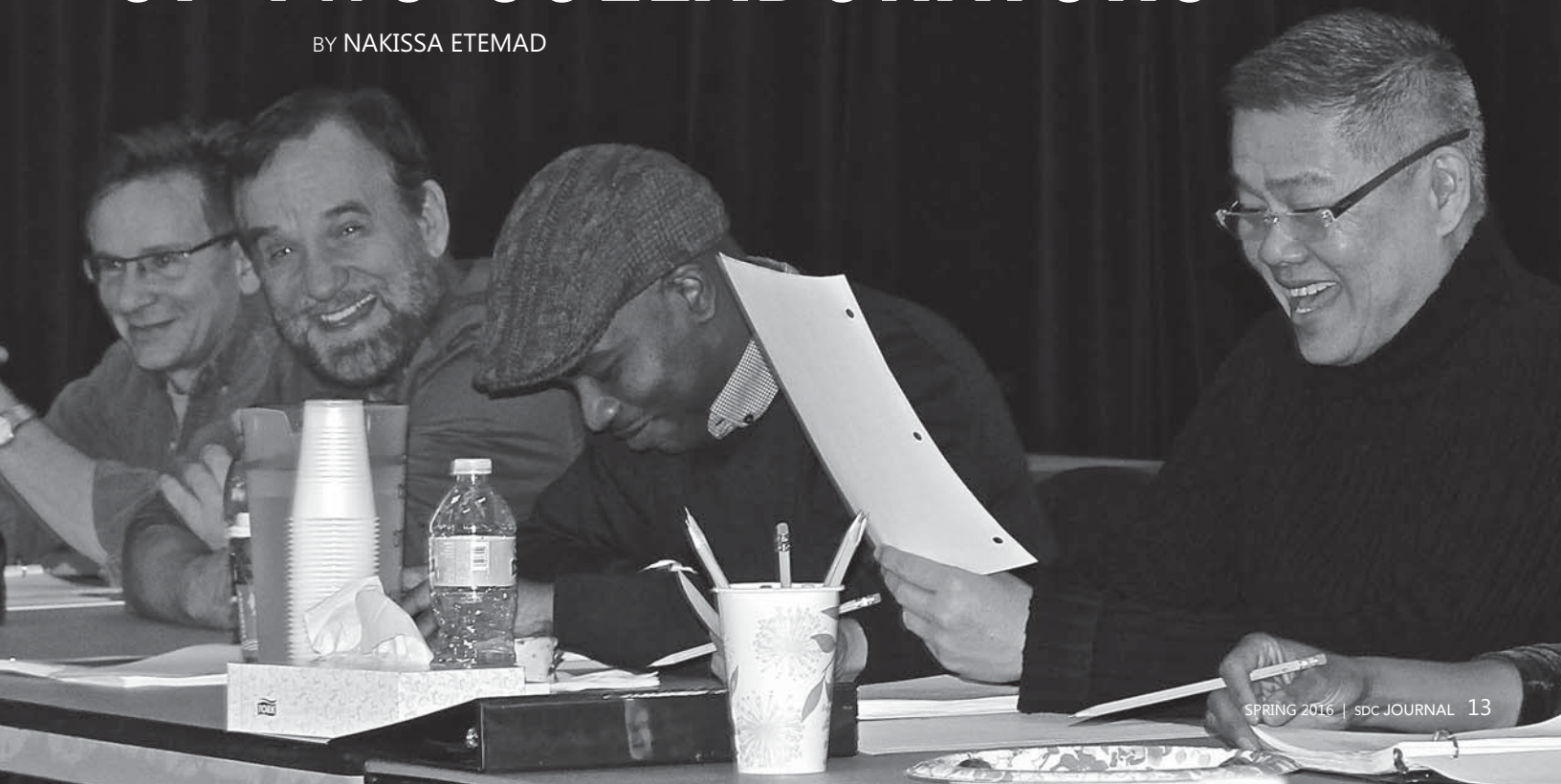


*Tennessee Williams and Elia Kazan.
Eugene O'Neill and Jose Quintero.
Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine.
The list of prolific director/playwright
collaborations is long and continually
growing. In this decade, one exciting
and productive partnership is that of
Victory Gardens Theater Artistic Director
CHAY YEW with playwright Marcus
Gardley. When Yew reconfigured the
Playwrights Ensemble at Victory
Gardens in 2012, Gardley was one of
the four playwrights whom Yew invited
to join as ensemble playwright. Since
that time, Yew has directed two world
premieres of Gardley's work at Victory
Gardens (and another world premiere at
Denver Center Theater)—with a Midwest
premiere planned to open in June 2016.*

