




Dramatists Guild 
of America

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REGIONAL REPORT | Washington, DC
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Hold On To Your Worlds

I love my job. I create worlds, and the people in them do and say whatever I want. That's my Big Sell when I teach playwriting to young people. I tell them it's a way to control reality through their imaginations, to confront and solve the issues they face during a time in their lives when they have very little control over what is happening to them.

Award-winning local playwright Karen Zacarias is Founding Artistic Director of Young Playwrights Theatre, the only theatre in DC dedicated solely to producing plays by young people. Their goal is not necessarily to discover the next Suzan-Lori Parks or Tracy Letts, but to provide a platform on which young people can present their unique vision and engage with their community: YPT's mission is "To teach students to express themselves clearly and creatively through the art of playwriting."

Besides her work with YPT, Zacarias is a DC playwright who has managed the envious feat of getting produced in her home town. It didn't happen overnight, and she'd had quite a few successes outside DC before the big theatres took notice, but now she has commissions in the works for Arena, Round House, and the Kennedy Center. Round House is especially committed to her work, as they also premiered a play of hers last season.

In earlier columns, I've focused on DC theatres doing new work, and it's time to mention Theater J's track record for producing local playwrights whose work falls within their Jewish-themed mission. These playwrights include Joshua Ford, Jeanette Buck, Hannah Hessel, Ernie Joselovitz, Aaron Goldman, and its Artistic Director Ari Roth. Though their latest premiere, *Honey Brown Eyes*, was written by New Yorker Stefanie Zdravec, she's a playwright with family ties to DC. When she was in town for auditions for her play, she spoke about the process

at Theater J, praising Roth for his insightful text-based questions, and for his sensitivity to preserving her vision.

I've written before about Inkwell, an outfit headed by Jessica Burgess. Still in its first year out, Inkwell has engaged local playwrights in its efforts at establishing best practices for new play development. As part of the seventh annual Page-to-Stage Festival at the Kennedy Center, Inkwell presented readings of several plays, and hosted a panel on new play development that was prompted by an article Nelson Pressley wrote in the *Washington Post* about how development can do more harm than good. Ari Roth (Theater J's Artistic Director), Blake Robison (Round House Theatre's Artistic Director), and I joined Pressley for the discussion. It was a privilege to represent playwrights on the panel, and I went head-to-head with the idea that playwrights need to be "beat up" in rehearsal, as Roth said. To be fair, he also said he believes in protecting the playwright as much as possible, and in offering script suggestions in the form of "compliment sandwiches" to preserve their ego. (For all of Roth's and my differences on how to work with playwrights, he's someone I've turned to for advice on how to work with directors.)

I've heard stories where celebrity directors bend scripts to suit their concepts, or where cuts are suggested in such a way as to make the playwright feel like a fool for not taking them. On the panel, I *repeatedly* repeated my conviction that it's the playwright's job to make sure her vision isn't co-opted by a theater or director. The director of my recent commission and I each committed ourselves to serving the script. The often fraught discussions that followed were conducted with a deep respect and clarity that I believe only strengthened the play. Neither of us felt "beat up," and we never resorted to handing each other "compliment sandwiches," preferring to disagree more straightforwardly. Robison seemed to have the healthiest and least invasive attitude when he said that he works hard to make sure the playwright doesn't accept too many "helpful" suggestions during the developmental process.

Thanks to those of you who made it out to our Town Hall meeting in July. We had a panel on—what else—new plays in Washington. Gary Garrison moderated, and we invited the heads of the smaller DC theatres who do new plays, with the thought that smaller theatres are more likely to take a risk on a local playwright. Deb Randall said she fell in love with playwrights soon after starting Venus Theatre, and now she has a reading series featuring new plays from all across the country. She also said she has found that producing local playwrights translates into bigger audiences! Deborah Kirby, Artistic Director of Journeymen Theatre, could not attend at the last minute, but she has a history of producing short plays by local playwrights, and is commissioning a new play from a local playwright.

Charter Theatre's Keith Bridges and Richard Washer said their mission is to produce new work, and it just so happens that it's usually by a local playwright, because they have found that their greatest successes have come about when the playwright was available during the process. (Bridges said the kiss of death is when a playwright says, "Tell me what you want me to do to my play so you'll produce it.") Christopher Henley, Artistic Director of Washington Shakespeare Company, said that out of ten plays in his last two seasons, five were either completely new or new to DC. Other panelists were Jessi Burgess, who specifically wants to engage and nurture young writers at Inkwell, and Randy Baker, who produces local playwrights through Rorschach Theatre's Myth Appropriations, a happening that collects writers, directors, and actors for a week

and assigns them myths to adapt. Deb Randall closed the panel by sharing one of the biggest reasons she's committed to producing new plays: "We need that three-dimensional direct connection of story and people in one room to counter the oversaturation of two-dimensional media."

It was great to see so many Guild members at the Town Hall meeting—Emily Solomon, Karen Alenier, Anthony Gallo, Dante Deen, Renee Calarco, Marian Licha, to name a few. I was heartened by how many of you came up afterwards with postcards of your own shows you were producing! Keep it up! A big thanks to Gregg Henry for letting us host our Town Hall meeting at the Kennedy Center, and for continuing to work tirelessly on behalf of playwrights.

All right. It's time to tell you all. I've broken up with DC. DC gladly would have let me continue to self-produce, but my best shot at *being* produced requires getting produced outside of DC. As so often happens in relationships, the moment I declared my intent to break up, DC did everything it could to keep me—my belongings and I were in a cargo van on the Jersey Turnpike when the *Post* called asking about my plays; further up I-95 I got an audition for the lead in a spring show at one of the larger DC theatres; then I got an email asking me to direct a show in DC. At Page-to-Stage, I had two plays read and I spoke on the aforementioned panel. In September, my DC swansong opened to terrific reviews in which the critics referred to me as a local playwright, even though I'm now in New York. Sigh.

It's been an honor to represent such a creative and smart bunch. Award-winning (and fabulously stylish) playwright Renee Calarco will take my place. Renee is the first theatre friend I made in DC, an undisclosed number of years ago. At the time, she often spoke of her baby brother Joe, who was a struggling director in NYC, and who is now working all over the place. Time flies.

Keep creating your worlds!