

MANILA PAGES

**Assembled by Alice Tuan (U.S.A.)
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A. GARCIA aka ROKAFELLA North Bergen, New Jersey

Theater is a place where I can have a voice equal to the men... my stories can be told without being subjected to an outside perspective... a woman can be tough, aggressive, motivational and an example of abuse... Hip-Hop inside a theater is a liberating place for her to recite rhymes and play records- vinyl, spin on her head and create beats with her mouth, she can also hold a spray can and put her writings on the wall. Hip-hop theater women are presented with many options regarding characters... so I am not stuck with just being an addict or a whore, but I can be an artist or a struggling artist or an artist trying to provide for her beloved partner and /or children... theater is there to reflect reality indoors, and I feel like my street reality is palatable to the indoors audience because we all hustle to some extent... we all want to fit in... hip-hop was about standing out, not conforming and so hip-hop is both... resisting and looking for recognition... the duality is perfect in theater..

ok hope you like it... hit me back... I have to dye my hair red tomorrow...not lucy ricardo red but a tint to my dark brown.. who knows...it is for my character (of the crack mother) in that indy film...

DAEL OLANDERSMITH New York, NY

'I ma trying to write stories'. I am interested in the human condition and to be pigeonholed as a 'Black female playwright' is disconcerting to me. It is a given that I'm Black and female. No one says that Arthur Miller or Edward Albee are white, male playwrights-- they're just playwrights. Given that, it (in many people's minds) determines the 'kind of writing' I should be doing. The new play is an English/Irish/ Nuyorican play written by me, a Black woman, and directed by a Czech woman. An Asian woman will be doing costumes. I explained this to someone recently and their response was 'Why? are you trying to make a point?' My reponse was/ is: I'm NOT making a point . This is the way it's supposed to be and that's the point. Albee can write about Bessie smith, Neil Jordan can do the 'Crying Game' and 'Mona Lisa', Shakespeare can write the Moor... why can't I write a play about English and Irish people? And what makes someone think that only white males have that option? The rules have been set by white males and it's time to break them so ALL of us can just write'...

KARIN AGUILAR-SAN JUAN St. Paul, MN

I don't have anything to say about theater except this comment about whiteness as a spectacle: I've been living for 4 years in the Great White North and still, it all looks like Lake Wobegon to me.

Some people actually came here to photograph the place, which is supposedly fictional:

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/0012/feature5/>

As for actual theater, I haven't paid for any. Our students staged something they called the Family Reunion which had good acting but no message; the point was for them to interview people all over the Twin Cities and tell their stories. Instead, the students told about themselves. Isn't it often true that when we ask for other people's stories, what we hear is about ourselves?

ELLEN McLAUGHLIN
Nyack, NY

So here's what I've been thinking about:

In the last year, as America's administration has steadily squandered all the international good will directed our way in the wake of 9/11 and piece by piece dismantled much of what is worthwhile about my country and the principles it was founded on, I have given in at times to despair and the helplessness of the particular kind of rage this obscenity has induced.

The one moment of hope occurred through this medium we all share. On March 3, 2003, a global phenomenon took place which was unprecedented in human history. On that day, people all over the world did readings and performances of *LYSISTRATA*, one of the oldest plays in existence. It was a project engendered by two out-of-work actresses in New York who put the plea on a web site, wondering if it might catch on. It did, beyond anyone's wildest expectations.

Every major city in the world, along with numerous minor ones, hosted readings, sometimes dozens of separate ones in one city, in theaters, mosques, churches, town halls, temples and living rooms. Performances were as far flung as Siberia, New Zealand and the press corps tent in Afghanistan. During the course of that one day, a staggering number of people read that ancient Greek comedy about women attempting to stop war in the most direct way possible, by refusing sex, thereby refusing to bring more children into the world only to give them up to the engine of war. Yes, it's a comedy, partly because it is about sex, which is inherently funny, but mostly because the women succeed.

Problem solved. Everyone decides that, in the end, life and all its pleasures should be privileged over death and violence. The joy of this stunningly simple solution seems out of reach to us, but there is tremendous hope in even entertaining the notion of it.

In being part of this unprecedented theatrical event (I directed and wrote the version done at Brooklyn Academy of Music--one of 56 readings in New York alone) I felt an extraordinary, palpable connection to the rest of the world for the first time in my experience. And it was through this medium I have given my life to. That made sense to me. The theater is unique as an art form, not because it can reach across boundaries and ethnic divides--all art is capable of such power--but because of the way in which it engages its participants in time together.

It demands that living people perform in front of living people at just this moment, no other, speaking directly to each other, creating each ineffable, unrepeatable event together as they go along. That such a modest medium--it exists only in its own time and space--could have such a worldwide effect was

simply exhilarating. The event belonged to all of us and yet to none of us, not even to old Aristophanes. No other art form can do that. I am grateful to be a member of this profession. I am humbled by the power it can unleash.

May we never underestimate it.

CARIDAD SVICH
New York, NY

We live in uncertain times. Perhaps times have always been uncertain. But it seems to me than now the uncertainty of the modern condition is particularly palpable, as a strange soft porn mentality has begun to govern our lives. There seems to be an increasing, and alarmingly so, lack of clarity not only in local but global culture, as those in power refuse with egregious nonchalance and arrogance to acknowledge the fragile ecologies that need subsist in our world, and the rate of poverty that grows exponentially whilst an infinitesimal percentage of people control the economy.

Those of us who practice art are faced daily with not only the blank page, stone, or screen, but also the seeming impracticality and irrelevance of making work for a consumer-driven culture. The worth and value of a piece of work is measured often by how much one has sold one's work and to whom. Intrinsic value is not a marketable commodity, but therein lies the strength and power of what we as theatremakers and artisans do. We are joined at the hip to the ephemeral, to the vanishing moment, or the passing look.

We make something for it to last not eternally but finite time. Art is like life: finite, and subjected to random destiny. It takes fortitude, will, a good sense of humor and precious little nonsense to get things done and do them with honesty and integrity. We know we are passing through, we know art is a simple mark of our passing through this time and space. Reveling in the temporal, we need look both inside and outside ourselves in order to document properly what we see, hear, and feel, what impacts us truly, regardless of fashion's impatient sensibility. It is tempting and comfortable to submit to fashion. But what if fashion is fascist or inhumane? Do we go along with it anyway? It is not for me to judge or preach. But it is important to me to keep vigilant to culture, and how it transforms and evolves over time.

Practitioners are involved in a constant and never-ending lab experiment with the art form, the discipline, and society. Each mark, cyber scrawl, or invisible footprint (consciously drawn or not) becomes part of the skin stretched out over the planet, and part of the living membrane of society. It is our job as theatremakers to not only make the mark but also be alert to the other marks that have been made before us and in our time. We cannot predict the future, even as it is constantly within our reach as every second goes by. But we can make a living present, a truly living present (living for all) out of the strength of our conscience, and a willingness to refuse intolerance in our world.

A far cry heard close:

Multiple languages are released
through the human
YES

Caridad Svich
resident playwright, New Dramatists

SARAH SCHULMAN
New York, NY

Thank you so much for this invitation. The situation is so wrong that I don't know if I really have the strength to describe it. In summary the problem is that the white men who run the theater believe that they are objective, neutral, and value free. They see anyone else as special interest. They identify with plays that either reflects their own coming of age experiences, or that re-enforce their sense of themselves as right, regular, the way things are. When one of us tries to expand the paradigm of what is allowed to be seen on stage, we are told that what we are doing is wrong. Familiar is right. Like all people with power, they want to be told what they already know-principally that their experience is superior. My experience is that gay men with power understand that oppression exists but are profoundly bored by women, and that straight men with power have no comprehension of the oppression experience, and- most importantly- the impact of exclusion and stigma on individual human beings. It's a dismal, upsetting experience to be part of this.

SUSAN JONAS
New York, NY

(A recent NYSCA report surveyed regional theaters around the U.S. and found only 16% of the plays written by women, and 17% directed by women).

I am so glad the report has some impact. Only honestly I don't SEE the impact. I SEE mainstream theatres that say there are dedicated to new American plays producing seasons with maybe one play by a woman, maybe one by an artist of color, usually directed by a man-- in a city like NYC, with an audience that is 62% female-- granted almost exclusively white. I see plays that deal not at all with world politics. I see women voting in Arnold Schwarznegger and voting against themselves, like the Jews leading up to the Holocaust, and supporting the loss of their own hard-won rights, I see decreasing representation in government-- LESS advocacy for childcare-- and a world perception that women's rights are not human rights.

So, well, the report circulates among already disgruntled women who never seem to organize and use their leverage. And men don't read it or feel in the least pressure to change their programming or their thinking.

I am very glad you are going to the international conference and so wish I could go in your pocket. PLEASE bring back the news and CIRCULATE it. We need information widely disseminated. If the journals and AMERICAN THEATRE and the papers won't carry it in detail, then please won't you send us emails and we'll do our damndest to get it out over the internet.

Rant over. Best Susan.

NATSUKO OHAMA
Los Angeles, CA

I do want to say something as a woman and a theatre person.

It feels that the real work for me is in the voice work, since I haven't done a play since the "Tempest" and perhaps I should address that. I feel the part of my work that is the voice teacher is engaged in the most important political action for me. The events surrounding the war in Iraq, our civil liberties, the right to choose, the environment, the constant amazing outrages and revelations by the government and big business and the sense of powerlessness on many people's part, have made it imperative to free people's voices to speak.

The ability of the human voice in the theatre and in life, to reveal our thoughts, desires and emotions, is one of the major components in communication. The more connected and free it is the better the communication. So many people are now dulled and cowed into silence and indifference. It is essential that theatre, the most human of arts, awaken the spirit and encourage expression not repression. I am working on the breath, vibrations, physical bodies, minds, emotions of people, so when they unite with text the spark of life ignites. It has become increasingly important that people speak truly and from the heart. When the cliff of fear rises up in front of you, throw up your life lines, cramp irons, and pick axes and begin the climb, hand over hand, step by step. SPEAK!!!

I hope this is okay. I do feel this Alice, that as fun as it may be to play a pedicurist on a Bernie Mac film, or the dry-cleaner on King of Queens, and I do my one line with commitment and energy, it is not the most valuable of my work. I do not want to put it down, since I have a great sense of humor and enjoy it, and there is a lot of talent involved. Still at the end of the day, what are we here for, and what is life about? I have this ability to teach and inspire and it behooves me to use it...as my friend Greg Cole told me when he was a child, he talked back to his father...."I've got a tongue in my head and I'll use it!!"