*At the start of the new year, Nakissa
Etemad—a longtime colleague of Yew
and a frequent dramaturg for Gardley—
spoke with the collaborators about their
work together.*

THE SINGULAR VOICE OF TWO COLLABORATORS

BY NAKISSA ETEMAD



TOP
Marcus Gardley + Chay Yew at the first
rehearsal for *The Gospel of Lovingkindness*
at Victory Gardens



THIS PAGE
Cleavant Derricks + Tony Todd
in *black odyssey* at Denver Center
Theatre Company
PHOTO Jennifer M. Koskinen

“I’m always very proud
of working with him
because I feel like
we’re telling stories
that people need
to listen to and
respond to.”

CHAY YEW



NAKISSA ETEMAD | It is so thrilling to be interviewing you both, two of my collaborators and friends who are now in residency together. Chay, when I was the dramaturg on your play *Red* at The Wilma Theater in 2003, you were becoming known as both a playwright and a director. When did you make the shift from playwrighting to directing and why?

CHAY YEW | I was an Associate Artist and the Director of the Asian Theatre Workshop at Mark Taper Forum between 1995 and 2005. We produced many readings and it fell upon me to find directors. Sometimes, when we couldn't find a director, playwrights would ask, "Why don't you direct the reading?" In those readings, I applied everything I had observed while sitting next to directors who directed my plays. I count those years as being an unofficial assistant director. I also discovered I could speak to playwrights about their plays—as a playwright. We have a shorthand in discussing each other's work. It was also easy to get in the mind-set of the playwright and ask myself: What are they seeing here? Why this particular word, this punctuation?

Then I started directing productions, not only at the Taper but East West Players and Theatre at Boston Court. I owe much of my early directing career to these smaller theatre companies who took chances on young directors.

I don't usually direct the world premieres of my plays, except for a devised work I had written called *A Beautiful Country* with Cornerstone Theater Company, and my own adaptations of *Bernarda Alba* and *The Cherry Orchard*. In my entire directing career, I have been invited to direct classics only once—*Our Town* at Oregon Shakespeare Festival. For me, the only way to direct classics was to adapt them as a playwright. I yearn for the day I can finally direct a Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, or Shakespearean play without having to adapt it. I'm glad to see more directors of color working on classic plays in recent years.

Balancing time between being a playwright and a director has been difficult, admittedly. It's harder to write when you are directing someone else's work. It requires a different set of skills and intuitions. I have to kill the director perched on my shoulder when I'm writing. I keep hearing my dramaturgical and analytical mind, and it inhibits my instincts and my freedom to dream and play as a playwright. Other playwrights who are directors may have it easier. For me, it's been a personal challenge.

NAKISSA | Do you have a preference for doing playwrighting over directing?

CHAY | I like both and very separately. As a director, I love plunging into worlds that I would have never thought to write nor experience, and helping to realize these worlds for playwrights.

I also immensely enjoy the collaborative work in the rehearsal room, playing with actors and designers. As a playwright, nothing gives me more joy than to create a version of my world that I want to share with audiences. It's more solitary, contemplative, more insular.

NAKISSA | When you direct, what kind of plays excite you? What plays are you drawn to?

