

An overdue conversation

BY ASHLEY LEE

FOR NETFLIX'S "The Forty-Year-Old Version," writer-director-star Radha Blank channeled the frustrations of a career in theater into her first feature film. Chief among them: the white producer who helps her on-screen alter ego debut a play on Broadway. This gatekeeper's less helpful notes include saying her piece isn't "Black" enough, requires a white character to "grab the core audience" and would be perfect for a white director who just staged "A Raisin in the Sun."

"Some people think he's a caricature," says Blank, who raps in the movie about programmers' affinity for "poverty porn." But that character is instantly recognizable to any Black playwright who has had to navigate anti-Black behavior to even entertain a career in the American theater. "It's the same kind of person making the same type of choices, controlling what diverse stories are told," Blank says. "There needs to be an investment in trying to make the American theater reflect what America looks like." With "Version" — both a romantic comedy and a strong social commentary — now streaming, The Times invited Black theatermakers to share their experiences with insidious racism — sometimes subtle, other times blatantly cruel, even amid all the Black Lives Matter statements. "This pushback against the whole system," says playwright Jocelyn Bioh, "these are conversations that artists of color have been dying to have for years."



Jeong Park

Radha Blank

Writer, director and star, "The Forty-Year-Old Version"

For a long time I had no idea why so many theaters told me, "We love your work, but we can't produce it. What else do you have?" I heard that over and over; it was so frustrating and made me doubt myself. What I think they meant was, "Do you have any plays with white people in them? Or will help our white patrons feel better about being white?"

It's not to say that these places don't produce theater of color, but it's usually a certain kind of piece that caters to the "white with silver hair" patron and their idea of Black life. They're rarely contemporary, and they're drenched in strife, grief, poverty and pain, or atoning for some guilt they may have. And it shows up during Black History Month or in response to racial tension in the world. But if I were to say that the choices they made are based on racism or white supremacy, they'd turn red and be so offended.

Now I'm grateful for the adversity that I experienced trying to get my plays produced, because it gave me this story to tell.



JAY L. CLENDENIN Los Angeles Times

Dominique Morisseau

Playwright, "Pipeline"

Let's talk about the white critic gatekeepers, who don't seem willing to step back and acknowledge that they're not the expert on something. They don't know the people you're writing about, but then they'll tell you how well you wrote about them.

When "Detroit '67" was done at the Public, one character was likened in an insulting way to "Good Times." It felt like someone was trying to tell me that I'm caricaturing and exaggerating my family, my community, my own people — people you've never met, never had a conversation with and never been invited into the homes of. We're writing from our real lives, but the critic has no idea of what those experiences are like, and then their review misses the work because it just has no context.

That then becomes how my work gets etched into the cultural canon, and that's ridiculous. What's worse is that the work doesn't go forward because the theaters are way too obedient to these critics. We're not a culture that's comfortable saying, "We don't know enough," and it ultimately hurts the artist who does.

An artistic director in Portland told me, "I love your work, but I just don't have the courage to do it." This white man, with his privilege and his multimillion-dollar theater, was othering me and essentially saying, "I like Black people, but you can't work here because I'm too afraid of your Blackness." And I'm supposed to feel excitement that his gaze has recognized me? As if him liking my work will feed me, clothe me or pay my bills?

Cut to a couple years ago, when I directed a Shakespeare production in Denver that broke box-office records. That theater then hired a new artistic director who, lo and behold, is the same one who made that comment. He never saw my show, but when he was asked about it in an interview, he said he's "allergic to the use of high tech" and prefers "disciplined" work. And nowhere in the entire interview did he mention my name.

His language to me and about me was rooted in racism and, even worse, was a form of erasism. And I will not be erased, especially not by a white man sitting in his privilege.

One of my early directing gigs, I was told, "We're concerned our audience won't understand what they're saying. I was like, 'They're speaking English. And you all just did an Irish play; were you worried about your audiences dealing with those accents?'"

Eventually, we came to an understanding and it was a real learning moment for the institution. But I had to fight and say that I wasn't going to change anything. If your audience needs to look up a word, then that's work they can do.



Zack DeZon

Robert O'Hara

Director and playwright, "Bootycandy"

Margo Hall

Artistic director, Lorraine Hansberry Theatre



Diane Zhao

Katori Hall

Playwright and book writer, "Tina — The Tina Turner Musical"

Early in my career, I met with a white female artistic director and her associates about a commission. I pitched two plays: one with a white woman who wakes up with a Jamaican accent, and another that's set in a beauty shop in 1940s Memphis. They asked me, "Which one do you really want to do?" I picked the latter, which centered the Black Southern female experience.

