

Cycle of Poverty: Part 1 with Vasanti Saxena & Marlow Wyatt

Veralyn Jones: Welcome to Writers Revealed, a podcast from LA-based BIPOC-theatre company, Lower Depth Theatre. This podcast emerged from our monthly series Writers Revealed, which presents a personal and stunningly honest look at the writer behind the words and the person behind the page. Each month, we invite two new writers to read their own work - whether that's an excerpt from a play, novel, poem, essay, or something else entirely. After the readings, writer/producer/EDI facilitator, L Trey Wilson leads the two writers through an engaging discussion - a deep dive into everything from their writing process to unique ways in which the world informs and inspires their work.

To learn more about our writers, please visit our show notes or our official website lower-depth.com.

We hope you enjoy Writers Revealed.

L. Trey Wilson: In this very special episode of Writers Revealed, you will hear from two playwrights in our Commission Fellowship Program, Vasanti Saxena and Marlow Wyatt, followed by a discussion moderated by me, L. Trey Wilson. Each of these outstanding storytellers were selected to write plays that examine the "Cycle of Poverty."

First, listen as Vasanti reads from her play, working title, FOOTSTEPS about two girls who grow up together in poverty and ultimately go down different paths. Cleverly framed by the fairytale, HANSEL & GRETEL, Footsteps is a beautifully human story of hunger, hope and healing.

Then Marlow Wyatt will read from her play, BREAD AND CIRCUS. Told by a flashy showman that breaks the fourth wall, this story follows two generations of homeless women as they help each other navigate homelessness and poverty.

Please enjoy this episode of Writers Revealed.

Vasanti Saxena: Lights up on Mika, seated in a chair, behind a colorful foam play mat on the floor. A scrim runs the length of the stage. Shadows of dolls/ children behind it. A daycare.

MIKA

All right, children. Today we're starting a brand new story. Isn't that wonderful? So let's settle down and use our...? Yes! Our listening ears.

(opens her book)

"Once upon a time, there lived a poor woodcutter with his wife and two children. They had very little to eat, and were running out of food. One night, the woodcutter was worrying and said to his wife, "What can we do? How can we feed our children when we can barely feed ourselves?" His wife replied, "I have an idea. Tomorrow we'll take the children out to the thickest part of the woods, make a fire for them, give them a little piece of bread, and leave them there. They will not find their way home and we'll be rid of them."

Behind the scrim, so we see only their shadows, Hannah and Ariana, 4, fight over a doll.

ARIANA

Give it to me.

HANNAH

No.

ARIANA

Give it.

HANNAH

Make me.

ARIANA

Don't make me make you.

HANNAH

You scary?

ARIANA

No!

HANNAH

You scary!

ARIANA

I'm not scary!

HANNAH

You is.

ARIANA

(starts to cry)

Stopppppp.

HANNAH

Hey. Hey. I'm not doing anything to you.

ARIANA

You said I'm scary.

HANNAH

You is

ARIANA

Not!

HANNAH

Ok. Ok.

ARIANA

I'm not!

HANNAH

You not. (beat) Ok? (beat) You not.

ARIANA

Hm.

HANNAH

Here

ARIANA

Hm?

HANNAH

(handing her the doll)

Here!

Ariana takes it. Hugs it.

ARIANA

She says I'm not scary.

HANNAH

And?

ARIANA

She says thank you.

HANNAH

You welcome.

ARIANA

Where'd you get her from?

HANNAH

Over there.

ARIANA

Where?

HANNAH

See that box? That's the doll box. You can get one from there too.

ARIANA

But I got this one.

HANNAH

You can get a different one, if you want.

ARIANA

I like this one.

HANNAH

I do too.

ARIANA

She's pretty.

HANNAH

She's strong.

ARIANA

Huh?

HANNAH

She's strong.

ARIANA

She don't look strong. Look at these skinny arms. I'm stronger than that.

(flexes her muscles)

Look.

HANNAH

What are you doing?

ARIANA

Look at my muscles.

HANNAH

Ok.