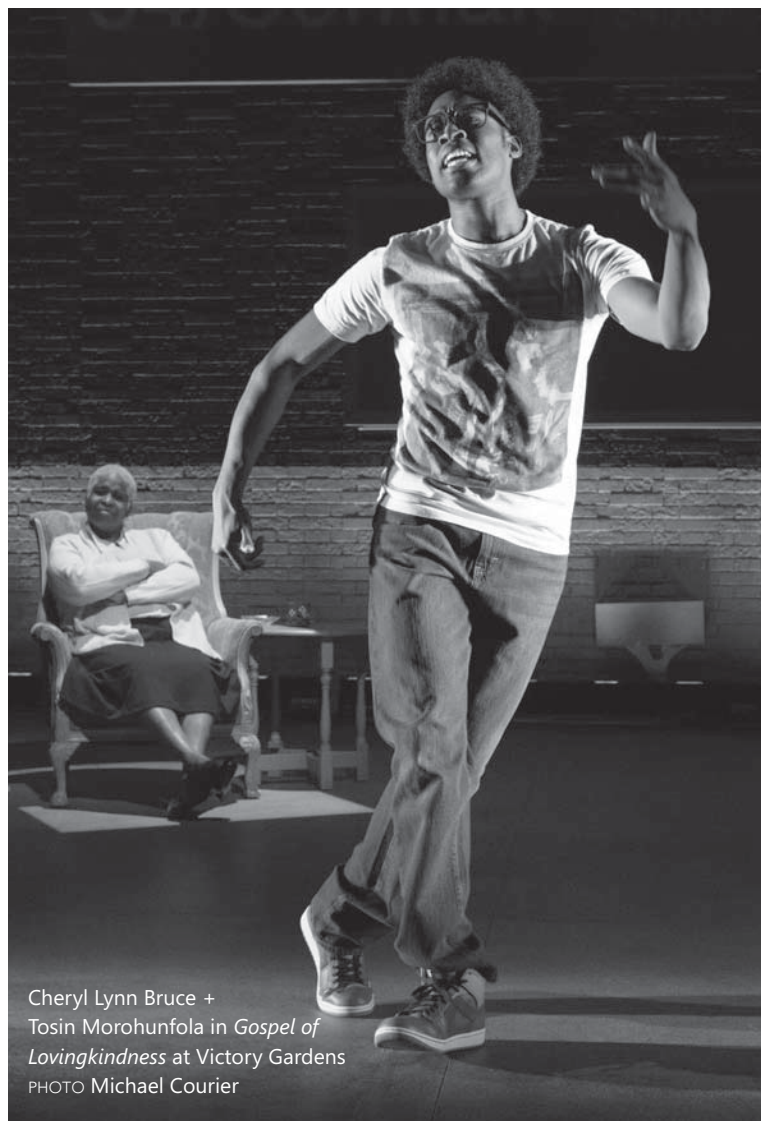
CHAY | I'm drawn to plays that have a sense of politic—that inform my citizenship in the world and in this country. Plays rich with language, emotional complexity, relevant plays that ask hard, brutal questions about the way we live. I also love epic and theatrical plays—plays that blow up my reality and challenge my perspective. *Theatrical* works. I'm probably not the person you want to direct a play set in a living room on the Upper West Side, with characters talking about curtains.

NAKISSA | Do you find that, as an artistic director, you're drawn to different kinds of plays?

CHAY | One of my responsibilities as artistic director is choosing the best plays that speak most passionately to the mission of Victory Gardens and to Chicagoans. We produce new and contemporary plays that represent and reflect our American experience through the lenses of diversity, community, and social justice. Sometimes, these plays may not be my cup of tea aesthetically as director, but what the plays express need to be experienced at Victory Gardens. I try to make it a practice to divide my life as an artistic director and director. What the director in me wants to do may not be in the best interests of the theatre's mission, and vice versa. When it collides, great. When it doesn't, I find homes for the plays I want to direct at other theatres.

NAKISSA | How do you decide if you will direct or if you will hand it off to another director in your season?

CHAY | You always want to find the director who



Cheryl Lynn Bruce +
Tosin Moruhunfolu in *Gospel of
Lovingkindness* at Victory Gardens
PHOTO Michael Courier

best understands the voice of the playwright and who breathes the best possible life into the play. Sometimes that director isn't me. Also, I prefer to direct world premiere plays because I love new plays and working alongside a playwright. It's like discovering a magnificent uncharted country, learning and understanding its unique customs and culture. As a preference, I tend not to direct second productions of plays, unless the playwright wants to rework their plays with different eyes.

NAKISSA | Marcus Gardley is a resident playwright at Victory Gardens. So his plays must fit nicely into your mission. Marcus, how did you first meet?

