

# Playwright Jennie Berman Eng goes in search of an ‘AUTHENTIC’ Holocaust movie



A scene from Jenni Berman Eng’s “A Moving Picture”  
Screenshot

By Lisa Traiger  
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**“When I heard about Ravensbruck, I thought, ‘How could I have never been told about an all-female camp?’”**

Jennie Berman Eng doesn’t mind being labeled a Jewish playwright. In fact, she proudly owns the moniker as the first-place winner of the Ninth Annual Jewish Playwriting Contest.

“The term [Jewish playwright] is something I proudly wear,” she said from her Annandale home. “I think it defines me as much as I would say female playwright, because everything I write comes from my worldview, my lived experience, and Judaism for me has always been about values and family.”

Eng’s winning play, “A Moving Picture,” is a Holocaust tale for the 21st century, showcasing an abrasive and self-aggrandizing Hollywood film auteur and his seminar of budding film students tasked with writing an authentic Holocaust screenplay. But beneath the surface, it wrestles with Jewish values and present-day social

justice issues.

Eng, 44, said she began the script years ago while a student in the MFA program of New York’s New School drama department. After it got set aside as life got in the way — including marriage and two children — she returned to it after moving back to the Washington area.

“That first draft I wrote was pretty terrible and I put it away for a long time,” Eng said.

She grew up in what is now called North Bethesda, attending Temple Beth Ami and graduating from Walter Johnson High School. “Here I had access to the U.S. Holocaust [Memorial] Museum library.”

She began spending time to research various facets of Holocaust history, particularly the role that large corporations played in the Nazi war effort, including big names like Mercedes, Bayer, Siemens and Volkswagen. “I remember my parents would never buy a German car, for example.”

“That really changed my understanding of the corporate experience in the Holocaust, the profiteering that happened and the enslavement of Jews and others for financial gain by companies that still exist today,” she said. And that was part of the Holocaust story she wanted to tell.

But other stories, particularly about the German all-women’s concentration camp Ravensbruck just 35 miles from Berlin, also captured her imagination.

“When I heard about Ravensbruck, I thought, ‘How could I have never been told about an all-female camp? Was that a Holocaust experience that was not worth talking about?’”

“I realized,” she said, “that’s what I want to focus on.” Her early draft was set entirely in the past, but she realized it lacked urgency to keep present-day viewers engaged. The world didn’t need another dramatization like the “Diary of Anne Frank” or “Schindler’s List.”

Then she remembered something her brother had told her when he took a Holocaust film studies class in college.

“He told me that the professor said that, statistically,

every character in a Holocaust film should die, because statistically there were so few survivors, but in films they never do,” Eng said. “That resonated with me.”

After immersing herself in the Holocaust film genre, she noted: “The truth is the protagonist always lives because [the viewer] gets invested in the character. So you see them suffer, but they live, they’re redeemed in some way and return to society.”

But that isn’t what happened in real life, of course.

This became Eng’s hook, and in rewriting her draft, she toggled between scenes set in an NYU Holocaust screenwriting class and scenes between two friends in Ravensbruck, who used vaudeville-like comedy sketches to assuage their suffering.

“A Moving Picture” also speaks to the current moment with the character Gail, an African American Holocaust studies major.

“Gail is trying to understand genocide in the world,” Eng said. “As I’m rewriting, I’m thinking about why Jews have not been at the forefront of social justice in America? What we’re seeing now [with injustices against African Americans] is the same kind of thing that happened to Jews in the early 1930s in Germany – a systemic erosion of rights until eventually the police were targeting Jewish people for everyday infractions.”

Eng wonders why the present-day American Jewish community has become complacent. “Have we so fully assimilated that we don’t need to think about those things?”

Her winning play is a way to confront issues of the Holocaust, but more contemporaneously, she wants to inspire audiences – particularly Jewish audiences – to rethink the current Black Lives Matter social protest movement. “Why,” she asks, “are Jews not in this for Eric Garner and George Floyd?”

For this year’s JPP contest, 254 playwrights submitted scripts from 26 states and five countries. Due to the closure of performing arts and community venues, presenting excerpts and voting took place online and more than 1,500 people voted on videotaped selections from the seven finalists recorded on Zoom to select Eng’s play, which she calls a dark comedy.

“The characters in the scenes from Ravensbruck use humor as a coping device,” she said. “But I’ve had audience members tell me it’s not appropriate to joke about these things ... yet people use humor, even in the worst moments of their lives.”

Eng adds, “I mean, as Jews, we’ve always had a rich tradition of relying on humor to soften our circumstances.” [WJW](#)

To watch an excerpt of Jennie Berman Eng’s “A Moving Picture,” visit <https://bit.ly/2QaKa6p>



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Photo by David Stuck