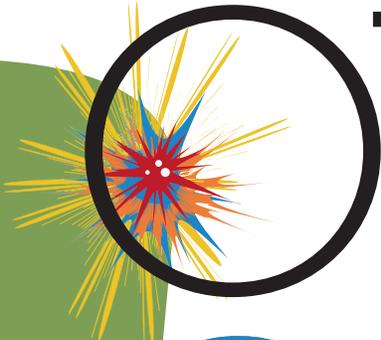

IMAGES OF THE OTHER



WITH
KIA
CORTHRON,



FERNANDA
COPPEL,



AND JOHN
WEIDMAN,



MODERATED BY
CHRISTINE TOY
JOHNSON

*An excerpt from the November 21, 2013
DG Academy*

KIA CORTHRON: Well, when you ask where I start, often *Democracy Now*. I mean I'm a political writer, so I always start with something political. You want me to elaborate?

CHRISTINE TOY JOHNSON: I do. *[Laughter]*

KIA CORTHRON: A few years ago, I was fortunate that the Guthrie Theater had these commissions where they got this big grant and they picked nine American playwrights. We could go wherever we wanted in the world and write about the experience. So, while often my research does come from books, actually, I could do it there this time. So in 2004, I went to Liberia as they were transitioning out of their Civil War. Sometimes people think, "Oh, I'm black, and that's Africa. So, therefore, it's your culture," but it's actually [not my] culture.

CHRISTINE TOY JOHNSON: Because where did you grow up?

KIA CORTHRON: Maryland in the Appalachians. Why do you ask? *[Laughs]*

CHRISTINE TOY JOHNSON: So pretty far away from Africa.

KIA CORTHRON: Yeah. [Laughter]

So part of it because there's an American history and part of it is a history play because it was settled by free American blacks with something called the American Colonization Society. That's a whole other story. Ultimately it's a big three-act play. By the end, it's completely given over to the Africans because it comes to the present, about the time that I was there. And so when we did a workshop of the play in Minneapolis with the Guthrie, it's interesting 'cause there are lots of Liberian ex-pats in Minneapolis.

I had a person from the university who was my guide, my *consultant*, so he was really helpful. And he brought ten people from the community to the workshop reading. He was a little late. I think there was maybe one person there by the first act. There were a couple by the second act. Most didn't get there till the third act.

CHRISTINE TOY JOHNSON: Oh, wow.

KIA CORTHRON: But that didn't keep them from ripping it to shreds.

But some of what they said was useful, and I considered that and incorporated it, and some I had to remember what happened there. For example, part of it, I was on the Firestone plantation which is the American Firestone plantation and it's enormous. There's a million acres and they turned it into a rubber plantation and pay the people nickels to do all this work, right? The only white person I met in Liberia was this big blonde man, who was in charge. It was very weird because my family set up this interview. He didn't say anything. He was just staring at me and I was talking to other people. It was very weird and creepy.

But then we went to the workers, the tappers. I always say I could never be a journalist, because I'm not very good with interviewing people because I'm always conflicted between wanting to understand the story to write and really feeling like I'm in other people's business. But, as it turns out, Liberian English is very – especially for working-class people, is very hard for Americans to understand, so my family

were speaking to them, anyway, and they just asked all these questions. So I found out these people that had to tap a ton of sap a month, with no days off.

As we were about to leave, a young man came out of the forest and he started talking really quickly. I thought this will be the person to say, "What are you doing here? This is none of your business." And, actually, what he said was, "I'm so glad you're here. Somebody needs to finally tell our stories."

So I had to balance that with the Liberians in Minneapolis. Some of what they said certainly was legitimate, but other stuff, partly because they were angry, again, because somebody was talking about this. They said, "Firestone's not even an issue anymore. Nobody works there." But it was totally an issue. And I had to balance what they said that was useful in terms of the culture, with what I saw with my own eyes and what that man said to me about telling the story.

Ultimately, the characters that I wrote were not the Minneapolis Liberians. They were not the Liberians that I saw. They were from my head, but were enriched by understanding the culture.

CHRISTINE TOY JOHNSON: John, did you have a question for Kia?