MARCUS GARDLEY | I was a huge fan of Chay's plays, which I studied in college. More than any other writer, he had a really beautiful way of using terse language and beautiful poetry creating complex thought, a profound voice in terms of sexuality, but also of what it's like to be a foreigner in this country. Then I saw a lot of the plays that he directed at the Public and Julia Cho's piece that he had done in L.A.

I first met Chay on a panel for Theatre Development Fund at New Dramatists. It was Craig Lucas, me, Chay, and several other playwrights and directors. It was formed because of Todd London's book *Outrageous Fortune*. After the book came out, TDF saw there was a huge gap between how they thought theatre was serving artists in terms of financial support and representation versus what was really happening.

On the panel, Chay talked about a lot of his passions and I thought, "This is somebody I could collaborate with because we share a lot of the same passions." I remember telling my agent at the time, Morgan Jenness, that I would love to work with Chay. I think she said, "Oh, he's a perfect match for you" and—you know how agents do—"I'm already on it." (laughter) I think she passed him my play *the road weeps, the well runs dry*. New York Theatre Workshop was doing a workshop of it and he agreed to direct it. We had instant chemistry and a really great time. I felt like one of those moments where the cast and creative team was such a great match that I got inspired to do major rewrites every night.

It's rare in theatre that we find a collaborator who we feel confident enough that they really study what you're trying to do—you know this, Nakissa, as a dramaturg I work with a lot—that they are really trying to hone the story. I struggle with structure and Chay is really keen on that. So it was a great, great collaboration. We had a really long chat on the train ride back....

CHAY | ...The train ride up. Up *and* back.... Talking about the play, what he wanted the play to be, why he wrote it. I was learning more about the world of the play and what he expected of the workshop.

MARCUS | I think we knew we wanted to get this play on its feet. So, that was our first collaboration.

NAKISSA | It sounds like you were planning... you thought you two had a future together from the beginning.

MARCUS | Oh, we knew, definitely.

CHAY | For me, one of the key things about a long-lasting collaboration, aside from creative compatibility, is that can we sit down together as two individuals, laugh and dish, have conversations, argue about the art, and ask questions of our world. What do you believe in? What are you passionate about? What do you fight for? Our conversations grew into a friendship and an artistic relationship, grounded by similar passions and politics. I think that whatever Marcus writes, how we communicate, there is always a sense of "We're always on the same team."

NAKISSA | When you each think about your relationship versus your relationship with another playwright or director, do you think your personalities mesh well? Is that something that binds you? Is it intellectual common ground, or is it many things?

MARCUS | I think it's many things. One of the great things that he is doing here at Victory Gardens is that he sees a need and he tries to fill it. A lot of artistic directors may run from it. I find that to be the most common thing in the American theatre; you can quote me on that! (laughter) A lot of people—this is generally speaking, of course—work from a sense of fear. "We better not do that because I don't want to lose this funder." What's really kind of crazy about that is that even with the people you think are going to respond negatively, people always respect courage and bravery. At the end of the day, we say, "That was a really bold choice." And I think if you're going to work in the theatre you have to be a visionary, because nobody is going to walk away a millionaire. (laughter)

It's really about the work—about the community. We both have a really strong passion for community. Chay is passionate about Chicago and about the communities here. And I'm a community person—I grew up in that, I come from that—so that pushes all my buttons. If I talk about heart, that's where we meet, heart-wise. But we also feel very passionate about representation on stage. Who haven't we heard from? It's not because

they're necessarily marginalized, it's just in general, why haven't we heard from them?

Where is the truth in that character? What is the emotional journey of that character? Why do I care that the character is on stage? Those are the things for me that are the heart of the theatre, it's what I try to put in my work. Intellectually, Chay and I also congeal on how can we push audiences into areas where they are uncomfortable, where they wouldn't normally go? And to me that is the most important thing about the art form.

Unfortunately, this is a medium where a lot of subscribers are older. And we have a responsibility to also appeal to younger audiences; we have a responsibility to appeal to most of the people who normally don't come to the theatre. Those things are where we meet and are most passionate about. The proof is in the programming here at Victory Gardens. Even the plays that are challenging; at the end of the day, they're ambitious. The messages we're receiving are very powerful; they're complex. Nobody walks away from a Victory Gardens play without having a great conversation about the show. Many theatres are doing *Death of a Salesman* for the third time in 10 years. It's like, "Really?" I don't want to create theatre if I can't challenge myself as an artist. I think Chay is passionate about that as well.