ARIANA

She don't have none. So she can't be strong.

HANNAH

You don't know what you're talking about.

ARIANA

Do too.

HANNAH

Do not.

ARIANA

She got skinny arms so she can't be strong.

HANNAH

Can too.

ARIANA

You got skinny arms.

HANNAH

Do not

Ariana pushes Hannah.

HANNAH

Hey!

ARIANA

See? You ain't strong at all.

Hannah pushes Ariana.

ARIANA

Hey!

HANNAH

You're not sposed to push people. It's not nice. It makes people not like you. And then no one will want to be your friend. And if you got no friends, it means you're all by yourself FOREVER.

ARIANA

Forever?

HANNAH

(nods solemnly)

You want to be all by yourself forever?

ARIANA

No.

HANNAH

Ok

ARIANA

Will you be my friend?

HANNAH

You pushed me.

ARIANA

Yeah.

HANNAH

I don't want a friend who pushes me.

Ariana starts to cry.

HANNAH

Why are you? This don't make no sense. Why are you? Ugh. Listen. Don't push me again. Ok? (beat) Ok?

Ariana snuffles and nods.

ARIANA

Ok.

Hannah walks her doll over to Ariana's doll.

HANNAH

(in doll voice)

“Hi. My name's Princess Hannah. What's yours?”

ARIANA

(in doll voice)

“My name's Princess Ariana. Do you want to play with me?”

HANNAH

Ok. But I have to ask my mama first.

ARIANA

How come?

HANNAH

Because she say so.

ARIANA

How come she say so?

HANNAH

I don't know. I just know I have to.

ARIANA

Ok. But does Princess Hannah have to?

HANNAH

Hm.

ARIANA

A princess don't have to ask her mama nothing.

HANNAH

She do.

ARIANA

Why be a princess if you can't have your own special rules?

HANNAH

Cuz princesses are pretty. And have crowns. And diamonds. Ooh! I'mma change her name!

ARIANA

To what?

HANNAH

Princess Diamond!

ARIANA

That's pretty.

HANNAH

I love diamonds. On the TV when a man loves a lady, he gives her a ring with a diamond. Or diamond earrings. Sometimes a bracelet. But the ring is the best. And then the lady smiles and smiles and smiles.

ARIANA

Does your mama have a diamond ring?

HANNAH

No. Does yours?

ARIANA

No. But when I grow up, I'mma buy her one. I'mma buy her all kinds of things!

HANNAH

Like what?

ARIANA

A big TV. Lots of pretty clothes. A phone that don't crack when you drop it. Or throw it. Fuzzy slippers.

HANNAH

My mama has fuzzy slippers.

ARIANA

My mama did too. But they got real dirty and she threw them in the trash and never got new ones.

HANNAH

Is she sad?

ARIANA

About the slippers?

HANNAH

Mm hm.

ARIANA

I don't think so. She's sad about other things.

HANNAH

She sad about her cracked phone?

ARIANA

She mad about that. She always dropping her phone and cracking it.

HANNAH

My mama would be mad at your mama.

ARIANA

Why?

HANNAH

My mama say you gotta be careful with your stuff. Specially spensive stuff.
Like a phone.

ARIANA

My mama say I can't have a phone until I'm ten.

HANNAH

Ten! She crazy.

ARIANA

She not crazy.

HANNAH

She sound crazy.

ARIANA

Take it back.

HANNAH

Why she gotta make you wait til you're ten?

ARIANA

She not crazy.

HANNAH

Whatever.

ARIANA

Take it back.

Ariana pulls back like she's going to punch Hannah.

HANNAH

You want to be all by yourself? Forever?

Ariana deflates.

HANNAH

That's what I thought.

Marlow Wyatt: Bread and circus. A follow spotlight appears downstage left. The very charming and charismatic BARKER steps into the spotlight wearing a

tuxedo with tails, a top hat, gloves and a magic cane. His entire suit, hat shirt and shoes are a colorful patchwork of slogans relating to poverty.