JOHN WEIDMAN: Well, you sort of answered it, but I wondered whether the critical response from the Liberian audience in Minneapolis was mostly about the politics of what you were presenting, or was it about, "She thinks that's us, but that's not us. She doesn't know who we are. She got us wrong."

KIA CORTHRON: Yes. I think the latter, but like I said, most of them didn't get there until the third act. I'm not saying right or wrong, but I'm saying that they were upset in the first place. I was only there a couple of weeks, so I think they felt that I didn't have the authority to write that.

Of course, the project was about Americans going to other countries, so it wasn't going to be a Liberian writer. But, yes, that's what I believe is ... yes to both your questions in a way because a woman said that she was upset because I focused on women

characters who were tappers, actually, in the contemporary story, and how Liberian women don't work outside the home.

And I think it was just nine days before this that Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was elected in Liberia, the first female president of Africa. But they just sort of were ignoring that reality, and no one brought that up because of legitimate fears about someone else co-opting their culture. I think they are afraid that it might be wrong to the point of maybe some of them deciding it was wrong before they heard it.

CHRISTINE TOY JOHNSON: Right. I think it's interesting that you heard from somebody, "Thank you for telling this story." That's a really powerful thing.

KIA CORTHRON: When I was there.

CHRISTINE TOY JOHNSON: Yeah. I actually made a documentary film with my Caucasian husband about the first non-Caucasian pro basketball player. He's a Japanese American guy from the 1947 Knicks. I'm Chinese American, but for some reason, over this period of time, I ended up doing a lot of research and work about Japanese Americans in the '40s, in the internment camps. And so some people would say, "Well, why are you interested?" That's what's offensive to me, actually. "Why are you interested in a Japanese American story?" "I am." But the larger more important thing to both Bruce and me was the number of Japanese American people who came up to us, and still do, that say, "Thank you for telling this story," and that's the bottom line.

I guess to us, we'd say whenever we feel put on the defensive at all or put on the spot, or made to think maybe we shouldn't care, or that we don't have the right to tell the story, that we are the ones who are telling the story. We actually made the film. We're getting the story out there, and it's had a really big impact.

I guess on the flip side of this whole conversation, I'm interested to know whether or not any of you feel a responsibility, for lack of a better word, to write about your own culture, or your own family stories, or who you're most touched by.

FERNANDA COPPEL: Well, I mean I look at theater right now and I don't see a lot of people like me working on a regular basis, and that really angers me, so I think it is important for me to continue to write stories that are close to home.

So definitely, yeah, I do think twice sometimes when I sit down because I know that there's a lack of Latino playwrights being produced, so I do feel that it's important to get those stories out there.

CHRISTINE TOY JOHNSON: And when you're populating the world of your play, when you're writing it, do you specifically say, "This needs to be..." if it's not a character that might need to be about race or ethnicity or sexual orientation, but somebody that could be of many different, or any different kinds of – you know what I'm trying to say. Do you write it specifically in your script? I've heard some people say, "Well, I say 'any ethnicity' sometimes," or –

FERNANDA COPPEL: I've never done it. I like to write for actors that I see. Actors inspire me a lot. So if I see somebody I like that is of a different ethnicity, I'll write them into my plays. I love working with inspiring and dedicated actors.

JOHN WEIDMAN: Well, and as the white man on the panel up here, the country has given me a free pass to write whatever I want. And I think one of the things that underlies this entire conversation, as Fernanda said, is the fact that non-white male voices still have a great deal of difficulty being heard in theaters around this country, and things have gotten better, but they have a long, long, long way to go.

I think that a lot of what we're talking about will hopefully be self-correcting when a variety of different voices have easier access to stages that they have to struggle to gain access to now. In 2040, when today's ethnic minorities are supposed to become the majority, things should get better. Maybe. We'll see.

That said, the theater is a cultural institution that should be leading the way on an issue like this and pulling the rest of the culture along behind it. Theater should do a better job. Commercial producers should do a better job. The not-for-profits should

do a better job. If any of you have read *Outrageous Fortune*, Todd London's book about what it means to be a playwright – well, first of all, you can't be a playwright in the United States. By quantifying what playwrights earn, Todd demonstrated that it's actually not possible to be a playwright in the United States, despite the fact that there are playwrights all over the United States. But one of the other things he quantified was how difficult it is to get original non-white male voices on stage.