NAKISSA | Chay, what do you think is your common ground?

CHAY | I concur with Marcus, on many levels. We share many core beliefs, aesthetics, politics, and a sense of humor. I love his ability to write directly to the soul and heart of human beings. His gift of speaking about the world in which we live. Using lyricism and poetic language. His great, great imagination taking us to worlds that we could never imagine.

He also possesses the uncanny talent of employing and fusing history in his plays—sometimes uncovering lost chapters of American history—so we can better understand how we got here, why we behave the way we do in the present, and what needs to be done so history won't repeat again. Add his politics, his cry for racial and class equity, and his desire to represent and celebrate the stories from his community that are often not told nor dramatized. I see a younger and better version of myself in Marcus. It's thrilling.

I'm always very proud of working with him because I feel like we're telling stories that people need to listen to and respond to. In all of his plays, we've seen audiences moved, reminded of where they have come from and having a dialogue about where they need to go next.

That's not only African Americans but Americans across the board. Black history doesn't *only* belong to African Americans; it belongs to all Americans. It is a travesty that most Americans don't know nor own black history. So, the fact that Marcus has been telling these stories to us, to new generations, and also perhaps to remind older generations, is truly the thing that he does most wonderfully. What is remarkable, too, aside from his unique theatrical language, Marcus also captures and uses the vernacular of the contemporary African American community—building an immediate bridge to African Americans (in a way) that no other person could.

I remember during previews of *The Gospel of Lovinkindness*—Marcus's play about gun violence on South Side Chicago—his first monologue pierced through our audience on different levels. The African Americans were shocked. They looked at each other, "Did I hear what I just heard? I can't believe the character is speaking directly to me. Can I laugh?" They immediately got the sense, *finally*, that someone is speaking *to* them and *about* them, without filter, without context. Their neighborhood, their voices are on stage. Then the younger liberal audience that was like, "Can we laugh at this? Am I given permission to laugh? Is that politically incorrect?" And you see the looks on the faces of older white audiences: "What's going on? What are they getting that I'm not? Stop laughing." They were indignant that the other audiences were in the know before they were...which is kind of ironic because that's how most people of color feel when they experience a white play.

We are producing too many plays about the black experience for white audiences where everything is overexplained and contextualized. The black aesthetic and experience are bleached out for white audiences. We usually explain black life, the black experience, in very simplistic ways to white audiences in the theatre. It's interesting that white audiences don't demand that of Shakespeare. This is often the same with other plays of color; we have to filter our lives and narratives through white dramaturgy and lens.

This time, with Marcus's play, the tables were turned. In time, the older audiences went on the same ride with the others. I've never had this experience before and it was exhilarating. We need more poets of the community on our stages, on American stages, and Marcus Gardley is definitely one of them.

NAKISSA | I was wondering what it's like for Marcus to be a member of the Playwrights Ensemble and have a residency. What is that like for you as a working playwright?

MARCUS | It's incredible. I can't help but think that why Shakespeare wrote so many plays is because he was essentially the playwright-in-residence at the Globe.

What greater inspiration do you have when you are in the community, writing for a group of people over a series of years? Often playwrights write a play at a regional theatre and they never come back. Audiences only see that one breadth of the writer; they never get to see the full range of what that writer can do. The real gift for me is not only am I in Chicago writing a series of plays for the community, about the community, with the community in mind, but I actually have a sort-of family at the theatre who I can bounce ideas off of. I can workshop the play here. I can work with other writers locally. In my collaboration with Chay, I really love his direction so much. What's really amazing is the more we work together, it feels like the voice becomes so singular. We don't waste a minute.

I like to be in one place and keep working in that place. It's sort of like digging deeper, and getting to the roots of the city. In my time here in Chicago, I've made so many really amazing connections. Chicago has become my second home. And it is *a theatre town!* Even more than New York, in a lot of ways. People come to the theatre in a blizzard.