BARKER

Welcome! Welcome! You're in for a treat! Gather in and watch your step folks! Come on...yes. All you beautiful smiling faces filling the spaces that you have paid such a high price for. And we thank you. We need you. We thrive because of you! And your generosity. Gather around for this very special event of this Circus we call life. Or is it life we call Circus? Hmm, something to think about. Either way you are here to be entertained; distracted if you will, from the stresses of your life and you will see that your money has been well spent....well...we spent it. So no refunds or exchanges. Yes, that's it folks.

(tone changes)

Ladies and gentlemen, Lords and Lasses, hurry quickly now and sit down, you asses...and do nothing!

We hear a loud GASP.

WHACK-A-MOLE

I can't believe he just said that.

Barker whacks him.

WHACK-A-MOLE

I'm offended.

WHACK-A-MOLE

Did he just call us asses?

BARKER

(to the Whack-a-Mole)

Yes I did my dear and I am truly sorry for the language. I just wanted to know if you were listening; make sure I was heard.

(under his breath)

I'm sure you've said worse.

Barker reaches into his pocket

BARKER

Here, have some candy and drinks vouchers for my offenses to put in your purse.

WHACK-A-MOLE

Free drinks! Oh, thank you so

Barker whacks her before she completes her sentence. We hear applause; some joyful oohs and ahhs. He takes a bow. Oh, the magic of theatre! Just a simple trick to pacify, a distraction if you will. The real attraction has not yet begun. The one you paid to see but already see for free...every single day. If you would just open your eyes. (smiles in pity) Anyway, I digress. Take your seats and prepare to bear witness to one of the greatest atrocities of the human condition. Clutch your pearls and bite your nails and listen carefully to this simple tale. One of many to unveil.

Live and in person, the first of it's kind. Better than any Reality Show on cable or prime

time! You'll want to touch the players to see if they are real but THAT is a no-no. Read

the fine print. Touching is not part of the deal.

If you have to take a leak, now is the best time to go.

(a beat)

I'll wait.

You won't be able to during the show.

(he waits)

No takers? So we're all good then I see. Now are you sure no one has to pee?

(he waits)

Fine by me.

Welcome to the underbelly, the bottom, the lowest of the lows: An American freak show.

Keep your masks on tight to avoid the virus and the stench. If you happen to pass by one of them look straight ahead, hold your breath, don't flinch. They're all around us everyday and we criminalize them for their fate. We close our minds and toss a dime their way. Doesn't that makes us feel great? Isn't it fulfilling to give? I mean why is it so easy for us to give money but so hard for us to give a DAMN?

WHACK-A-MOLE

What did he just say?!

WHACK-A-MOLE

Who does he think he is? I didn't come here to be attacked.

WHACK-A-MOLE

What did he just say?!

Barker whacks.

WHACK-A-MOLE

Who does he think he is? I didn't come here to be attacked.

Barker whacks.

4.

WHACK-A-MOLE

I serve meals at the Mission. That's how we celebrate Thanksgiving.

WHACK-A-MOLE

Is that tax-deductible?

WHACK-A-MOLE

They're just going to spend money on drugs.

WHACK-A-MOLE

I have to step over them on my way to work.

Barker is exhausted but keeps whacking and
missing.

WHACK-A-MOLE

I want them to have housing but not in my neighborhood.

Barker whacks! There is no more magic glitter
in his cane.

WHACK-A-MOLE

They took over the dog park.

Barker whacks!

WHACK-A-MOLE

They're an eye sore.

The scrim slowly rises. Barker is sweating and out of breath. He stops. The last Whack-a-mole says:

WHACK-A-MOLE

Somebody needs to fix this. It's a city of tents!

ALL

This is America!

BARKER

(to audience)

Prepare your souls for a glimpse at American Fuckery. There's no eating or drinking, no videos or photographs of this menagerie. Tonight is about Hope and Charity.

He gets a broom and sweeps the stage clear of all the glitter and confetti.

We hear the Sideshow lyrics by The Stylistics -

"So let the side show begin. Hurry, hurry. Step right on it. Can't afford to pass you by.