Love, Natsuko

POLLY PEN
New York, NY

Here's a quick thought...

I've been feeling an increasingly joyous bubble of subversion as I scribble away in a country that seems subsumed with the words "safety" and "security". I almost begin to bless the idiocy that hovers about us...

hmm. Polly.

ELENA MINOR
Los Angeles, CA

Something happens to women when they write for each other: they break barriers and find familiar pathways to communication: **starting here . . . going there**

It's when they have to write to The Paradigm that they get lost. The paradigm is still Aristotle's, who posited it most likely because he couldn't find a pathway and decided to invent one that would be simple and easy for others like him to understand. Communication and the artistic expression of it are difficult and complex phenomena, like trees. He stripped off the leaves, then cut off the smaller outlying branches upon which they hung, and shortened the larger branches to fit them all in his peripheral vision sightlines (so he wouldn't have to move his head in order to see one or more entire trees). *It is still a tree*, he must have insisted. *I have simply pared it down to its essential parts*. He might then have chuckled to himself at his play on words.

Difficult to explain, or even comprehend [in one page], how across the millennia much of the creative realm women once inhabited in theatre disappeared, while Aristotle's stunted tree survived and was transformed into the petrified legacy that dominates -- even rules -- in the US today. Some US women writers have accepted and adopted this predominantly "rational" paradigm and flourish in its execution (or seem to). Others struggle with it, knowing that what they have to say doesn't fit the box, but understanding that if they do not or **will not** or **cannot** communicate within its parameters, they had better choose a medium other than theatre. Still others make the hopeful attempt but end up walking away because it is a gut gouger. To go that deeply into essence, then pull it out, put it on paper, entrust it to others, then make it public and have to defend it as not to the paradigm is a fearsome thing and often gets to be more than is bearable. Better to withdraw and return to silence, which is what most US women of color do.

To be a woman of color of the US writing colorfully in the US is still a struggle to: 1) be heard at her own pitch; 2) be seen in a hue of her own mixing; 3) be acknowledged as a rightful self; 4) be felt as a creative force; 5) be enabled to roam free.

Notwithstanding, once or even twice per decade a WOC of the US is accorded honor and small tribute. Five thousand words of rave and 'nuff said print out on the pages of magazines with a collective circulation of five hundred worldwide. Big hoopla tolls out for a l-o-n-g, l-o-n-g ten seconds to all the digerati via their small and smaller screens and the young are pacified that all's well in the mediated colorblind society they insist they inhabit. But they don't come to hear the words or see the vision. [Sidebar question: When pain touches pain, does the one cancel the other out or is it simply greater pain?]

[A final note to note:] **Not** writing to the paradigm is not indicative of an inability to understand, learn and master the rules of convention; rather, it is this: **Writing is what it is and that is all it can be.**

CATHY SCHLUND-VIALS
Amherst, Massachusetts

A Stage of One's Own: Women in Theater

I must admit that my introduction to theater came relatively late in life. I was a junior in college – the University of Texas at Austin, to be more precise – and I was, as part of an English class, required to attend a production of *Death of a Salesman*. Theater had, up to that point, not captured my interest, and I must admit that the production of Arthur Miller's now canonical work did little to change my alienation from the stage. For me, theater wasn't accessible; it seemed more static than dynamic; and, most significant, it lacked a relevance to my life as a full time student who had to work full time. Though there were female characters in the work, the play did not strike me as one that attempted to advance a progressive feminist agenda. I wasn't connected, I wasn't involved, and I felt that, upon leaving the large auditorium space, that I was the same person after the show as I was before it.

I made it my mission to avoid theater – I was more of a movie person anyway, accustomed to the quick shifts and diverse camera angles, hackneyed dialogue and lush cinematic panoramas. It wasn't until 1998 – the year I began a graduate program in English – that I saw another theater piece. The title of that show escapes me as I write, but I do remember that it involved a South Asian American female protagonist. The story was one that I cannot speak clearly about, simply because it echoed so many elements from my own life that the two (imagined and real) become synonymous with one another in my mind. I guess what struck me most though, about the piece, was that I felt connected to it. As the work progressed, I felt that I could fill in the silences with my own story of growing up a Cambodian American in Georgia and Texas, two places which, at the time of my childhood, were not known to be hot spots in the Asian diaspora. This is not to say that all the experiences presented on stage mirrored my own. However, it was seeing this story on stage – the story of an Asian American woman – that allowed me to see the validity in my own story of existence. I realized as the lights came up and the audience members got up from their chairs that I had been moved to a particular consciousness that I had forgotten.

It is this sense of consciousness and the possibilities that exist in theater as a realm of imagination and exploration that moved me to apply for a job at New WORLD Theater, a multicultural theater company in residence at the University of Massachusetts. And, in complete honesty, the need for summer employment, coupled with the proximity of the campus to my home (a mere 4 miles away), made New WORLD Theater a more appealing employment site.

I have, in my almost four years at New WORLD Theater, served as a literary manager, reading scripts and reviewing work. My title has changed to "Program Curator", and I have been, in recent times, more involved with programming ancillary events around our main stage productions. However, I do still work closely with our interim Artistic Director Talvin Wilks, who has a keen artistic vision and has continued to foster work by emerging artists. Because we lack a permanent theater space, it is difficult for New WORLD Theater to produce original work, though we do still offer developmental weeklong residencies to several artists throughout the year. What I have noticed, however, is that many of the works that are submitted are ones that need further development, and works by female playwrights of color constitute the largest number of submissions. Though heartened by the numbers of submissions, I am admittedly saddened by the lack of opportunities facing these playwrights – we, like other theater companies, are limited in our resources, and we simply do not have the means to answer the call put forth by such talented individuals.

It is this actuality that leads me to the title of this piece, which is based on Virginia Woolf's novel about space and the need to have a particular space. I was able, through that South Asian American performance piece and in my work at New WORLD Theater, to find a space of my own in theater. It is imperative that we, as a society and as a body, try to find spaces for these playwrights to continue to challenge and draw future audiences. Through new coalitions, new strategies, and new visions, it is my hope that female playwrights of color will continue to push the theater canon and create provocative pieces that will reflect, mediate, and shift dominant ways of thinking. What I have left out, however, are the specifics...

TERRY HONG
McLean, Virginia

Educators say that for students, the experience of not seeing themselves portrayed in textbooks and other materials is akin to looking into a mirror and seeing nothing. Historically, Asian Americans-as well as other minorities-have peered into that looking glass and been confronted with predominantly negative, degrading images. Think: silent servant, exotic geisha, evil warlord, prostitute with a heart of gold, sexless geek, corporate raider without a conscience, and so on and so forth.

In response, over the past four decades, growing numbers of Asian-American artists have reclaimed our images, creating positive reflections on stage and in other media. In 1965, a group of noted Asian-American actors founded the country's first Asian-American theatre-East West Players in Los Angeles. While East West thrives today, its legacy is also seen throughout the country, most notably-though not surprisingly-in New York City, one of the great theatre centers of the world.

On Oct. 7, 2002, nine prominent Big Apple theatre professionals gathered in the Kaplan Penthouse at Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts for a symposium titled "I Am Going to Like It Here: Asian Americans in New York Theatre," to discuss the current state of Asian-American theatre. Hosted by the Asian American Arts Alliance in partnership with the Lincoln Center Audience Development Initiative, the event marked an unprecedented gathering of leading Asian-American theatre figures.

The panelists were Ping Chong (founder and artistic director of Ping Chong & Company), David Henry Hwang (Tony-winning playwright of *M. Butterfly* and the new *Flower Drum Song*), Mia Katigbak (co-founding artistic/producing director of the National Asian American Theatre Company), Chiori Miyagawa (co-founder and co-artistic director of *Crossing Jamaica Avenue*), Jon Nakagawa (producer of contemporary programming at Lincoln Center and former managing director of Vineyard Theatre), Ron Nakahara (artistic associate at Pan Asian Repertory Theatre, standing in for Tisa Chang, Pan Asian Rep's founder and artistic/producing director), Diane Paulus (co-founder of Project 400 and creator of *The Donkey Show*), Ralph Peña (artistic director of *Ma-Yi Theater Company*) and Welly Yang (founder and artistic director of *Second Generation*).

The founding of Asian-American theatres has been pivotal to the arts community for two important reasons: Asian-Americans actors have had the opportunity to consistently play challenging roles, regardless of ethnicity; and for the first time in history, Asian-American writers have been able to tell their own stories, in their own voices, for their own audiences and beyond. More recently, these stories are being written by new voices who, rather than being defined specifically as Asian-American playwrights, could more aptly be described as playwrights whose Asian-American-ness is a part of their identity rather than an all-encompassing definition.

What defines Asian-American theatre today? In fact, it is continuously evolving, changing and reinventing itself. Today, the mirror's reflections are as diverse as our voices: no expectations, no limits, only the challenge of new discovery. -Terry Hong

SUSETTE MIN
Brooklyn, NY

i don't have time to write anything, but thought the attached would be good if you replace art with theater. Feel that the vibe in theater corresponds to the trends in contemporary art.

In a cartoon featured in the November 2000 issue of *New Art Examiner*, Adam “Music for Airports” Green depicts a couple in a plane holding on for dear life during air ‘turbulence.’ The woman says to the nervous man next to her “Brian Eno said, “In art you can crash the plane and walk away.”” In bold capital letters above the cartoon, the artist writes “DURING TURBULENCE, YOU REALIZE THAT THERE WILL ALWAYS BE A SEPARATION BETWEEN ART AND LIFE.”

Three time zones away from the epicenter of September 11, 2001, driving across LA’s web of highways, passing cars along the fast lane, everything and everyone seemed to be in flight from itself, and we from ourselves, who watched all this happen from the sidelines. Yet we could not fly or walk away, in fact, we were unable to move at all, as the event made immobile not only NYC traffic, but also the imagination in its attempt to visually or verbally grasp what had happened earlier that fateful morning.