What that has created is an audience that understands dramaturgy—that will ask you in a post-show discussion about your dramaturgy. They understand play structure; they understand character development. So, it's not only inspiring, it's exciting to present work in front of them. Even if they don't get it or like it. But the conversations that the play arouse are always incredible conversations. People are so passionate about the theatre. And we're trying to engage them in an interesting way. We're talking about: "How do you write about Chicago in a way that keeps Chicagoans on the edge of their seats, that intrigues them, and that also inspires and educates?" We are trying to hit on all cylinders.

CHAY | It's been a luxury having Marcus live in Chicago because of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Playwright Residency Grant. The Foundation has just renewed for another three years. This has allowed Marcus to set up home here, while he travels around the country for his other projects. It is a wonderful opportunity for us to actually have him here at the theatre and to write new plays about the Chicago African American experience.

NAKISSA | It's incredible. As you said, you two can go deeper and deeper into the work and tap into the community in ways that other collaborators may never have the chance to do.

CHAY | Yes. We can actually spend time together—in one physical space—to dream together, and to offer him the resources to create new work. "Want to write something new, something really different? What do you want to know about this issue in the community? Okay, we know this person. Let's make a story circle or hook you up with our community partners for an interview." Marcus has been going to Chicago neighborhoods and workshoping with kids as well and speaking to community leaders and members to create new plays for their own community.

The wonderful thing is our collaboration also goes beyond our playwright and director relationship. We also collaborate with other social and political activists in Chicago. We know and meet with many artists and art administrators who share this same zeal. This is a city that throughout history, but particularly right now, has a lot of wounds—police brutality, gun violence, racial segregation. There are many of us who really believe that activism and art can be helpful. Marcus and I have already been meeting with the Cultural Commissioner on finding ways to help heal the city through theatre, performance, visual arts.

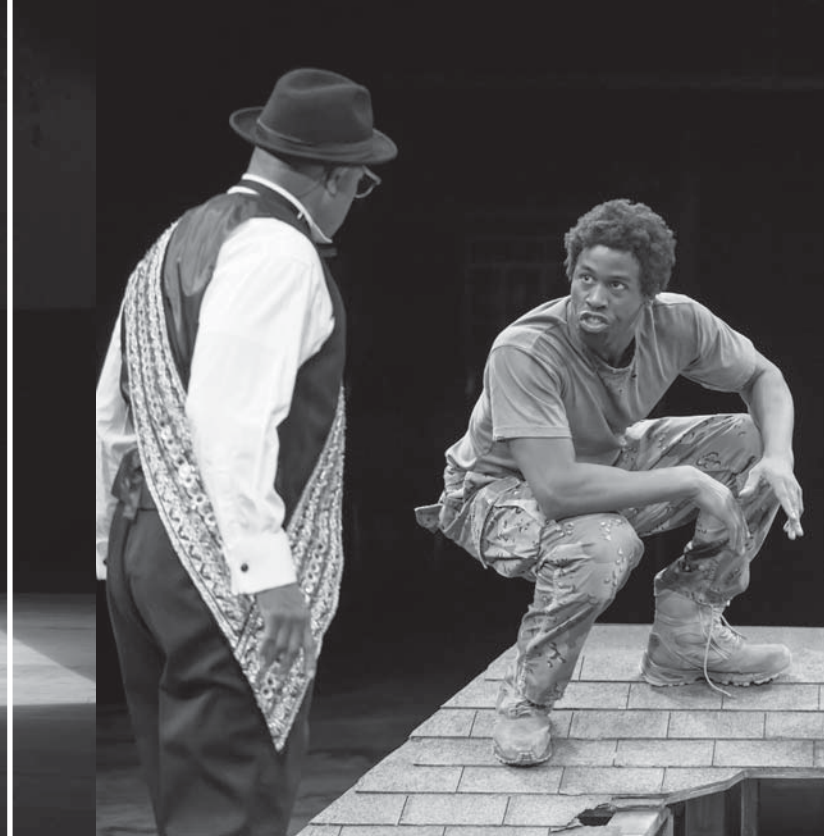
NAKISSA | Can you talk me through a typical process between you two? When you are starting a new play together, how do you create the work?