Guaranteed to make you cry."

The stage is clear.

Barker exits.

Lights change:

It's early morning; just before sunrise. We hear

the sounds of the city. Lights up on a
HOMELESS ENCAMPMENT near downtown
Los Angeles. We see only one physical TENT
the rest appear in the distance along the edges of
a freeway off ramp perhaps against the
backdrop of a skyline of hotels and corporate
buildings.

The TENT sits under a tree with BLUE GLASS
BOTTLES hanging from its branches.

It is also surrounded by various POTTED
PLANTS and a few flowers for color. This is
where HOPE lives. It should appear to have all
the comforts and amenities of a home.

Across from the tent there is an old TOYOTA
2010 model. The paint is faded and the tires are
worn. The backseat and passenger seat are filled
with books, clothes and other personal items.

There is a bike rack on the roof but no bike.

There is where CHARITY has landed; for now.

She hasn't been there long.

The distance between the tent and the Toyota is

just enough for each to mind their business but close enough to speak without raising their voices.

Hope sits outside her tent. She is wrapped in several blankets with her eyes closed, head tilted toward the sky. She takes in the Sun slowly rising against her face and the reflection of the blue bottles hanging from the tree create a type of kaleidoscope. She opens her eyes; smiles and greets the day.

Charity tosses and turns in the front seat of her car. Maybe she is having a dream or simply uncomfortable in the cramped space. Her CELL PHONE ALARM goes off. It plays Cardi B's Money. Charity is startled and hits her head on the window.

CHARITY

Fuck! Shit! Aaaaahhh!

She turns off the alarm and SCREAMS into a pillow. She gets out of the car and starts kicking and punching it with her fists.

HOPE

That ain't a fight you can win.

Charity looks around as if she is searching for someone. She notices Hope.

CHARITY

What?!

HOPE

Skin against metal. You're sure to lose.

Charity rolls her eyes and searches for a bottle of water. She paces back and forth beside her broken down car and drinks.

CHARITY

Damn, damn, damn! Damn it!

HOPE

Good morning.

Charity gives her a long look. She gives a forced greeting.

CHARITY

Mornin'...

Charity takes in her surroundings for a beat or two. Hope observes. Charity looks out toward

the audience searching. She walks the parameter.

HOPE

What you lookin' for?

CHARITY

I don't know....It's not what, it's who.

HOPE

Then who you lookin' for? You hidin' from the law?

CHARITY

No, I just feel like....

She takes another step.

CHARITY

Sure is quiet around here.

HOPE

It's the crack of dawn.

CHARITY

... do you feel something?

HOPE

Something like what?

CHARITY

Like we're being watched.

Hope looks around then gives her a look.

HOPE

(shakes her head)

You on some stuff?

CHARITY

What? No, I ain't on nothin'.

HOPE

You need to move on down the road if you are. Don't be bringing your habits over here. This is a safe space; as far as spaces go. Ain't nobody here doing drugs! (rambling under her breath)

Children play around this camp. They don't let us stay too long before they run us out cause of dope heads like you!

CHARITY

I said No! I'm not on nothin'. I don't do drugs. I'm not high... damn. I just feel something...strange. Like we're being watched.

Charity takes another look around.

CHARITY

Did you notice anybody? Other than us? I mean it's just me and you right? In this spot. Nobody else.

HOPE

As far as I know. 'Cept for the others by the bridge but they sleep during the day mostly. Ain't up this early for sure. I'm the only one besides you...for now.

CHARITY

I dreamed like...I'm telling you...

Hope gives her a look.

CHARITY

Nevermind.

Hope ponders the thought. Looks around
toward the sky.

HOPE

Hmph, who knows. Maybe we are being watched. What difference does it make? You better get used to looky-loos. There are plenty. Try to hide it though. Some people drive by with they camera's taking videos like we animals in a zoo. Like I said, what difference does it make who's lookin' or ain't lookin'. Don't change nothing. Nope don't change nothing at all.