The future of contemporary art has been more anticlimactic than anticipated. Yet the events of September 11th raised the stakes and pushed forward the momentum for unforeseen possibilities of contemporary art. The events in NYC reminded me of Michel de Certeau’s essay entitled “Walking in the City” where he begins his essay from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center (WTC). Describing the view from the WTC as a “...gigantic mass immobilized by the eyes...transformed into a texturology in which extremes coincide – extremes of ambition and degradation, brutal oppositions of races and styles, contrasts between yesterday’s buildings, already transformed into trash cans...” he goes on to remark that “unlike Rome, New York has never learned the art of growing old by playing on all its pasts. Its present invents itself, from hour to hour, in the act of throwing away its previous accomplishments and challenging the future.”¹

New York City functions as the art world of late and hence will remain the art center of the world. NYC is where the future of contemporary art will continue to unfold. (Despite recent efforts to ‘internationalize’ the art world, to move its center west to Los Angeles, across the Atlantic to London or Berlin, in globalized terms, contemporary art = the NYC art world. It is similar to the mantra of the U.S. nation-state that promotes E pluribus Unum; when the U.S. speaks, the world listens.) The events of September 11th were seen from the U.S. point of view as an attack on freedom. The rhetoric of freedom foregrounds ART as the exemplary transgressing of procedures because art is in and of itself the work of freedom.

In the spirit of this ‘freedom’, the spontaneity of makeshift memorials all over the country and the gesture of galleries to invite and show artwork by both professional and amateur artists and

¹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, p.91.

photographers of their response to the events of September 11th evoked in me a nostalgia for the future and a desire:

- to encounter a work of art by that provides a glimpse of the much philosophically-discussed sublime -
- an overwhelming feeling that verges towards the limits of representation;
- to see the merging of art and literature that goes beyond thematic concerns and semiotic comparisons;
- to experience being part of a collaboration of artists, curators, designers, educators, and boards of trustees to create exhibitions that go beyond the dollar sign, the assumption of the public's poor accessibility and acuity of 'high' art, and the safe and manipulated presentation and choreography of the already-seen;
- to blur the boundaries between public and private spaces where art is seen and shown in ways that are currently forgotten and/or unforeseeable;
- and lastly, along the lines of political and social imperatives, to see the prolific and profound interpretation of works of art that would normally be framed racially because of the color of an artist's skin or the unfamiliar spelling of a name. That is, I would like to see the works of these un/marked artists be interrogated with the same rigor as other artists by paying attention to the nuances of form and content, pushing existing representational categories while opening up other spaces.

To romanticize such a future of contemporary art goes against my current sensibilities in light of what I already know of the contemporary art world, of politics, of a war that at this very moment seems never-ending and indiscriminate.

What I see the future of contemporary art to be:

- The first casualty of this lost opportunity for an exciting and unforeseeable future will be the continuing racialization of contemporary art together ironically with the pervasive practice of exclusion;
- instead of the merging of art and literature, art and architecture, what I see for the future of contemporary art is the intensification and blurring of art and technology, art and Hollywood, art and advertising in which publicity-stunt events of technological innovations are veiled as art openings;
- the intensification of globalization will continue to enable the flow of privileged and entitled bodies across national borders as they gather to attend more over-determined biennials and symposiums now seen as celebrity-studded events;
- and lastly, the relationship between art and the commodity will continue to grow as art becomes more beholden to the market rather than a good review or essay from an art historian, curator, and/or critic.

Theodore Adorno describes "Art's Utopia, "as" the counterfactual yet-to-come... a recollection of the possible with a critical edge against the real; it is a kind of imaginary restitution of that catastrophe, which is world history; it is a freedom which did not pass under the spell of necessity and which may well not come to pass ever at all."²

Rather than desiring art as utopic, perhaps we should look for the future of contemporary art in works by those artists who are already at the extreme and in the margins: artists who continue to produce work, despite the grind of the everyday and their invisibility, that gesture toward points of identification which are simultaneously suppressed and unconscious, playful and free.

² Theodore Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, London: Routledge, p.196 quoted by Paul Gilroy in "Dialectics of Diaspora Identification" in ed. Les Back and John Solomos' *Theories of Race and Racism: A Reader*, London: Routledge, 2000, pp. 496-502.

SUJATA BHATT
Los Angeles, CA

Random Meanderings on Theater Because Alice Asked

Women making theater. That in itself is revolutionary given the global history of male actors impersonating women. What would it mean to impersonate—to take on the persona of, to be in the person of another, for entertainment or for fraud? A fraudulent theater? A theater that commits fraud. Offering politics in the guise of entertainment? Offering entertainment in the guise of politics? Laughter as a way of getting things said and seen? What if women impersonated men? An entire theater of women acting like and as men? Lysistrata-like, becoming warlike and manly in order to get men to do our bidding? A bidding for peace? A mirror to men that they can see themselves as they seem to our eyes? Warlike and wastrel. Theater for me begins in language but then takes on the form of sight. Insight. Light. Delight.

For me these days theater is a daily act, but not as a playwright grappling with global capitalism or how to pace an act. These days I teach first graders how to read which means putting sounds together to make sense, and then putting words and sentences together to make meaning, and then putting meanings together to make a scene. I teach them to read with expression, to imagine the feelings of the characters whose words and deeds they are reproducing (feelings = . ? and !). After that they get up and do the actions their characters are doing. This being first grade, the characters are often deeply concerned with relations between cats and hats and bats. They tend to hop and jump and moo, and with great regularity tumble down hills. Welcome to theater, first-grade style! The kids love it. They learn to make words come alive, to bridge life and text. Slowly, haltingly, but with great joy and liberation. What is about making theater that it's liberating for children who are already such free creatures? Is it theater's sense of play, because children really just want to play all day? Or is it maybe that it helps them make the strange new world of written language into something they already know and can own? What can we grown-ups learn from them?

TALAYA DELANY
Provincetown, MA

Enduring theater. Maybe that's where I ought to start. When I was a student with Adrienne Kennedy, I remember her telling me that theater is a huge endurance race-- and most people drop out in their mid-late twenties-- that they sort of give up the ghost after that, being assaulted by all the real life things-- having to make a living, justify oneself to family/friends, justify oneself to oneself most particularly, maybe-- in the sense of what am I doing? Does this make sense? Is this a useful way to spend my life?

I think, being a woman, the endurance race is even tougher. Worrying about things like-- how will I have a family? How will I get the bills paid-- take care of myself? What is this all leading up to? My mom always says that the most important thing you have to do as a woman, as a person, is be able to take care of yourself-- be independent. And living a life in the theater-- this seems particularly difficult. The lack of stability, the sense that you can try and try and still not get a production-- because of x numbers of factors-- makes it really hard to soldier through, makes it hard to keep hoping. Women, more than men maybe, self-select themselves out of the race-- because the whole thing seems impossible. I also think-- from own experiences in graduate school-- that women are encouraged less, seen as less "serious"-- then men-- and this below the radar discouragement can make it harder to keep going, keep pushing.

So I think enduring theater is finding a way to not self-select yourself out of the race. Finding a way to keep writing, keep doing-- even if its just a little something every day-- something you can control and own, something that keeps you writing and thinking and sane, even at times when the whole thing seems pointless. How does one do this? Ritual works well for me-- things I have to do no matter how I feel-- things that are not dependent on whether this theater or that theater is going to produce something, etc. Everyday, no matter what, early morning, I try to sit down for a period of time in front of the computer, and write. Even if its crap. Even if it's hopeless. Because this keeps me from being afraid of the act of writing, and it makes writing part of my schedule, like going to work, jogging, etc. I also (less successfully) try to keep the business end of things going. One day a week, send out a script, find out about a prize, research a new theater.

These things might take awhile to pan out, but it makes you out in the world-- and things can unexpectedly occur, boomerang back-- once you put the feelers out. That's how I ended up spending two years in Dublin. I sent out a play to the Abbey Theater, didn't even think about them responding, but they did-- and the process culminated in me going to Dublin, workshoping my play there, and building a real relationship. Just one random submission one Thursday night. I think lots of things happen that way, you show up somewhere, you make yourself available, you meet people-- and things boomerang back, maybe not in a month, but in several months, a year, the important thing is that somehow you're in the world-- and things can happen that way. What else keeps me sane? Friends-- other playwrights, writers, artists, whoever, anyone who knows what the whole struggle is like. Going to artist residencies is a great way to meet people like this-- and makes me feel less alone, like what I'm doing isn't quite as crazy as the world says it is-- or at least if it is crazy, I'm not the only one who's gone insane. There's other folks out there. And to drop a note, email, show someone stuff-- can keep me going when I'm feeling tired or rejected.

In the end though, the whole thing is about writing though, isn't it? I mean, no one can take that away. If I keep writing plays, keep pushing and developing and growing stronger-- come closer in craft and heart and thought to this thing I'm trying to build, this play-- that's the secret, I think. I mean, that's what makes the whole thing worthwhile to me-- to keep developing my craft, to struggle to be a better writer, a more precise writer-- that's the struggle I want to be part of-- that's what I want to dedicate myself to. And enduring theater-- figuring out how to not let despair, worry, etc. cripple me-- find out how to own my own writing, build it for myself, have a network of resources to keep me going-- is how I'm trying to create the space to become a better, stronger writer.

RUTH MALECZECH
New York, NY

Never been to Manila. You're so lucky to be going -and with Jessica, too and Ellen who is so dear to all of us. As for a statement about the theater, that's really not possible. The theater that interests me doesn't make statements, it asks question. So, no statement. My next question in the summer of '05, is called "Song For New York" and is an inquiry into the United States obsession with heroism, particularly individual heroism. Five poets, all female, from each of New York's five boroughs, five poems about the place and the people, an all men's chorus with knitting needles providing the percussion. Maybe each section travels from one borough to another on the back of a truck with an open bed. Should this piece be spoken/sung in many languages? What are the best musical equivalents for each borough?

Should the work be performed by puppets or people? You see, I said it's nothing but questions.

