AWP 2020 - RECLAIMING THE THEATRE WRITER’S ROLE IN SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUES

Event Description: The tools of the dramatist can be used to create much-needed dialogue about social justice in our conflicted world. In this panel, contemporary playwrights re-examine their role in the community, revisiting the path taken by their predecessors in the Ancient World who used theatre to question the moral/ethical codes of their culture. Theatricality, mindful storytelling, empathy, and metaphor are dramatic elements that can be mined to illuminate how to be a good person in a world in crisis.

Event Category: Playwriting & Screenwriting

Event Organizer: PAULA CIZMAR
Paula Cizmar is an award-winning playwright and librettist; her plays have been produced at Portland Stage, Women's Project, Playwrights Arena, among others. She is a co-writer of the documentary play Seven, produced in 30 countries in 20 languages. She is an Associate Professor of Theatre at USC.

Event Moderator: CHARISSA MENEFEE
Charissa Menefee co-directs Iowa State's MFA Program in Creative Writing & Environment. She has recently published When I Stopped Counting: Poems; premiered Our Antigone, a new adaptation of the Sophocles classic; written and produced for Code Red Playwrights; and launched The EcoTheatre Lab.

Event Participants: VELINA HASU HOUSTON, TIRA PALMQUIST, ELAINE ROMEO (+ Cizmar and Menefee)

Velina Hasu Houston has received 27+ writing commissions. Her career began Off-Broadway, expanding nationwide and globally. She also writes for film and television and is published across genres. At USC, she is Distinguished Professor & Director of Dramatic Writing. Archives: Library of Congress, Huntington.

Tira Palmquist is a playwright and dramaturg based in Southern California. Plays: The Way North, Two Degrees, Overburden, This Floating World, The Frequency of Stars and Other Matter and Age of Bees. Dramaturgy: Moving Arts Theater's MadLab program, Seven Devils Playwrights Conference and others.

Elaine Romero is an award-winning U.S. playwright. Her plays have been presented across the U.S. and abroad. TITLE IX appeared in the 2017 Eugene O'Neill National Playwrights Conference. She is an Associate Professor at the University of Arizona in the School of Theatre, Film, and Television.

OUTLINE OF THE EVENT

• Opening moderator remarks and housekeeping announcements. A bit of background: From its ancient beginnings, theatre has historically taken on the defining issues of its day, diving deep into the problems and challenges facing a community. Topics that are often difficult to discuss in everyday life can be examined onstage in a unique way that allows an audience to explore an issue through the journeys of characters who must make difficult choices, offering an enlightened, often cathartic experience in a communal setting. This diverse panel of award-winning women playwrights explores the craft of creating theatrical stories that directly address such issues as human trafficking, environmental justice, immigration, and basic human rights—with an emphasis on conscience and consciousness.
• Moderator introduces & identifies all speakers in the order in which they are sitting.

• Opening remarks and initial thoughts from each participant: What actually is social justice playwriting? Why is it important? Plus: Each participant reads a micro excerpt from their work. In this section,

Velina Hasu Houston will discuss the organic impetus for the representation of social justice in theatre and the importance of creating a more inclusive theatre.

Charissa Menefee will discuss historical drama as a vital tool for social justice, as well as the role of theatre actions, readings, and other forms of performance that lend themselves to timely and even rapid responses to current and changing events.

Paula Cizmar will discuss breaking down barriers, how creating theatre with lead characters who haven’t traditionally been heard from expands our world view, how embedding an issue with metaphor is essential to guiding audiences to see what they might otherwise have ignored, and alternative spaces.

Tira Palmquist will discuss some of her research into areas such as human trafficking and the loss of habitat and species and how these topics can be handled in a way that engages audiences via the characters.

Elaine Romero will discuss how growing up and living along the U.S. – Mexico border helps shape the work that she creates, and how her work often takes a deep dive into the issue of war, including the emotional trauma experienced by both soldiers and the families of veterans as well.

• Additional Questions for Each Participant:

  o How did you get started in social justice writing? Is this a new development in your career, or has it always been part of your writing life?

  o How can writing for the theatre effect change? What is it about writing for theatre that could motivate an action?

  o What particular process do you use when approaching a specific social justice issue? Is it different from your process for other types of plays? Is there a particular style or method? Talk about how to begin writing this type of play.

  o Theatre beyond the brick-and-mortar space: How can we be creative about breaking down access barriers, including for our audiences? How do we get the
writing to the people? How do we make sure all people are at the table and all voices are heard.

- **Q&A session:** We will reserve about 5 – 10 minutes for questions and answers at the end of the event. (We will pass the wireless microphone to the person posing the question.)

If you would like more information about these ideas, please feel free to contact the playwrights via their websites (listed in alphabetical order):

Paula Cizmar paulacizmar.com

Velina Hasu Houston velinahasuhouston.com

Charissa Menefee https://www.music.iastate.edu/people/charissa-menefee

Tira Palmquist tirapalmquist.com

Elaine Romero elaineromero.com

Notes re: housekeeping remarks. They will include the following:

- For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let the moderator of the panel (identify moderator) know and a printed copy of the event outline will be delivered to you.
- Please make sure that spaces marked for wheelchairs remain clear of chairs or other barriers.
- Treat service animals as working animals and do not attempt to distract or pet them.
- Be aware of those with chemical sensitivities and refrain from wearing perfume.
- Please be aware that your fellow attendees may have invisible disabilities. Do not question anyone’s use of an accommodation while at the conference, including for chairs reserved for those with disabilities.
- We realize the lines for the bathrooms may be long, but please refrain from using an accessible stall unless you require such accommodation. Please also be aware family restrooms located on level 2 are reserved for those with disabilities or those wishing to use a single-stall restroom.
- If you have any questions or concerns regarding conference accessibility, please call or text the Accessibility Hotline (503) 455-4127 or email events@awpwriter.org.