CHRISTINE TOY JOHNSON: I feel like it has a lot to do with going back to the word "perceptions," perceptions of who people think we are and how we fit into the American landscape. I'm an actor as well as a writer, and almost every new play that I have read in a reading situation, or auditioned for, if there's an Asian character, it's an Asian from Asia character. There aren't a lot of Asian American stories being produced, though there are a lot of us who are trying to write our own experience and get it out there.

For me, personally, my mother's side of the family has been here since the 1860s, so if I were writing a story that took place in China, I would have to do more research about people from China than I ever would about people from Westchester County, because that's where I grew up.

I'm going to put John on the spot a little. There is the Melbourne, Australia debut of *Pacific Overtures* coming up.

JOHN WEIDMAN: Get your tickets. There's still time to get them.

CHRISTINE TOY JOHNSON: And there was an article on, I don't know, some social media thing lately, that quoted the director of this production as saying that she was planning on doing cross-cultural and cross-gender casting, which is really strange, given – I don't know if you know *Pacific Overtures*, but it's especially strange in *Pacific Overtures*. But this is the inflammatory quote – [Laughter]

– that the director said. She said, "This is a story by an American playwright about a moment in Japanese history, so it doesn't claim any cultural authenticity."

JOHN WEIDMAN: I understand what she means. The language dresses the idea up a little bit, but the essential statement is that because Steve and I are not Japanese, there is no way we could write something set in Japan which would be culturally authentic. What she means is we can't replicate or duplicate something which a Japanese playwright would write. And she's right. But that doesn't mean there isn't an authenticity to what two writers in New York who aren't Japanese would choose to write about this particular episode writing it from the Japanese point of view.

It's a dismissive disqualifying statement that really needs to be examined. I think the more – at some point, we'll reach a point where writing from the perspective of ethnic identity is an option for all writers the way it's an option for me. I could write about the fact that my father was Jewish and my mother wasn't, if I wanted to, but I certainly don't have to, and I'm not letting anybody down if I don't. This is my country, man.

But it would be terrific to reach a point where statements like that director's statement wouldn't slide by so easily. And I want to be clear. I don't mean that – I remember seeing *The Colored Museum* at the Public Theater a million years ago. And I remember thinking, "This is an extraordinary piece of work," and feeling like I was being let in on a conversation which was fundamentally between George Wolfe and a black audience (that that was the primary audience for the piece), but that it was being made available to me.

It was like I could come in the room and listen, but that the experience the black audience was having of the bases he was touching and how he was touching them would have a whole different resonance than they would for me because I had had a different experience growing up in this country. And it just seems to me it would be great to reach a point where Fernanda, you didn't feel angry – that was your word – about the way Latinos were being represented...

CHRISTINE TOY JOHNSON: Or not represented, right?

JOHN WEIDMAN: Or not represented, and whether



or not a Latino author was representing the culture—I'm stumbling now, but I think we remain in a very, very difficult place for people writing from anything other than a majority perspective.

KIA CORTHRON: I just have a question. That director of *Pacific Overtures*...? Is she Japanese-Australian [laughs] or something like that?

JOHN WEIDMAN: I don't believe so.

KIA CORTHRON: I mean it sounds to me it's just like an excuse because she wants to do whatever she wants with the play –

JOHN WEIDMAN: That sounds right.

CHRISTINE TOY JOHNSON: That's exactly what it is. So anything goes. "I can do whatever I want because

a Japanese person didn't write this, so yeah, whatever."

KIA CORTHRON: And "I'm not Japanese, but *that* doesn't matter."

JOHN WEIDMAN: Whereas, actually, according to her contract, the theater's contract with the licensing agent, she can't do whatever she wants.

CHRISTINE TOY JOHNSON: Right.

JOHN WEIDMAN: Playwrights can control what your play looks like on stage. Not entirely, but you can.

VIDEO: Watch this conversation in its entirety via the DG Academy's Video Archive by visiting our website. <http://www.dramatistsguild.com/eventseducation> 



WE LOVE POLITICAL THEATRE. BRUCE IS JUST OFFENDED THEY SAT US LEFT OF CENTER.