Yours truly

Ruth

EMILY MANN

Princeton, New Jersey

I have been ruminating about the journey for myself and other women in the theatre, but particularly on Broadway, since I am back on Broadway at the moment-- ever since you've written. (This is my third time directing on Broadway. First I wrote and directed EXECUTION OF JUSTICE in 1986, then I wrote/adapted/directed HAVING OUR SAY in 1995, and now I am directing Nilo Cruz's beautiful Pulitzer Prize winning ANNA IN THE TROPICS. } When I graduated from college in 1974 and decided I wanted to be a director (I did not know then I wanted to be a playwright) I was told by the head of the Drama Center at Harvard that women did not direct professionally. "You might be very talented," he said to me. "Why don't you consider children's theatre?" Luckily, I was raised by an independent mother and a father who was an early feminist. They gave me the mistaken idea that I could do whatever I wanted to do. By the time I found out that that was not true, it was too late. Being told no because I was a woman simply got me mad and spurred me on. I was the first woman to direct on every main-stage I directed on in the 1970's and early 1980's. Sadly, however, even in 1995, when I was nominated for a Tony award (for playwrighting and directing for HAVING OUR SAY) I would have been the first woman to win for directing a straight play on Broadway in the 65 year history of the awards. Thank God, the next year Garry Hines won it (Garry is a very talented woman) but no woman has won the award since. (in 65+ years only one...!) It is still not an even playing field.

Broadway is a strange animal, of course, and is not the ledger for success. I am frequently reminded of the joys of running my own theatre outside of NY, the McCarter, in Princeton New Jersey. However, I must tell you this anecdote which reminds me of why Broadway can be important, especially to those of us who have been historically excluded-- Yesterday, we had a press conference with the Latino press for ANNA. It was conducted all in Spanish. (This is the first Pulitzer for drama won by a Latino, and the first all-Latino cast of a play on Broadway) I could actually understand the Spanish, but I cannot speak the language well enough to venture a word in public! It was the most moving press conference I have ever attended. Priscilla Lopez cried as she recounted her life in the theatre and what it meant to her to be a Latina in a real play, not a musical, not a "Latino comedy based on stereotypes, but in a work of art about Latinos" on Broadway." The others, Jimmy Smits and Nilo Cruz most notably, also eloquently concurred. When I was leaving, after a reporter asked me why I chose Nilo's play to direct and I told her what an honor it was to work on his brilliant play, she responded by saying she had never felt so cherished or respected at a press conference. For the first time, she was "not a second class citizen, but an honored American". The Pulitzer Prize and the honor of it being on Broadway meant the world to her, to the community, and to her colleagues. I was so moved by this, naturally, but I must tell you, this reminded me of the opening of HAVING OUR SAY on Broadway. HAVING OUR SAY was about two African-American sisters, both over a hundred years old. For the first time on Broadway, by the way, the play was by and about, acted by, and produced all by women. It is a documentary, and I had the privilege of giving voice to these remarkable, brilliant, wise and funny women as both playwright and director. For the first time, Black women felt they were being heard from on Broadway (and not as whores or beleaguered Mamas on the Couch) but as educated, smart, tart, and irreverent voices of America. (The sisters were called our "national treasures" in the press and the Black community came out in proud droves, often dressed in their Sunday best.)

In reality, in the last three decades, there has been some headway for African-American work all over the country; and for Latino work, for other writers of color, and for women. Since I heard the "WHY DON'T YOU TRY CHILDREN'S THEATRE" remark, there has been some progress for women... However, though there are a few notable and highly visible exceptions, the numbers for women (that is the percentage of work produced in this country by and/or directed by women) has changed very little since 1980. We must continue to cheer each other on-- to mentor, and champion, write and produce each other's best work. But we must keep in mind that we are nowhere near parity with our male colleagues. And we must remember, too, that our voices are so desperately needed, in every venue. We must be heard. We have been and are so often the voices of sanity.

I salute everyone at this conference and wish them the very best on their important work.

Yours,
EMILY (MANN)

SUSAN RUBIN
Los Angeles, CA

I began doing theatre during the Vietnam War. Born and raised in New York City, I had seen Broadway shows since I was big enough to be stuck in a seat; but when I came of age, I found theatre in New York wasn't speaking to my political concerns, and was distinctly a man's art form. I headed for Oakland, California, where the Black Panthers, Angela Davis, the San Francisco Mime Troupe, the Haight-Ashbury, and the Berkeley Free Speech Movement, created a melting pot of politicians and artists coming together to dialogue about how to Change the World.

In those years there was government funding for the arts allowing companies to pay artists a living wage. Amazing theatre was made as artists developed who spoke to specific cultural groups: children, seniors, women, lesbians and gays, people of color. I worked teaching tap and jazz dance while I studied Vaudeville, Karl Marx and Bertolt Brecht. (Tap, jazz dancing, and vaudeville were valued as "indigenous American popular forms"). The theoretical studying validated my belief that all art is political, and artists are responsible for what they put on stage. I ran my first theatre company, performing original musical plays in High Schools; we portrayed U.S. history focusing on the role of women and people of color.

I came to Los Angeles when Reagan was president and had destroyed the infrastructure from which we had created work we believed in. I came hoping to join the "mainstream"; to influence the T-V industry with progressive ideas. I was quickly rejected as an actress because I didn't look American and "nobody would want me to sell their product." That's a direct quote. So, once again I started my own company. I began to write more and perform less. Soon after coming to LA, I got breast cancer. I was lucky enough to survive, but two close friends got the disease and died within months of me being cured. I was no longer interested in acting, but quickly found my voice playwriting. My first play, produced at the Los Angeles Theatre Center was "club termina" about four women who had died of breast cancer, and were in a nightclub in the Underworld, singing and dancing as they waited to be reincarnated. I have written about what I know: women's lives, injustice, power, the meaning of Life in a world with so much violence and Death. My current plays are "The Trial of Persephone", an adaptation of the Greek myth in which I look at power, the nuclear family, and rape. And, "Eve's Drop" about women being punished for seeking wisdom. "Eve" takes

place in a morgue which is undergoing an electrical power outage.

I work with many of the forms I learned in my early years: music, vaudeville and comedy are strong influences in what I write. My desire is to reach an audience that is broad and diverse, by being first and foremost entertaining. My work always includes multi-cultural casting, and while I still focus on women's issues, I am less simplistic in my analysis. I write documentary shorts for a large, feminist organization, and teach At Risk High School kids playwriting. Coming full circle, I am beginning to be produced in New York. This winter I have a reading of "Persephone" at a progressive off-Broadway theatre. I want to do theatre in a city where the art form itself is not a stepchild of the T-V industry. I once wanted to infiltrate the mainstream and change it, I now want to do theatre that influences my audience to think. There are plenty of people to push mainstream culture to a better place, I think I'm most effective in the art form I started in; which I love and have been a part of for so many years.

Wish I could be there to see your wondrous conference!

Susan Rubin
Playwright, Artistic Director, Indecent Exposure Theater Company

EVE ENSLER

The Memory of Her Face

Islamabad

They all knew something terrible
Was going to happen
Each time he came home
The things he used
First time
He grabbed the closest thing
He grabbed a pot
He smashed her head
He smashed her right eye hard
The next time
He thought about it a little
And paused
Took off his belt
She had gashes inside her thighs
The third time he needed to be more
Involved in hurting her
So he beat her with his fists
He broke her nose
They heard her screams
They heard her beg
They didn't, wouldn't intervene
She was his
Unwritten law

Don't ask what she had done
It was just her face that pissed him off
Just her needy face waiting for more
The last time he
Had enough of her
He planned it out
He got the acid in advance
He poured it in a jar
She said she needed money for food for them
She looked like that.
Like that. Like that. Like that.
Her face is gone
Totally melted off
Just eyes that all you see
That's all
Just eyes encased in gooey flesh
I tell you this because
She's there inside this mess
Inside this monstrous mask
Inside the death of her esteem
Inside his wish to make her none
She's there, I swear
I heard her wheeze
I heard her sigh
I heard her babble something
With what was once her mouth
I heard her. I swear
She lives in there.

Baghdad

When she woke up
Her face was on fire
Bombs had fallen from the sky
And her face was in flames
She couldn't scream
The burning encircled her throat
Like a falling tower
Just as the flames were entering her eyes
She pressed her torn blanket
And it put out the flames
but stuck to the melted skin
when she pulled it off
she lost most of her cheeks,
most of her forehead and chin.
This was not a dream
There was nowhere to go
There was nothing to say
As they wandered the streets

Of Baghdad
Looking for a hospital
Or a doctor who knew
What to do when a face burns off
Her father
Unable to look at his only daughter
Oozing through
The bandages he made of white rags
Hated her looking like that
Hated whoever she had become
No longer a relative
No longer someone he knew
No longer a woman he could marry off
But still something he was responsible for
He hated the planes that dropped
Fire from the sky
Who promised
Freedom and instead destroyed
He hated those planes
But right now he hated his bandaged melted
needy daughter more.

Juarez

We look at the photographs in Esther's book.
Each woman is dark, particular, young.
Each woman has brown eyes. Each woman is gone.
There is one girl missing for 10 months.
She was 17 when they took her away
She worked in the Maquilladora
She stamped thousands of coupons of products
She would never afford
Four dollars a day
They paid her and bused her to the desert
to sleep in freezing shit
It must have been on the way to the bus
They took her
It must have been dark outside
It must have lasted until morning
What ever they did to her
It went on and on
You can tell from the others
who showed up without hands or nipples
It must have gone on and on.

When she finally reappeared
She was bone
Bone bone
No cute mole above her right eye,

No naughty smile, no wavy black hair.

Bone she came back as bone.
She and the others in Esther's book
All beautiful
All beginning
All coupons
All faces
All gone
300 faces gone
300 noses
300 chins
300 dark penetrating eyes
300 smiles
300 Mulatto colored cheeks
300 hungry mouths about
to speak
about to tell
about to scream
gone now bone.

I saw all of this with these eyes
I swallowed the ashes of their sorrow with this mouth
I choked on the ugliness of their melted beings
with this throat.
I smelled their burning screaming flesh
I tried to turn away
When she lifted her chador
In the restaurant
When she took off the bandages
To prove to the soldiers how bad it was
When they raised the plastic cloth that concealed
the bone out line of her head in the morgue
I tried to turn away.

