

An interview with Wendy Graf by Rose Desena

We are lucky to have such good playwrights living around the Los Angeles area. One of my favorite female writers is Wendy Graf. Although I only have seen one of her plays, “No Word In Guyanese for Me,” I feel as though I’ve known her for years — like Stoppard or Mamet. I just relate to her writing. She takes chances and explores cultural differences among women and in the environment. “No Word” was about a young Muslim girl searching for her place in the world, trying to decipher how her religion fits into modern culture.

In “Closely Related Keys,” Wendy chooses two female characters who have lived completely different lives. One lives in Iraq, and the other is a NYC lawyer. They are half sisters who, until now, were unaware of each other’s existence. The story then takes us on an emotional ride that includes family and culture clashes.

I wanted to find out a little about Wendy – what motivates her and why she chooses the subjects she does?

Rose: Hi Wendy,

Wendy: Hi!

Rose: I know you have an interest in the Middle East. Can you tell me what attracts you to the subject of Middle Eastern cultures and their effect on women?

Wendy: I passionately love the Middle East and India. I love the sights, the sounds, the smells, the colors...it’s like this total kaleidoscope of your senses. Being there is as if you’ve been living in a black and white world, and now you’re in this fantastic Technicolor fantasy. Unfortunately there is also a very dark side of India and the Middle East when it comes to human rights and women’s rights, just a huge juxtaposition. You have to ask yourself, how can so much beauty allow so much ugliness to live beneath the surface? The juxtaposition is what interests me. It’s the stuff drama is made of. It poses a million “what ifs” for a playwright.

Rose: I think the correlation between a modern, highly educated woman versus a socially suppressed woman is very compelling. Tell me briefly about your characters.

Wendy: My Iraqi sister, Neyla, is also highly educated and cultured. Both sisters are. The women of Iraq became socially suppressed after the fall of Saddam and with the rise of the Islamists. Life changed dramatically for the women of Iraq (and other Middle Eastern countries) with the rise of the Islamists. Neyla says in the play: “...And women and girls? Before we could walk freely, dress how we please....now we are locked up, veiled, made to stay behind walls.” “...My *Ummi* (mother) was very learned, very well respected biochemist, who worked with Mr. Charlie’s company. That was under Saddam, of course, when women still free to work.” The two sisters, despite coming from such different worlds, find they are a lot more alike than different. *Closely Related Keys*. That is the journey of the play.

Rose: What is special to you about this particular play. How does it differ from your other work?

Wendy: It does not differ from my other work in that here I wrote about what I always write about, the questions that interest me: family...heritage...faith...identity...home. “The old conception, replaced by a latter choice, is a way of seeing, and then seeing again”, Lillian Hellman once said, calling this “pentimento.” The present, transparent, reveals the past. What was once there reveals the present, unlocking the future. What is different with this play, I suppose, is what I’ve learned about Iraq and the American involvement, the ones left behind. Preconceived notions of right and wrong. Before writing this play Iraq was just a headline or short video on the Evening News. You don’t think of the human faces behind it. Then you start to ask yourself: why didn’t I ever know about this, why didn’t I pay more attention?

Rose: I don’t want you to give too much away, but can you give me a little tidbit to whet the appetite of my readers?

Wendy: The play challenges the audience as well as the characters to confront their own xenophobia. As you sit in the audience and watch the play unfold, you will be asked “how much do I hold onto these preconceived stereotypes about “those people”?”