They said, "We think what's best for us — and possibly for you — is the play about the white woman. It sounds hilarious! We could get Julia Louis-Dreyfus!" There were so many levels to this: devaluing the Black female experience as a worthy story, wiping off the table the opportunity for a Black woman to be the star, and eradicating the idea that I, a Black woman, wanted to pursue. Regardless of your good intentions in trying to provide me an opportunity, you pressured me to write for your gaze because you think it'll make more money. You say it's because you're thinking green, but in all actuality, you're really thinking white.



KIRK MCKOY Los Angeles Times

Jocelyn Bioh

Playwright, "School Girls; Or, the African Mean Girls Play"

My play "Nollywood Dreams" is a comedy set in the boom of the Nigerian film industry. One associate artistic director said to me, "When I read about Nigeria in the newspaper, all I hear about is Boko Haram, and all of the struggles and corruption in the government there. So I'm just trying to understand why everybody in your play is so happy."

I was stunned into silence for a moment. A lot of stories from the continent tend to be "poverty porn" narratives with war, rape, struggle — not that those stories don't exist and shouldn't be heard, but that's not the only narrative of Africa. And my play wasn't about that; it's about the entertainment world. No one is asking why they're not talking about political issues in "Noises Off," right?

"You thinking that Boko Haram runs all of Nigeria speaks more to your ignorance than mine." I vowed never to work at that theater again.



JESSE DITMAR Getty Images

Lynn Nottage

Playwright, "Sweat"

I wrote a play that did not have any white characters, and I remember the literary manager saying to me, "I think this is great, but you need to have a character that allows me entrance into your work." That is not the first and only time I've heard that as a note from either a white dramaturg or literary manager, whose job is to help the playwright get closer to their own voices, not further away. I did consider adding the character, and then decided not to.

This notion that "the audience" is synonymous with "white people" is incredibly detrimental to the work. But when you're a BIPOC theater artist working in predominantly white institutions, you wonder whether, in order to succeed, you have to reshape, alter or craft your voice in such a way that allows an audience, who might not necessarily be invested or familiar with your narrative, entrance into your work. It speaks to the anti-Blackness that's been so pervasive throughout our predominantly white cultural institutions for many, many years.

David E. Talbert

Playwright, "The Fabric of a Man"

A promoter said the title of my 10th play was "a bit esoteric" because of the metaphor, and should be changed to "something that the audience can wrap their minds around." He then suggested titles that felt like blaxploitation episodes like "Things Your Man Won't Do" that really speak down to the African American audience.

I trust my audience because I am my audience, and we as a community can embrace and "wrap our minds" around all kinds of concepts and metaphors and ideas. The Black audience needs to be given the respect they deserve, and our art needs to be given the respect it deserves. I didn't change the title, and it ended up being the biggest in my catalog.



KIRK MCKOY Los Angeles Times

Keenan Scott II

Playwright, "Thoughts of a Colored Man"

I'll never forget one of my first meetings about my play, when I was told by a white producer, "I don't know if a story about seven Black men is commercial enough." I feel like my white counterparts are never asked: "Will these seven white men be commercial enough? Will they sell tickets? Will this be palatable for audiences — who, typically, are middle-aged white patrons — to receive it?"

In that moment, I was told that the Black voice is not the standard, that stories from my community are not human stories. And we have to water down our Blackness to cross over to a "wider audience" because being authentically us is not enough to do so.

Of course, I didn't work with that producer, and that play is Broadway-bound next year. I hope the gatekeepers of American theater understand that by seeing the value in stories about different types of individuals outside of those who are white and male, they can redefine who that standard ticket buyer can be.



Lowell Thomas

James Ijames

Playwright, "Kill Move Paradise"

Very early in my career, I had spent a lot of time preparing for an audition for a play. When I went in for it, they said to me, "You're not very urban, are you?" It was utterly disorienting to hear someone use such coded language. And I remember thinking, "Well, do you have a note? Are you gonna do your job and offer me something to get closer to the thing you're looking for? Because I am a trained actor, so I can play anything!"