Eve Ensler

***5000 women have been acid burned by their families in Islamabad, Pakistan.
90 per cent of them have died. Not one person has been prosecuted.
-----women were burned or killed in the Iraqi war. The United States
government calls it collateral damage and will not be prosecuted.
300 women have disappeared in Juarez, Mexico.
90 have turned up dead in ditches, most were mutilated and raped. Not one man has
been prosecuted.***

KIRSTEN GREENIDGE

Boston, MA

Once I started writing plays, I fell in love. And I can honestly say I that I rarely think of writing for other genres. I think in the future I may try a novel, but other than that, very few other types of writing present the kind of mystery that I want to explore in the same way that I do when I write for the stage. There is something transformative in hearing your words performed that does not happen in poetry or prose. The fact that human beings are speaking in front of you, breathing the same air as you is something movies can't offer, either. Also, so much can go wrong when reading or performing a play. When a reading or production goes well, when all the different elements of theatre work in concert, there is such a feeling of accomplishment, and what's beautiful about that is that it is shared with other people: there's nothing that satisfies and completes in quite the same way.

That said, it can be challenging to be a playwright in a culture like that of the United States, where a career in the arts is not as valued as a career in finance or technology. Because theatre can be such an expensive endeavor here, theatre companies are under enormous financial pressure, and economic survival can often take precedence over presenting new and relevant work. Since I am both a woman playwright and a black playwright, I feel as though I am sensitive about the demographics of who and what gets produced in this country. The last statistic I heard was that seventy-three percent of the plays produced in America are produced by men, and that of that seventy-three percent, relatively few are new plays and still fewer are by new writers.

With those statistics, the likelihood that I will become some sort of overnight phenomenon, produced all across America is slim. So I find I face the challenge of rejection often, but not nearly enough or with enough ferocity to make me consider taking up another profession. It's dismaying to be rejected. Especially when it comes to something as subjective as art. And something that I love so much. It's challenging to keep writing when it can feel as if it wouldn't matter if I never wrote another word again. In the United States we have a variety of development programs for new work. Although development programs can be an entry-way for new work by new writers, they can be challenging because you talk to so many people with so many different opinions about your work, with so many different biases, that it can be awfully confusing to remember to listen to your own voice first, while considering the voices of others second. It's a close second, though, because I have also learned that there are many, many highly intelligent and extremely generous theatre artists out there who are dedicated to encouraging new work by emerging writers.

Another challenge is to avoid being labeled or pigeonholed as being a "black" writer, or a "woman" writer. Whenever I am asked to participate in a development program or reading series, I always wonder, "Did they choose me simply to fill a slot? Or because they like my work?" I don't think I should ignore those questions or their answers (we haven't come that far yet) but I can't let those questions adversely affect my work.

Also, I would have to say the development environment itself can get frustrating. You spend a week with collaborators you may or may not know very well, and at the end, you've created this entity that isn't quite a play yet, because it hasn't had the chance. The worst can be taking a play from theatre to theatre and never see it fully performed.

Finally, because I don't have a steady office job as my means of support, it can be difficult planning the mundane events of life, like acquiring health insurance or starting a family or buying a house, because there is a lot of uncertainty involved.

For the most part, however, I feel more than fortunate to live in a place where my voice, once heard, is valued, where I had the opportunity to choose to write, to choose to develop and study my craft. Without something as fundamental as that, I am not sure where I would be able to let my voice be heard.

RHIANA YAZZIE
Los Angeles, CA

A Message to Playwrights Around the World from Rhiana Yazzie

Recently I was involved in a staged reading in a renowned new works play reading festival. My role was a literary assistant. It was barely a functional position; it was more like a glorified fly on the wall. I appreciate and relish the opportunity to watch the process of an emerging playwright and veteran director trying to create something new, something innovated, because I want to be that playwright too, one day. But it wasn't too far into the two day rehearsal process that I began to feel ancy and began to feel that my time was being wasted.

Maybe because the playwright, like myself, was a minority that I felt like his play should have said something more. The play was a convoluted homage to violence and did not offer anything more than albeit, entertaining fiction. I heard myself saying over and over in my head, "I don't have time for this kind of fiction, I don't have time for this kind of fiction!" I know that there is so much in my heart that I want to say, that I need to say, which is why I am a writer, and I was frustrated with the way his story missed an amazing opportunity to say something meaningful and to give a voice to something that has never had the chance to speak in a world, in a country that swallows lives whole. I don't like to hear stories without purpose and without the ability to move. Use the opportunity to tell the audience about the hidden places and lives that never see daylight. Use your story to give validation to muffled voices, to let an audience know that my people are alive and tell them this is how we get through our lives living in the cracks. I crave a story that has a purpose, that says something important. I need to be moved and I want to see how people solve the problems of their hearts in conflict.

MARTHA RICHARDS
Northampton, MA

The Fund for Women Artists - Martha Richards, Executive Director

In 1994 I created The Fund for Women Artists, a non-profit organization dedicated to challenging gender and other stereotypes and to increasing the employment of women in the arts, especially women in theatre, film, and video. In our first nine years we have provided direct fundraising services to hundreds of women artists, and we have raised over \$2.2 million including an endowment of \$425,000.

I love to talk about how I started this wonderful and growing organization in my kitchen with only my trusty laptop computer, because I think it is important for women to realize that we have the

power to build our own organizations. In fact, I don't think we will ever get cultural institutions that truly suit our needs unless we build them ourselves, and more people should consider this option.

But you can't really understand The Fund for Women Artists unless I start the story a little earlier. My usual version ignores a key question, namely, "What the heck was I doing at home in my kitchen at age 44 instead of working a full-time job as I had all the rest of my life?" The truth is that I was recovering from a broken heart.

It wasn't a person who had broken my heart, but a job. From the beginning of my arts career, I had dreamed about being the head of a theatre in a medium sized city where I could settle in, find colleagues, and build an audience for the kind of bold, provocative theatre that I love so much. With great effort, I had finally gotten a job as the Managing Director of a regional theatre, and then just five years later I quit and found myself sitting in my kitchen crying.

What happened? Glass ceiling? Sticky floor? It was a complicated situation. There were relentless financial pressures and the usual constellation of theatrical personalities, but what finally did me in was a gnawing sense of alienation from the work. As a manager, my role was to support the artists by supervising the fundraising, marketing and accounting functions, but the artists in charge were all men. In the five years I was there, we only did one play by a woman playwright (and a dead woman at that), and we had no women directors. I kept having uncomfortable moments where I could see that many of the characters on our stages were stereotypes, but as a manager and not an artist, I didn't see a way of changing them. Also, I was painfully aware of the salary differences between our male and female personnel.

I can remember a turning point in my final year. We did a period piece for the holidays about a Southern family getting ready for Christmas dinner. Most of our audience members were white and they seemed to be enjoying the show, but one night there was an African American family sitting right in the front row with a very excited little girl who was about ten. As part of the "Southern" dialogue in the show, there was a point where one of the white actors casually used the term "nigger." I found myself looking at that family. It was supposed to be a festive holiday show. Even though it was dark, I could see that little girl wince and turn to her father in shock and disbelief.

I was never quite the same after that, because I identified so deeply with that little girl and that wince. I had been that wide-eyed girl in love with the stage when I was ten, and seeing her reminded me of all the painful vulnerability I had felt and still feel as I experience limiting stereotypes - about gender, about race, about sexual preference, about size, or other issues. I was back in touch with a whole range of feelings, and I could not hide by keeping busy or pretending nothing had happened. I felt compelled to do something, but I wasn't sure what it was.

This brings us back to 1994 when I was sitting in my kitchen. I needed a way to experiment, and I started The Fund for Women Artists not with any answers, but with a question: "How can we create an organization that will support artists who want to challenge gender and other stereotypes and make sure that they are fairly paid?"

It turns out this is a wonderful question, a question that I can work on happily for a very long time. It's also a very sociable question, because it is far too complex for just one person. We have to form teams to create viable solutions.

I want to leave you with two thoughts. First, I want to say that my broken heart turned out to be a good thing even though it hurt a lot, because it forced me to stop for a while and think about what

I wanted to do with my life. The Fund for Women Artists has accomplished great things in its first nine years, and I am confident that we are moving in a good direction. If any of you are suffering from broken hearts or quiet despair, I hope my story will encourage you to work through your grief and search for the values that mean the most to you. As my mother always taught me, "It's not how many times you fall down, it's how many times you get up that counts."

Second, as we start our second decade at The Fund for Women Artists, we are moving in bold new directions. We are determined to build an organization that will have a lasting impact on the role of women artists in our society, and we are looking for collaborators.

Since we receive a steady stream of calls and emails, we know that there are amazing women artists all over the world who are struggling to create works reflecting a more just society. We are awed and inspired by these women, and we dream about what will happen when they have the resources to express their creativity fully. We are convinced that they can change the world, and we want to help. Please join us if you can.

For more information, please contact us at info@womenarts.org or visit our website at www.WomenArts.org.

MALLORY CATLETT
New York, NY

This summer I was at a dramaturgy conference that was focusing on diversity. Due to my recent work on the THE FIRST 100 YEARS I realized that we were talking about this issue almost exclusively from the perspective of new play development. No one was talking about diversifying the cannon, for example. I was thinking historically, and it occurred to me that history hasn't favored diversity; and that we often think about the problem from the front end. It would be wise to think about the issue from the back end in an effort to more fully support the work of playwrights today.

In terms of the cannon, from what I can tell, the reason it is a rich source for us even today is the way in which playwrights have recycled and reconsidered the stories of the past. Any one play may have many plays and production histories in its wake. Somewhere behind WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF is DANCE OF DEATH. It is this referencing of writers in the past and the constant reintegration of that material into the present via the voice and vision of playwrights that leaves the rich trail for directors, actors and audiences to walk.

In 1695-96 London produced a season of plays that had one of the highest percentages of female playwrights in Anglo-American history. By that time woman had been writing for the professional stage for only 25 years. What is wonderful about that season was there were several plays that were adaptations or critiques of other plays previously written by women. So there was this instinct early on for women to refer back to and rethink and recycle the work of their predecessors. They didn't have a long history but they knew it, and they dealt with it in their work.

I think we underestimate the power of knowing our history and letting it have some influence on our work. Theater history tells us that a play gains currency and richness exponentially when it grapples in some way with the past. Women have been writing plays and using the theater to tell compelling relevant stories for hundreds of years. That work and those stories need to be recycled and

reconsidered by playwrights today. So I guess I'm thinking about knowing one's history and making work that reflects that knowledge. It is an obvious point and probably not particularly interesting, but our history allows us to stand on rich ground when we work. We don't have to constantly reinvent the wheel. I don't think this preoccupation serves us well or makes for interesting theater.