MARCUS | I think every process is a little bit different. What we've found now is a sort of medium ground. I'll have an idea and then he'll give me some suggestions on the idea and then we'll bounce back and forth—which I really love. It just saves you all that time of outlining, and everything like that. When you work with someone for a long period of time, you just have a shorthand.

[When we have a first draft], we might do a workshop. Then I would do another pass, probably two or three passes, after that. And then we'd start rehearsal. All through the rehearsal process, I'm doing drafts, scenes. Then there's a moment where the playwright really should be giving the play over to the cast.

What's so great about Chay is he is not opposed to rewriting scenes in previews. During previews, we do a lot of tweaking. We're there every night. We always do post-show discussions. We take into account what audiences are saying. We mostly listen to how they are responding while they're watching. When do we feel like we lose them? How can we change that?

We work, work, work up until the day before the opening. And even after that. Just before this call, we were talking about a piece we



worked on—one of my favorite pieces—several years ago. I think we just kind of magically unlocked some of the problems that were in that play. Now I'm excited to go back to that. Plays are living things, and that's one reason why I love working in the theatre: you can always learn something about a play.

NAKISSA | Are there general guidelines you observe with each other about communication in or outside the rehearsal hall as director and playwright? Do you have a pattern for working together?

CHAY | Our doors are always open to each other. If Marcus calls me late at night about a plot point, we talk through every detail until he is inspired to write something. I like being his bouncing board and we feed off each other, tracking characters and story, asking questions. Sometimes, because I'm a playwright, I always preface certain notes, saying, "Okay, this will be prescriptive, but what about this?" Marcus is smart enough to realize that's a good note, or he'll say, "You know what? I like it but it's sparking something else for me, and I can come up with something better." There isn't a fight between egos with us. We are all about the play, what makes the play better. And we always go with what's better.

Our channels are more open because we're friends—which is weird, because I never expected us to be friends. Marcus and my relationship is based on shared aesthetics, politics, a work ethic, a love of story, and lots of laughter. We enjoy each other and are friends who work together. The lines are always blurred. We have fun, we talk about the work,

we *do* the work, he shows me something different, I say "Great, how about this?" he says "I don't know, how about that?" And then at some point, we talk about food and the new Beyonce video.

It's a continual dialogue, one that I hope will continue for the rest of our lives. I'm fortunate to have Marcus. I don't feel alone in doing it.

NAKISSA | What is an example of something you have learned from Marcus or your collaboration with him that you never knew before? Maybe it's taught you a skill?

CHAY | That I can actually stage some of the fantastical stage directions he writes! (laughter) I find different ways of interpreting them. Given his incredible imagination, one thing Marcus has given me in our collaboration together is the opportunity to push myself more artistically. Whether it's choreographing musical and dance numbers, staging theatrical scenes and extended fights, or clashing time, space, and narratives, working on his plays is such a thrill to stretch my aesthetic canvas.

As an Asian American immigrant, it is a surprise that I find myself most American when I read or see his plays. And they often have brilliant moments where I'm confronted with my own humanity; his words cut me to the core and I feel alive—aware—as a result of it. In *The Gospel of Lovingkindness*, the scene where one character writes a letter to his unborn son in the future always rips me apart. When I see it, I am always reminded about what my parents gave up for me to come to this country. In *black odyssey*, there is a scene where his characters are trapped on the roof

because of a great flood. One character then tells of other African Americans who are also trapped on other roofs of houses. She points to four little girls whose church was bombed in Birmingham; on another is Emmett Till. Suddenly the end of days arrives, and we see all the souls slowly rise up into the heavens. This scene is political, a hymn to all African American lives senselessly lost to racism. I still carry that scene in my head.

These are rich images, history, language that no one has managed to fuse together. So, it's not only a privilege but a gift to work on such plays.

NAKISSA | I totally get it! I feel much the same way about Marcus's work. So, Marcus, can I ask you the same question? Is there something you've learned or you value from your work with Chay?

MARCUS | Yes, quite a few things. I think most writers will attest to this: when you start out as a writer, people expect you to "get it" right away. Chay always reminds me, and I think a lot of it comes from his experience as a writer, that there is something about when the playwright is not seeing what they envision right away and a good director will be able to see where they're headed and that they'll get there. Every time we do a run-through or a reading, Chay will come in and check in with me. Any time that there's something that is not working, or even that might be unclear to me, he will come in and say, "I know this is what you want, we're getting there; just be a little bit patient." Or, "We ain't going to get there! Let's come up with another strategy." To me, that is so exciting, because there are always more tools.