I was able to muster some version of, "I don't think I know exactly what you mean by that," but in a tone that hinted that I knew exactly what this director meant. I did not get that job, and I didn't get called in to audition for that theater for many years.

I say it out loud and know it's small potatoes compared to what so many others have dealt with. But it truly framed how I approach my work as a director and a playwright, and what I demand of the people I work with: Try to see the brilliance of the artist instead of making a value judgment about the person.



Samuel Tesfaye

Penelope Lowder
Playwright,
"West Adams"

One of my first short plays was about a wealthy African American couple whose marriage was crumbling due to a lack of communication. They were in their 50s and dining at a restaurant — one of their favorite pastimes — and often spoke in food metaphors. Easy, right? The director told me he was having problems with casting. I compromised by changing the male character to white, but I kept the woman Black. He then told me he hired a white actress. I told him I specifically wanted this piece to be a vehicle for at least one Black actor; he said he tried but just couldn't find any. He ignored my voice and vision. Feeling as if I had no other options, I foolishly acquiesced. My characters went from being two African Americans to two white people. This director didn't realize the significance of a play with two people of color who were not oppressed, impoverished or polarized. These were three-dimensional characters representing a world not often seen in theater. I never saw the production, and if I had gone to see it, I still would not have seen my own play.



Charli Williams

Loy A. Webb
Playwright,
"His Shadow"

My play is about a football player who becomes an activist when someone dies at the hands of police. Many theaters demanded I answer whether this play was about Colin Kaepernick. I kept telling them, "Colin's legacy is part of this piece, but it's an homage to the history of Black athletes who've revolted before Colin and those who will come after him." The play references Tommie Smith and John Carlos; a simple Google search of those names would have absolved that inquiry. Still, they didn't seem to get that, nor did they find it important. In fact, an off-Broadway theater told me the play was "too simple." I think about that comment a year later, as more athletes have become vocal about the injustices in this world and, sadly, more Black people have died from police brutality. How disheartening it is to have to defend our stories, to be told that our lived experiences are "too simple." To Black writers who are writing the world as they've lived and breathed: do not stop, despite the ignorance of white institutions who are illiterate to the struggles and rich history of Black people in this country.



CAROLYN COLE Los Angeles Times

Stacy Osei-Kuffour
Playwright,
"The Pearl in the Black Sea"

When you're a POC playwright, theaters will blame it on so many things — their company members, their subscribers, timing — because rarely are they willing to take a chance on your work and on you. We have so much to say, and if we're given the platform and the space and the time — beyond our race — we could and would succeed. When George Floyd was murdered, a white theater company in Los Angeles reached out to me, after promising me to produce my work for four or five years now. Why does it take a horrific event, like a man being suffocated and killed by police, for this theater to finally produce my work, for me to finally be seen and considered? I ultimately said no to this theater, and unremarkably, have watched them continue to only produce white plays. [The idea that] white stories always come first is ingrained in our culture, our society and our systems, and it's wrong. I want other stories to have priority, to have the chance to truly shine.



Brandon Nick

Donja R. Love
Playwright,
"One in Two"

My play is about how one in two Black gay and bisexual men are projected to be diagnosed with HIV in their lifetime, and the end is a call to action to stop this hidden epidemic. During previews, my director and I were talking to the artistic director and associate artistic director, who said that folks loved the play but felt as if they were being yelled at. I very candidly asked if they were referring to white people. I told them, "This play is for everybody, but it's specifically for Black gay men to see themselves centered. This note, though, is essentially centering white people; it's a note about culture, not craft. If you have a note about structure and making the work the strongest it can be, please give it. But this is not." I'm sure they weren't thinking about white supremacy in that moment, but they listened, understood and shifted for the next time we spoke about the play. That's how we can fix this. I'm not interested in allies, who can go back into their privilege at any moment. I'm interested in accomplices, who will stand alongside you when s— goes down.



Alex Portenko

Francisca Da Silva
Dramaturg and playwright,
"can i touch it?"

This moment is still so visceral in my mind. It was my senior year at New York University; I had a playwriting thesis class with one of my best friends, also a Black femme playwright. Our professor, a white woman, often confused us for each other, and even went so far as to email us the other's script notes. We look nothing alike, nor were our plays similar in terms of theme, structure or story. But none of that seemed to matter. Reflecting back, I realized we were being lumped together into the monolith that is "the Black play." Having since taken part in conversations around play selection and programming at predominantly white theater institutions, I now know that the concept of "all of us looking alike" isn't just attributable to physicality but also our artistry. Not only are we not a monolith, but the play selection process as a whole needs to change. Theaters need to examine who is doing the reading, who is saying "yes" and "no" at all levels. Having one Black play in a season is not enough. And Black plays are no riskier to produce than white plays.