Have a good trip,
Mallory

LYNN NOTTAGE
Brooklyn, NY

I've been very interested in the isolationist nature of American theatre, particularly the way in which it excludes the voices of women from the Southern Hemisphere. We simply do not have access to plays written by women of color living outside of America. I acutely feel this absence, and mourn the fact that no real artistic dialogue is able to occur between women of color writing for the theatre here and abroad. Is it that theatres don't know these writers? Is it that these women don't know how to penetrate the American market?

DIANE PAULUS
New York, NY

THOUGHTS FROM DIANE PAULUS – NOVEMBER 11, 2003

What interests me most about the theater is the audience. I believe that the impulse to make theater is a gift giving impulse, and whenever we make a gift, we always think about the recipient. The intention of the gift can be multifold – to delight, to shock, to provoke debate, to laugh, to recall memory. Whatever the particular nature of the intention, it is always somehow to touch the recipient, in our case, the audience. Nothing is worse than the polite response of a “thank you,” when deep in your heart you know that gift will go untouched, or in the case of a Christmas fruitcake, perhaps uneaten. Probably the worst feeling is to give someone something they already have, as it indicates that we don't know our friend well enough to even know that we are duplicating what they already have.

As usual, the best gifts are labors of love with an investment of time and thought behind them, endowed with a personal touch and a great attention to detail. There is always an element of the unknown with a gift, of suspense, in how we present these gifts – how they are wrapped, choosing the best moment of presentation. All these choices are made in an effort to craft the perfect exchange.

I think that as theatre artists, we need to always question the entire event of this gift-giving, never taking for granted any procedures – the shape or size of a gift, accepted colors of wrapping paper, or the very fact that it has to be wrapped. Instead of merely thinking about the gift itself, we must always think about the ritual surrounding the moment of exchange. Where do we want to place the recipient for this moment – at the top of a hill at the exact moment of sunset, in a crowded bar after several drinks have been imbibed, blindfolded and led down a back alley.

In the United States, it is staggering how limited our vision of this moment is. For the vast majority of theater making, we numbly follow the catalog version of sitting our audience in chairs bolted to the ground, all facing one direction towards a proscenium stage, with a code of behavior for our audience

that dictates the range of proper reaction (talking back to the actors is completely forbidden and would probably have you escorted off the premise.)

To the women playwrights of the world, I say, break our expectations. Engage our minds, hearts, and bodies with new forms that will mandate the reinvigoration of theatrical ritual. Wake up our audience, trick them, catch them off guard. Invite them with care and love to a place they have never been. Craft a moment they will never forget. Create a gift that will finally necessitate an honest reaction from the audience – or perhaps provoke a response from an audience that we never thought was possible in the theater. That would be a gift.

JUDYIE AL-BALALI
Cape Town, South Africa

NOTES FROM CAPE TOWN

Alice and I shared many wonderful moments teaching together this summer. I'm honored she's asked me to participate in this esteemed gathering of potent creative female energy. At this juncture, nexus, leap in human history we absolutely deserve to do what we love in an atmosphere of support and mutual benefit. Congratulations on being where you are.

Let me add that I'm writing this in Cape Town, South Africa looking out at the ocean and mountains and thoroughly enjoying one of the most spectacular views on Earth. I'm thrilled to be immersed in an incredibly exciting society at a profound state of transition. So, I gladly state my gratitude for my vibrant artistic life right here at the top. Congratulations on being where I am. In response to Alice's inquiry I'd like to briefly offer three points that are particularly inspiring for me right now.

Theatre as a Place to Vision; Establishing Interactive Creative Spaces

Time to broaden our definition of theatre to include our audiences in the creative process. Most contemporary societies, certainly those that are mechanized and bureaucratic need places where people can feel, express, connect, touch and interact with safety and vulnerability. The ritual space of theatre, specifically the studio rehearsal room has this potential. Audiences now need more than to sit passively at the final product. It's time for the studio to become part of the theatre experience, not in any way as a replacement for performance, more like inviting the public into our private way of life. Games, improvisation, writing exercises, movement plus all your favorite techniques are valuable tools allowing the body and breath to be engaged.

Embrace Technology

We can't do what electronics can do and they can't do what we do. Together we are something New. Not too long ago I was a purist, regarding live performance as a sacred antidote to media gadget glut. I've come to appreciate the evolving unity of technology and organic life. I know there are more precise terms for this process and I'm hungry for the appropriate language. One of my most exciting recent discoveries as a director emerged through a discussion about the computer industry. We combined a discourse on physics with a hip hop dancer and created a very exciting performance. Art and science are no longer dualistic. We are harmonizing and enhancing our respective worlds.

Ability to Respond

Even with all the outstanding poetry and layers of irony I'm tired of focusing on oppression. I want to choose topics that uplift and inspire. 'Uh –Oh' I hear you say 'Easy, sappy, unrealistic

theatre'. Say whatever. I have two children who are young adults and a whole generation of students that want to live in a New World. They are truly able to envision, implement and celebrate living on a New Earth. Media directs our attention 98% of the time to problems. I want to see theatre become a great laboratory for solutions. Let's be scientists and encourage our scientists to be artists. Life is Grand.

Judyie Al-Bilali
11 November 2003

JULIE JENSEN
Salt Lake City, Utah

ONE PAGE OF CONCERNS by Julie Jensen

- Women playwrights are still not represented in anywhere near equal numbers to men. In spite of the fact that way more than half of theatre audiences are composed of women, those women get to see very few plays by women.
- The theatre in this country is controlled by men, money, and movies.
- The really important social issues for women are seldom treated in plays: domestic violence, pornography, reproductive freedom.
- The notion of class consciousness is seldom treated in the theatre; consequently the upper- and upper-middle class ideas and issues predominate.
- Many young female playwrights do not want to identify themselves as feminists. They are eager to be included in the larger category of playwrights. That means that they likewise shy away from women's issues, sometimes even refusing to write women characters.
- The political picture in this country is both confusing and ominous. Female playwrights are as confused as everyone else. Conservatism (indeed, sometimes to be equated with Fascism) is unwelcoming. Criticism of political choices goes unheeded, sometimes even punished. Theatres are in economic trouble and cannot figure out how to save themselves. Women's issues, per se, seem less important in that mix.
- More and more theatres are looking at niche marketing, appealing to a specific demographic: blacks, Asians, gays, young, etc. Yet the number of women's theatres has not increased, and plays by women are somehow not considered when seeking to balance seasonal offerings at mainstream theatres.
- Writing about people other than your own group is discouraged. Hence, many issues are not treated because no one from that group is telling those stories: stories of Native Americans is an example, stories of working class people.
- These times require bravery, and we are not brave enough. They require relentless dedication, and we are not dedicated enough.

DESI MORENO-PENSON

Bronx, NY

It is an exciting time to be a woman in the theatre...

Playwriting is at the center of the theatre. Theatre is at the heart of a playwright's fervor. It is the hub of both uncertainty and enthusiasm. Vague indecision and keen gusto. It is the core from which we emerge as artists—shaping the world, nudging and stimulating our senses, bracing us with thoughts, compelling anecdotes, and passionate ideals.

To be a playwright is to be fully engaged in the ongoing and enduring narrative of the world as we see it. With both acute observation and the beheld scrutiny of our very human place within it. And for both men and women, it is an awesome responsibility. And like men, women playwrights are continuing to shape and create within the 'final frontier' of the American stage; works that are experimenting with form and structure in ways never imagined before.

It is an exciting time to be a woman in the theatre...

Women playwrights are tackling subject matter that in some cases could only be undertaken by women. For itself, audiences are seeing plays from distinctly new angles. Innovative ideas and ardent thoughts that are driven, diverse and emboldened with a fresh and novel energy. The tricky relations between aesthetics and politics, success and marginalization, and all the delicate subtleties that surround those patently risky categories like race, ethnicity, cultural and sexual identity and gender...

Women playwrights have and continue to have, and will always continue to have *so much to say*...

As such, in spite of living in times of both political and economic upheaval, I believe that the 21st century future can be observed with an air of hopeful expediency, if not outright optimism. As women playwrights continue to ask provocative questions in their work, they maintain firm stands in their embrace of potentiality. The psychic tolls of cultural and colonial Diasporas, sexism, racism and gender warfare will not lessen the urgency, ambition and humility seen all too clearly in the work of women playwrights working in the theatre today.

It is an exciting time to be a woman in the theatre...

At the risk of ending this on such a cliché tone, there continues to be a great deal left to do. No matter what, women playwrights must continue to write, to create, and to dream within the sometimes wary, conservative and anxious world of the American Theatre. So, where do we go from here? I have absolutely no idea. But I am excited at the prospect of finding out. We should all be excited at such a grand and illuminating prospect.

Desi Moreno-Penson
Playwright/Dramaturge
November 11, 2003

CHING VALDES
New York, NY

The playwright and the actor are co-dependents! One cannot exist without the other! In 1979 at La MaMa E.T.C. in JeanClaude Van Italie's "Tibetan Book of the Dead" where I started my career in the theatre. There were only a handful of Filipino actors in New York City and even fewer playwrights (if any, aspiring perhaps, but none to be contended with). There were David Henry Hwang and Philip Kan Kotonda who were just starting out but no Asian-American female playwrights.

We have come a long way but not far enough!!!! There are more Asian-American playwrights and actors at the present time but not enough productions are being done that gives employment to all. We have three major Asian-American Theatre Companies here in NYC (namely, Ma-Yi, the National Asian-American Theatre Co., and the Pan Asian Rep) who are mainly producing Asian -American writers...thank God for them...but these are not in the main stream venue.

I SALUTE THE PLAYWRIGHTS WHO WILL NOT BE DEFEATED DURING THESE DESPERATE TIMES. In fact, what better time to keep the flame going and keep our voices ROARING.

THIS IS WHAT THE THEATER MEANS TO ME: TO EXCHANGE IDEAS, TO PROVOKE, TO CHANGE AND/OR SIMPLY TO AFFECT THE HUMAN SOUL, TO FEEL, CONNECT AND THINK AND TO HOPEFULLY MAKE THIS A BETTER WORLD TO LIVE IN.

