



Binders Full of Women and People-of-Color Playwrights

excerpted from an article
by Holly L. Derr

At a recent panel on diversity in Southern California theater, several of the artistic directors on the panel trotted out familiar platitudes about their commitment to diversity, their willingness to challenge their audiences with plays about people that don't look like them and their desire to build a more diverse audience. Yet these same artistic directors run theaters that still devote the majority of their resources to plays written and directed by white men.

Given the astonishing range of theater being made by women and people of color all over the country, the reluctance of major theaters to walk the walk they talk is increasingly at odds with the reality of American theater as a whole. Yet somehow, the argument is still being made that there just aren't plays out there by women and people of color that are ready to be produced in the big time.

Well, I'm starting a binder. Binders of plays, binders of playwrights and binders of women and people of color currently writing and directing in the professional theater will be available to any leaders who continue to protest, "I *want* to produce a diverse season, I just can't *find* any plays."

Closely Related Keys, written by Wendy Graf, takes place in New York and centers around Julia, a young, successful lawyer who suddenly finds out she has a half-sister in Iraq. When that sister shows up on her doorstep, Julia and her estranged father are forced to confront their past and their own prejudices.

Graf, who is Jewish, has written a number of plays with Jewish characters and themes, but she also writes characters with cultural heritages different from her own. *No Word in Guyanese for Me* is about a lesbian Muslim refugee from Guyana. *Leipzig* features an Irish-Catholic family in Boston. This production has a Black family at the heart of its story, with Julia being in an interracial relationship with a White man.

Closely Related Keys is as firmly grounded in the details of the cultures it represents as it is in the basic humanity of its characters. As the family drama unfolds, the truth of America's relationship with Iraq, past and present, is illuminated, as well as what changed (and not for the better) for women in Iraq when we deposed Saddam Hussein. One moment in particular could have been pulled straight from the feminist blogosphere: When Julia attempts to get her Muslim half-sister to put on an American dress, her sister firmly rejects the idea, arguing, "I would not feel like me."

Closely Related Keys are just one new play by a woman being done in one city in one month. Others premiere all of the time in cities across the country. What new work have you seen that would refute the notion that big theaters are trying but just can't find plays by women and people of color to produce?

The thicker our binder gets, the fewer excuses established theaters will have to produce seasons without gender parity and ethnic diversity. They claim they want their stages to look like the world we live in: Let's hold them to it.

Holly L. Derr is a feminist media critic who writes about theater, film, television, video games and comics. Follow her @hld6oddblend and on her tumblr, Feminist Fandom. Related: Diversity and its Discontents in Southern California Theater.