Candrice Jones
Playwright,
"FLEX"

During a Q&A talkback about my play, a white female audience member asked if I "had gone to school or something because my vocabulary was so expansive." I'm guessing she was surprised that a Black woman with a deep Southern accent could articulate herself. It let me know that even if white collaborators are trying to be careful about their actions, the white audience members who frequent and support these theater institutions may not do the same.

Aleshea Harris
Playwright,
"What to Send Up When It Goes Down"

I was part of a collaboration between theaters in California and France. The director, a white Frenchman, wanted to explore topics like race relations in America, but oftentimes I was the only Black person in the room. He fired people whenever he felt challenged, and because I voiced my concerns, he barred me from rehearsals. This director, with the artistic director in California, read my private emails aloud in a meeting, and colluded to make me look like I was lying. It was disheartening and frustrating that these two white men in power understood that cultural mythology allows them to be more believable than me, who is both Black and a woman. Of course, this theater recently released a Black Lives Matter statement. You're not shooting Black folks in the street but, when this happened, you essentially were telling me my Black life definitely doesn't matter. The theater world fancies itself as very liberal, but there are ways in which it replicates the very things it seems to disdain in our current administration. Your theater can't simply say "Black Lives Matter." You need to actually care about the Black lives in this industry.



BRIAN VAN DER BRUG Los Angeles Times



Dave Thomas Brown

Tracey Scott Wilson
Playwright,
"The Good Negro"

I was the only person of color in a play development program, which was putting on scene readings in front of an audience. My play is inspired by the civil rights movement; there are characters who resemble Martin Luther King Jr. and his wife, Coretta, and Ralph Abernathy and his wife, Juanita. So the scene calls for two Black men and two Black women. I showed up and looked around the room. I saw a couple of Black male actors, but I didn't see any Black female actors. I kept thinking maybe they were just late or something! It comes around to my turn, and two white women started reading for the two Black female characters. I actually felt sorry for those women at one point because they so clearly wanted to die; they were speaking in such a whisper because they just didn't know what to do. I was in such disbelief; we're in New York City, and they couldn't find two Black female actors? Everyone else's plays were cast just fine, because their characters were all white, right? I quit the program the next day.



JAY L. CLENDENIN Los Angeles Times

Colman Domingo
Playwright,
"Dot"

I don't take it personally when a theater doesn't read my plays; that's from the sheer volume of work in the world. What I do take personally is when I've done productions at major off-Broadway or regional theaters and afterward, it's hard to get them to return my calls, to read new material or even watch B-roll. Generally, artists have gratitude for institutions, but it doesn't seem to go the other way for the Black playwright in particular. I don't say this with any bitterness: To me, it seems that theaters are always looking for the next Black thing, and they can only embrace and elevate one Black voice at a time. Why can artistic directors handle having multiple relationships with multiple Caucasian writers but can only have one Black friend? My white counterparts are constantly produced at these theaters; they can fart out a play and it gets considered after a first reading. It feels like we're more expendable. I think that's why we're losing a lot of Black playwrights to spaces like film and TV. I love the theater, but I've had to make other choices to be happy and be paid my worth.



Joey Stocks

Erika Dickerson-Despenza
Playwright,
"Cullud Wattah"

As a 29-year-old Black woman, I repeatedly have the same encounter with theaters across the country, often led by older white male figures. They always encourage me to work with an older director — usually, the same five Black directors who direct all the major shows. They say, "Your show is going to be reviewed, so you might want to think about working with someone who's done this before." That doesn't allow for young, Black women, including trans women directors to get a foot in the door or to forge artistic partnerships with playwrights. I want to work with someone who is closer to the demographic I'm writing about and is exploring these themes and ideas differently from previous generations, but I'm told those directors don't have enough experience — how can they, when you never give them a chance? It's my greatest frustration because male collaborators seem to go forth unchallenged. So I have to make ultimatum around having young Black women directors under the age of 35. I risk it every time; it's that serious to me. Do not insult the creativity, ingenuity and vision of young Black women.

Twenty more Black playwrights share their experiences at latimes.com/arts.