CHING VALDES-ARAN
ACTOR/DIRECTOR/(and aspiring playwright)

SUZANNE BENNETT
New York, NY

Yesterday the heat backstage stopped working, the board reneged on a promise to host an opening night party, the playwright just added extra scenes to a play we're in rehearsal on, making an already long play longer and a staff member's husband is going to Bogotá and her worry is making all of us hyperconscious of the increase in the world's dangers and our helplessness. But last night I went to a reading of a musical that came about from our first ever Collaboration Initiative between the Playwrights Lab and the Directors Forum at the Women's Project. One playwright and one director were given \$500 and access to rehearsal space and over the period of a year they worked with a few actors and composer and created Cyclone and the Pig-Faced Lady. The play starts in Romania in the early 1900's and follows a gypsy mother and her two children who flee persecution and come to the U.S. where they end up working at the then glamorous Coney Island. Act One ends with the burning of the Luna Park entertainment tower and Act Two opens in this century as the writer who created these gypsy characters listens to a message on her machine from a lover on Sept. 11 from the World Trade Center. It's one of those truly inventive dramatic surprises that catch you off guard at the same time that you appreciate the way history echoes and the way loss and survival is a story we will live over and over.

After a really lousy day, I went home feeling lighter, my optimism restored about the theatre, our playwrights and directors and even, despite the deceitful Bush and his arrogant administration, our

world. When such creativity can spring from such modest circumstances as \$500 and a rehearsal space, we can only be proud of our profession and the way we spend our time.

Having worked with the Women's Project and Productions, the largest theatre dedicated to producing work by women in the U. S., off and on for over 15 years, I often get discouraged that women playwrights and directors only make up a quarter of the main seasons of our theatres (excluding Broadway where we clock in at about 10%). But this season, as I look around at some of the most influential New York theatres I see announced plays by Lisa Loomer, Paula Vogel, Cherylene Lee, Naomi Wallace, Alice Tuan, Lynn Nottage, Milcha Sanchez-Scott, four plays by newcomer Julie Jordan and just yesterday, the announcement that Sarah Ruhl, won the prestigious Whiting Award.

Last June we published the 8th anthology of plays from the Women's Project so women's work in the theatre continues, undaunted by statistics, to proliferate and provide great satisfaction and encouragement on our sunny and on our dark days.

Suzanne Bennett
November, 2003

DORIS BAIZLEY
Venice, CA

LITTLE WOMEN, BIG SUBJECTS: The letter I never sent to a woman theater critic.

Dear Ms. (Critic), Ok, you think my play (about the Vietnam war from a woman's point of view) is self-conscious and melodramatic. It's awful to see that in print, but I understand that one woman's drama can be another woman's melodrama, and on the subject of Vietnam I'd rather sin on the side of going too far toward melodrama than holding back with cool irony.

But here's what really bothers me. It's the "Self" words: Self-important, Self-involved, Self-conscious, Self-pitying. How many times have women (not just writers) heard those words used to describe and belittle our ideas and emotions? As a woman writer there's nothing I would rather do than turn that around and say: Yes, my "self" is important, is involved, is conscious, and capable of pity and terror and all the other big feelings that make drama.

After recovering from your attack I realized it was just the goad I needed not to give up on my play; not to sit back and say forget it, lay off the big stuff, lower your voice, and stick to closely observed domestic realism. The subject is big. I want to write it big. And I will continue to write it big. You may still call it self-conscious and melodramatic, but as long as actors and audiences don't, I'll keep at it.

This isn't just my problem, so let's make it public. Let's have a panel and ask some male playwrights about drama vs. melodrama, self-conscious vs. invisible writing. I'll be there - but I can't guarantee that my voice will be modulated to a soft, gentle, ladylike pitch.

Sincerely, Doris Baizley, playwright.

NANCY KEYSTONE
Los Angeles, CA

NANCY KEYSTONE--ARTIST STATEMENT

When, in third grade, we were assigned to make a report on one planet in our solar system, I chose to do my report on the entire solar system. This early ambitious desire to generate work (including the last-minute-late-night-mother-to-the-rescue scenario) has remained a rather consistent model for me. I consider myself a multi-disciplinary artist: in the theatre my work encompasses that of director, playwright, choreographer and designer; I am also a visual artist, filmmaker and educator. From the earliest days, my life has been suffused with the arts to the point where art-making as a core expression of being is as necessary as breathing. As my expanding understanding of the universe is informed by my various expanding identities--artist, woman, citizen, wife, Jew, mother, teacher--that understanding manifests itself through many disciplines and forms, as I search to express meaning in the most visceral, poetic, resonant way. Working in the theatre is a form of devotion; it is a way of life which engages the intellect, emotions, body and spirit. What I love about theatre is what is difficult: it is a labor intensive, collaborative, low-tech art form, which requires a group of people to inhabit a common space and experience an event together, in the present moment, with concentrated attention. These days, in the U. S., at least, this seems like an almost insane proposition. However, the more difficult this becomes in our virtualized, fragmented society, the more I am compelled to embrace it. The material that interests me is usually expansive in nature: epic structures, muscular language, highly charged emotional matter, extremes of human behavior and situations, work that asks the big questions about our existence. I believe in rigor of thought, structure, and technique, combined with intuition, spontaneity, a deep, wide imagination, hard work, and an occasional miracle.

I am the founder and artistic director of Critical Mass Performance Group, a collaborative ensemble dedicated to the creation of new works and reinterpretations of classic plays, aiming to push the boundaries of narrative form and performance. The process of making each piece is long-term, progressing over more than a year, allowing for deep exploration and the discovery of an ideal performance vocabulary. An interest in the poetics of space has led me to create productions in non-traditional environments--houses, a jazz bar, parks, building exteriors, industrial spaces—as each site contains a unique energy and meaning which is integral to the event. I consider myself extremely fortunate that, in addition to activities with Critical Mass, I am also able to work regularly as a freelance director, designer and writer at other theatres throughout the country.

The coincidental convergence in the past couple years, of having a child, and living in what seems to be an acutely unstable and frightening moment in history, has made me even more conscious of the work I'm doing and how I do it, leading me to seriously question the necessity and meaningfulness of the theatre. I'm, sadly, past the moment in my life as an artist when I believed that doing a play could stop a war. And it is regularly argued that art is functionally impotent, it has no concrete, quantifiable purpose. Despite this, I still believe that the effort of making and sharing work is valuable on a larger, more subtle and mysterious level, that art is, in fact, vital to the inner life of the human being. At this critical juncture in history, when my government is doing things, in my name, which I deeply oppose, it is incumbent upon me to have faith, and to direct my artistic voice toward these issues from my tiny corner of the world; I aim to create transformative events, to jolt us--artists and audience alike--out of our habitual perceptions and assumptions, to re-engage with our oft-numbed sense of astonishment, to touch the nerves, spirit and intellect through the burning of the human mark in time and space.

JUDY SOOHOO
Los Angeles, CA

Say the unsayable.

LISA LOOMER
Los Angeles, CA

Since you are speaking mainly to women...tell them this.

At first, when people identified me as a "feminist" writer, or a writer who addressed "women's issues" I balked. I did not want to be labeled. Or limited. I still don't. But...my last three plays have been about...well...women's issues. Not that these issues haven't affected the men in my character's lives. Not that these women characters have not been affected by men... But I have written about breast cancer, high tech baby making and adoption, and childcare. What I realize, though, is that through these stories, I have been able to look at race, class, power and citizenship. I have been able to look at science. I have been able to time travel. In other words, "women's stories" encompass...everything.

MIGDALIA CRUZ
Cape Cod, MA

Dearest Colleagues:

On November 10th, I was on a theater panel at INTAR Theater with seventeen Latino theater artists. In this rare and extraordinary company, I was asked what was my dream for the theater.

I could not think of one.

If I had only one dream or wish, I wouldn't waste it on theater. The world is in too much turmoil.

I long for my daughter to one day know a world at peace. That's my dream.

Theater is not something I dream about. It is something I do. Like a carpenter-I build houses to fill with voices. And I would like to see each person whom society has tried to make disappear, find the strength to build their own houses, filled with their own stories, giving them the truth and beauty they deserve. Each person of color, each poor person, each person who been disenfranchised by society-I would pray that each one of us would finally feel entitled to our own poetry. Let us fill many sturdy houses with our voices. Let our voices be our path to truth.

Maybe that is the way to peace.

-Migdalia Cruz, Nuyorican playwright and mother-

p.s. I did NOT vote for George Bush.

RACHEL HAUCK
Los Angeles, CA

Dear Al and All,
Here are a few thoughts:

I think of Emily Mann's letter to this conference (which Alice just read to me over her kitchen table/desk) and think what a different and indebted generation I am from

I am shocked to hear those numbers.

I never think about those numbers.

But come to think of it, I am sure that less than 16% of the country's designers are women.

I don't wish myself to be defined as a "female designer".

It is somehow a qualification

As in "pretty good for a female designer"

Yet I am shocked to hear those numbers, and I think how can that be?

I watch the government slash arts funding everywhere and I think

Hmmm. What does it mean that the arts in America are not valued?

That can't be a good sign.

And then I think of that school in Georgia that eliminated recess because it was a waste of perfectly good class time, and that school system in Kansas that starting teaching Creation and went to court to prohibit the teaching of the Theory of Evolution. Recently.

In the new millennium they did this.

And I think uh oh. This really can't be good.

And I worry.

These days I think often of a project that I worked on recently which presented the simultaneous and interwoven writings of Euripides, Shakespeare and Rogers & Hammerstein, and pointed undeniably to the timelessness of human nature.

I wonder where in the cycles of Medea, of Macbeth, and of Cinderella we find ourselves now?

And when it gets quiet, I think of my Swiss friend who listened to my political rant on a train one late night and who responded, "do you have any idea how American the fact of your response is?"

That has given me great pause.

ANDREA HAIRSTON,
Northampton, MA

In the tradition of Rappers, African American Baptist Preachers, and West African griots, Andrea Hairston calls on any language to express what is necessary. Griots are poets, musicians, oral historians, praise singers, and diplomats negotiating community, conjuring identity. Griots shake time loose, allowing us to feel beyond our brief moments, beyond our skin. They dance down ego-trips, pour libation to the ancestors, and welcome the unborn. Illuminating the past, invigorating the future, these time- traveling Wordsmiths stand between us and cultural amnesia.

Archangels of Funk is my latest play.