MIDDLE
Eugene Fleming, Jason Bowen, Sequoiah Hippolyte + Kim Staunton in the Denver Center Theatre Company's world premiere production of *black odyssey* PHOTO Jennifer M. Koskinen

RIGHT
Lizan Mitchell, Steve O'Connell + Tosin Morohunfola in *an issue of blood* at Victory Gardens PHOTO Michael Courier

There was a moment in the opening of *An Issue of Blood* where I was really frustrated because I saw one way to do it. I just had people singing, but what Chay did was stage the entire prologue, and it never occurred to me that was possible. You know the entire history of these people in two minutes. It is revealed later in the play, but I don't know how you could even get there without having that moment. So, one thing I learned is trusting the process, and trusting your collaborators, letting people find it. The play is really a blueprint, it's open for interpretation, and trusting that.

NAKISSA | I want to ask a hard question. What do you do when you don't agree? Do you go to your corners? Do you hash it out?

MARCUS | It's never bad. We've never had drag-out fights; we don't do that. When I don't agree, he always respects that. What I've found is when I get notes, it's never a bad note. It's either, "It's not what I see" or "I can solve it another way." There has never been a time where I've been angry or frustrated with him in that way. We always have a great time. Being an artist, you're just not going to agree on everything.

CHAY | That's because the play is the thing and we let the play be the final arbiter. What does the play want? When we're listening to the heart of the play, we *know*. We say, "Let's go with the best idea that serves the play."

One recent example had to do with a stage picture. In *An Issue of Blood* there was a lynching scene. For me, dramatically and visually, seeing ten bodies hung on stage made a devastating point about our violent racist past and brought to life our country's first

slave rebellion. However, once the audience experienced this moment, they found it hard to follow the rest of the play. Because it was such a visual assault. It was too strong an image and it stopped the play. At one preview, we took all the bodies out of that moment, but something was missing. Marcus and I felt the lynching of the character had to be seen. But the question was: how many, when, and where? Again the play trumped the two of us. Finally, we used one body and it was done stylistically. It worked.

MARCUS | Exactly. If we had done that visual in the South, that's the moment that people would have been *riveted*. It's all about location. They *live* with it. We don't live with it in Chicago. That's not a Northern thing. I have done readings in Texas and places in the South, and when you try to talk about lynching, the conversation is incredible. People want to talk about it. I love the way we solved that, and I thought the end result was really remarkable.

NAKISSA | I have one last question for you. What advice would you offer to other playwrights and directors about how to productively work with each other? Especially for early career playwrights and directors. Is there a secret formula? I think perhaps it's to keep in mind that the play is the thing. But is there something else?

MARCUS | Definitely. I think everybody is different. The reason why we're good friends is part of the reason why we work so well together too. I think not everybody is going to be a great match. It doesn't mean that one person is hard to work with. It just means that sometimes different personalities don't

connect for a particular project. What's great about that first conversation I had with Chay was that I didn't have to question him. As a playwright, you really want to find somebody who you just know is telling you stuff you already thought about in your head. That's somebody you just connect with artistically, on a visceral level.

Chay was a well-established director, so I got lucky. Sometimes playwrights are working with directors because they are known, and I don't think that's always a good choice. The key ingredient is the effort to be passionate about your work, understand on some deep level what you're trying to do, and be open to creating a series of projects with them.

CHAY | Love and respect each other's work. Get to know each other well. Share the same politics, the same fire, the same fight. If you can't share a laugh or a conversation, seek different partners. It's a relationship, and sometimes it's a marriage. You're not always going to agree on everything. But you are committed to each other because you have a lot that you can learn and give to each other. And that comes out as the plays you work on.

Marcus pushes me to try new things or think or rethink, and I do the same with him. It has always been exciting, inspiring, and very, very invigorating. Sometimes we'll talk about what is happening in the world and ask ourselves, "How are we going to respond to this?" The air changes. And suddenly we are brothers, warriors, artists, responding to society with a new project. **SC**