abbey* Playwright, Carissa Meagher

1. How long have you been writing plays for/how did you first get into writing plays?

a. *I was on stage, as an actor, from a very young age and certainly tried my hand at writing short plays as a child. However, it was in high school when I really discovered my love for the art. My regular acting class did not fit into my school schedule, so I landed in a playwriting class instead, much to my chagrin. The teacher, Karen Pollard, had an incredible skill in inspiring deep and vulnerable pieces for the stage from her young students. An assignment from that class became my first full length play, which earned me my first professional staged reading, and the rest is history! The love for it stuck with me through drama school and eventually inspired me to get my MFA in Playwriting from the Lir Academy at Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland.*

2. What inspired you to choose this specific Jane Austen novel to adapt?

a. *Jane Austen is, obviously, known for romantic novels full of keen observational humor and sharp wit. Northanger Abbey is no exception in this regard, but it also comes with the added element of being satirical in nature, specifically in regards to Gothic Novels. This combination really attracted me as a reader and a writer. I found myself absorbed in the budding romance of the books protagonist, Catherine Morland and her new suitor Henry Tilney, while also curious about the darkness to be found at Northanger Abbey—only to find myself suddenly cracking up at Austen's commentary on it all.*

It was, indeed, her first written, though her last published, and as such it is often seen as her "youngest" novel—but also her funniest. I have spoken to many Austen fans who have told me Northanger, despite some of her other novels being more skillfully written, is their favorite because Catherine Morland is the most similar to Jane Austen herself when she was young—a young lady, obsessed with novels, who dreams of becoming a heroine, much like the ones in her books.

3. For those not as familiar with the story, can you give us a brief overview of what to expect?

a. *Northanger Abbey follows the story of Catherine Morland, an unlikely heroine. The reader sees her go from a wild and free spirited kid, who much prefers rolling down hills and playing cricket to learning the piano, to an intelligent young lady, ready for a life in society. With a great affinity for gothic novels, Miss Morland approaches situations with a skewed sense of reality, and is constantly aware of the terrors that could be lurking around every corner. This tendency leads to trouble when Miss Morland is invited for a stay at Northanger Abbey, the dark and mysterious home of the Tilney family. Miss Morland, meanwhile, is falling further in love with the youngest son of the family, Mr. Henry Tilney, causing great trouble when she grows suspicious of his father and the dark history the house may hold.*

4. Can you explain some of the similarities and differences between the novel, and your adaptation that audiences can expect to see?

- a. *My adaptation stays true to the story of Catherine Morland, her entrance into society and the subsequent events that lead her to her great adventure in Northanger Abbey. However, Jane Austen herself is also a character in my play, commenting on the situations Miss Morland finds herself in and offering, often comical, narration and insight into the mind of a gothic novel fanatic. When I read the novel, I felt Austen was reaching through the text and speaking directly to me, at times, whispering her opinions of these people directly in my ear. I wanted to find a way of capturing that feeling onstage, and of highlighting Austen's own experience as an avid, imaginative reader which is mirrored in Miss Catherine Morland. As such, in my version, Jane Austen finds herself a player in her story, playing the part of Catherine Morland in the telling of Northanger Abbey, while still remaining the narrator and creator of the novel.*

5. What do you hope audiences take away from this production?

- a. *I hope audiences walk away from this production with a greater appreciation for Jane Austen and her breadth of work in varying styles. Northanger Abbey is not necessarily her most well known novel and I think it offers this darker side of Austen that people don't immediately associate with her. Also, the story is ultimately uplifting and offers us a great reminder to lift our heads from our books (or our phones, the news, computers) and really connect with the world around us, without immediately supposing the worst in others or ourselves.*