Archangels' host says the show is a live performance "between the stations and networks, a rogue transmission broadcasting on a fractal frequency . . . Like a hip Prairie Home Companion, only from the asteroid belt." Using a variety show format of "interviews, romance, gossip, news, the blues, and radical views, even a mini-drama series and a rant or two," the play explores the possibility of soul repairs in an age of terror and plagues, soldiers in the closet, and a September sky exploding on our heads. *Archangels'* host asks us to "Dance life, but if you trip and stumble, then sing life. And if your voice cracks, let your heart keep time. And if your heart gives out, with your last breath leave your story behind. And if you are forgotten, come to us, in dreams and visions. Shake us from these death-like trances. Haunt us, hound us, like demons. Until we cannot forget that some slow, shuffling death is not the DANCE that is LIFE."

The other piece I'm working on is:

Stage Fright by Andrea Hairston, with music by Tony Vacca and Pan Morigan, is a speculative music/drama set in a future America where public performances have been banned, ostensibly because of recurring violence/terrorism at sports events, pop-rock-rap concerts, and other large public gatherings. In the future world of *Stage Fright*, theatre had just about died out before the banning due to astronomical costs, esoteric content, poor audience attendance, craft atrophy, and dwindling talent pool. (Current concerns in the field. Despite Film and TV artists' passionate engagements in theatre, some fear the 'best' talents and minds are otherwise engaged.) Given computer capacity to generate music, tune voices, adjust rhythms, synthesize bodies, etc., few artists in the *Stage Fright* world are capable of sustaining spontaneous, live performances. An old actor is caretaker of a once popular theatre space. The theatre's last production, a post-modern performance piece, had as its setting an installation on disappearing diversity—animals, plants, languages, cultures, and peoples going extinct. Despite compelling images, powerful performances, and poignant theme, no one came. The production was abandoned during social unrest with the setting in tact. Creatively working the cybernetic bureaucracy, the actor has been able to preserve this space while other theatres were demolished. He adds to the installation: masks, musical instruments, and props he scavenges from former performance sites. Occasionally he performs for himself.

In the midst of a passionate soliloquy from a favorite play, he encounters someone raised in the era without public performance. The stranger/intruder has left a restrictive home environment to experience a 'live' world, to wander in the dangerous public sphere and meet others face-to-face rather than simply on-line. This character seeks sites where people congregate for secret society performances and could either be an agent trying to hunt down dangerous dissidents or an artistic adventurer hoping to participate in forbidden mysteries.

The setting for *Stage Fright*—the sculpture, photography, paintings, drawings, and collages that constitute the installation/setting on disappearing diversity will not be silent, nostalgic artifacts, but living images given voice by musicians and actors. Pan Morigan will research 'endangered' and popular musical styles to score the images.

My aim with both *Stage Fright* and *Archangels* is to encourage audiences to be agents of change taking an active role in constructing their own reality. We take seriously our roles as modern griots who must engage and entertain while fostering critical thought and challenging our community to become its best self.

That's stuff I've been thinking, about working on.

JULIE HEBERT
Los Angeles, CA

What I'm thinking about has to do with what i miss from the theater- and that is the freedom, responsibility and risk of authorship- complete authorship of a work. in film and television there are so many collaborative voices to be considered that in a way it leaves the author a place to hide- a place from which to say 'i didn't write that, i didn't mean that, they made me do it.' whether it's true or not it is a comfort when being scrutinized harshly... a comfort not available in the theater.

on opening night of a play i've written i feel more exposed than at any other time in my life, bar none. the play expresses what i think, what i feel--- is truthful, essential, mysterious and worthy of being noticed. i teach myself through writing a play; i risk exposing my lack of skill, my lack of insight, my lacks in general and it is this very risk that causes growth. when i write a play i am seeking and i feel i am doing my real work. my brother died this year and the deep, aching need to write a play about him won't leave me alone as i go through my working day here in hollywoodlandia.

love,
julie hébert

SARAH RUHL
Los Angeles, CA

One thing that I've noticed, watching language in this country over the past three years (the years of Bush's tenure, and the rise of Schwarzenegger, two right wing coups smack dab in the middle of a functioning democracy) is how much this country craves the language of simplicity. Subject, object, verb. Americans love that. We love it. Coast to coast. It makes us feel like we live in a simple time. And I think the left has made fun of this rhetorical principle rather than taking it seriously.

Hearing Schwarzenegger's speeches, which lack all substance, but glimmer with the charismatic leadership derived from simple sentence structure: "I want to govern for the people of California!" I wonder: What is the role of theater, which examines rhetoric closely, during a time when Americans crave a masked simplicity? We want simplicity from our politicians, our journalists, our movies, and our advertisements. We want the illusion that it's Morning in America. We don't want to think about the complexities of destroying another country. It makes us feel weird. Cognitive dissonance. And the palliative for cognitive dissonance in the U.S.? Simple sentence structure and good PR.

The democrats in this country, I feel, have capitulated on the field of language as well as on other fields...the criticism of the right is muted, and when we do hear it, from people like Tom Daschle, it is in the language of bureaucrats. "What we have here is..." says Daschle on the subject of the lies told to Americans, and he pauses. And I'm hoping he'll say: A BIG FAT LIE! or even: MENDACITY! MENDACITY! But what he says is: What we have here is...a credibility gap! His sentence goes: Motor, motor, motor...and a great big collapse. A mincing bureaucratic sigh. Dismissed.

Who in this country but professional politicians and pundits gives a crap about a credibility gap! The left needs a better language for criticism. And I don't know why it should be so difficult, because the fact is that when you're speaking the truth, it often comes out with great concision and clarity. I think of the truth telling of Martin Luther King. A man whose life, morals, convictions, and speech were all united in a kind of clarion language of truth telling. Well, it's impossible to conjure up another Martin Luther King. But we need someone to say--in plain speech--with conviction--that our government has

been lying to us about Iraq. About a lot of things. All of the PR scams in the world--Condoleezza Rice's job has been transformed into a colossal PR job--shouldn't hide the fact that there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Why no one seems to point that out with sufficient outrage or plainspeech is strange to me.

So, what is the place of theater in times of perverse language? The lies of seductive plain-speech on the right and the craven-talk of complex professional bureaucrats who are hedging their bets on the left? We need whole alternative WORLDS of language. We can have them in the theater. And people will listen, without the mediation of the media. We need plain-speech exposed as a lie (see Kelly Stuart's latest play *Homewrecker*, that takes apart George Bush's speechifying), we need complicated intelligent talk that communicates the complexity of the world (I recently saw the opening monologue of Kushner's *Homebody/Kabul* and was overjoyed about how much JOY there was in the theater derived from simply experiencing complex political engagement), and we also need simple speech--the simple clarion emotional political speech of an Anhouilh.

I believe that the truth telling in the theater does not even have to have political content in order to work on a political plane. The truth telling might be about the smell of cigars (see Nilo Cruz' beautiful lyric *Anna in the Tropics*) but our bodies might remember the sensation of hearing something true. And we might start to demand that sensation from our politicians.

We need writers. We need live untelevised space. We need to remember, in our bodies, what it feels like to hurl truths at one another, one human being to another.

Brooke Berman
New York, NY

My latest obsessions? I'm so honored that you've asked me but aren't exactly sure what to say or how --

My concerns right now are the following;

How to evolve my own human heart and change.

How do we change?

How do we really change?

What does change mean?

Does it take a long time?

Do we, as a culture, as "the world" change all at once, or gradually, over a long time, so long that no one can see it until it has happened?

Is there ever an "apocalypse" or is it (again) slow-going and less dramatic?

What is love?

Where does love fit into creation and change? Can one do/be/have both? What does a change-positive paradigm look like?

I love making sure that my plays are seen. I love marketing. I love outreach. I love being involved in making sure that the work gets to the people who need to see it – in my case, audiences under 30. why don't more playwrights feel we are able to act as our own advocates in this regard? Plays are written to be seen – not because they are OURS, but because they are written to provoke dialogue, change, and movement.

How do things move?

How do we make sure that we, as theater-makers, are healthy and how do we sustain ourselves financially?

How do we survive the lean times?

Hope this is something. I'm sorry it's not more coherent. Don't feel you have to use it. It's just what's on my mind right now.

bb

PAULA CIZMAR
Los Angeles, CA

Often now, when I speak to some of my women playwright friends, I hear the repeated lament that they feel bewildered and inadequate as writers in the violent world in which we live. They wonder if they have anything to say that is worthy enough, considering the current state of affairs. I've been feeling this way, too.

I confess I used to get impatient with this sort of thing—which would bring on my typical irritated Good-Riddance-So-Just-Don't-Write-Anything-Then kind of response. But now I'd like to acknowledge the decency of this feeling of unworthiness—and also to point out that it is a product of empathy. A product of taking in daily pain and disappointment and confusion and trying to process it as a human. And as an artist. A product of trying to find a way to somehow put voice to the world's madness in a form that will have resonance for other people and yet will not ignore it or trivialize it or excuse it.

I keep reminding myself that the countries of the world are composed of people, not situations, not governments. I keep reminding myself that it is people that I love—not situations, not governments. And I keep reminding myself that so many people are still voiceless. So there is nothing inherently trivial about writing a small human story about a person who has no one else to speak for her. This is not ignoring or excusing a larger global problem, it is merely looking at it and its effects on a more local scale. But I wonder: Is that enough in a time when my government is operating on lies and leaks and secrecy, playing on people's fears and using the words "patriot" and "national security" as justifications for reducing civil liberties? I don't know. I honestly don't know. I do know that it is the human story that we all crave. It's the human story that has always drawn us close to the fire to create community. The tale of the small person caught up in the impossible task, the slaying of the huge, fierce dragon. That's the story we all want to hear. I suppose, even now, it's the one I will still try to tell. But maybe I'll start telling it with a much sharper tongue.

--Paula Cizmar, Los Angeles, California

Y YORK
HONOLULU, HAWAII

Plays make use of the fewest words to get at the most meaning. I like discarding wrong words, pushing them away, wiping them up with sponges, wringing them down the drain. I like studying correct words, laying them down like bricks, making a temple, a spire. Aspire.

In the world, they're flying around like bullets now, the wrong words. Dividing, isolating, killing. We're lying low, me and my word friends, BREAD, SPOONBREAD, LIGHT, trying to make a temple to rise up, make peace. Maybe not a temple, maybe a lighthouse, showing the way.

I am happy that so many sisters are also hard at work with their word friends. I long to hear them, see their lighthouses rising, sending out word beams, landing like caress, lighting the way.

Y York, no dot