L. Trey Wilson: Hi everybody. Thank you so much for joining us. I am delighted, uh, to share our two guests today. We have Vasanti and Marlow. They are amazing and fun, and we're gonna have a great conversation. Hello Marlow. Hello Vasanti.

Marlow Wyatt: Hello, Trey. Hi Trey. Thanks for having us. Hello.

L. Trey Wilson: Hi. Oh, my pleasure, my pleasure. So I have, I have a few questions to dive right in, but, um, first off, uh, these pieces and tackling or creating a piece around poverty, uh, were you already working on a piece that related to poverty and homelessness, or was the commission of doing a piece around poverty and homelessness, the motivation to create the piece?

I'll start with you, Marlow

Marlow Wyatt: For me, it was the commission around poverty. I had just finished a play called Robin from the Hood, which was a, a Robin Hood theme story based on, uh, corporate greed and how they go in communities and things like that. And so my friend had sent me the submission for this, and I was like, I feel like I already kind of wrote about poverty or, you know, And he was like, It's not really the same.

And so I was like, You're right. And I, I, I thought about, uh, A whole new theme. So my piece originated from the theme and working with that theme. And when I thought of poverty, what, what came to mind? And for me at the time, just, just, just homelessness and not, uh, housing affordability in America. And I live in a, a, a town in an area, which I love very much, but there's not a day that goes by that I don't leave this apartment and, and walk over, whether it's a half a block down the street, either way, a homeless person. So that's why I chose, you know,

L. Trey Wilson: Got it. Got it. And Vasanti, same question.

Vasanti Saxena: Yes. Um, great question. I was, uh, same as Marlow actually. I was spurred to write this because of the commission and the theme of poverty. And in the beginning when I was deciding what to write about, there were so many things that came to mind, you know, based on people I know.

And, uh, I live in Inglewood right now, which has been going through a lot of gentrification in recent years. Um, cuz the building of the stadium and metro access. And when I walk around my neighborhood, um, I tend to have conversations with almost everyone I run into. And just hearing different people's struggles, uh, really gave me some seeds for, for this, this play especially, especially, um, during the pandemic when everything got so much harder for folks who are already struggling.

L. Trey Wilson: Yes. Yes, absolutely. And in doing that, uh, is there a way that these pieces are different from the pieces you normally are usually write? I mean, I know in terms of we have the particular subject matter around poverty, but in terms of the style, the form, anything, was there a deviation from the normal pieces that you write?

Or even do you have a, a standard way in which you write and create, I'll start with you first. Vasanti, how is this piece different besides the content? Hmm.

Vasanti Saxena: Another great question. I think, I think I, my intention was for it to be very different stylistically and at its core, but I realized as I was writing it, Well, let me rewind a little bit.

Um, most of my work tends to be pretty intimate, so relationships between family members, relationships between, um, you know, romantic partners, but they're small and then they address something larger. And with this piece, I wanted it to, I wanted it to start big, um, but it didn't work out that way. And , it's essentially the relationship between two friends.

So it's that intimate relationship, but, um, hopefully illuminating, you know, some of the, the larger issues that, um, that we face. So it kind of ended up being similar, although there are, um, there are some fantastical elements that I don't normally have in my work, um, to such a great extent.

L. Trey Wilson: Got it. Got it.

Thank you. Marlow, same question.

Marlow Wyatt: The, the same with me. I, because of this was a commission, I just took it as an opportunity to challenge myself. So I wanted to create reality in the world, in a world of a circus. Because for me, when I thought about this, when I think about homelessness, especially in America, you know, uh, a super power country, uh, with this third world issue and, and the bureaucracy and what we do and the politics around it, it all reminded me, honestly, of a circus.

I felt like everything is smoke and mirrors. Everything is clown. You know, we got the, we got the barker who's kind of leading us on and we're following him. And it's almost like a, it's, it's, it's almost entertainment in a way. Um, especially now with social media and how we use it, um, to, uh, show the problem to film the problem, but we don't actually address the problem. And it's a, it's such a fixable problem in my eyes. So I wanted to create this play with a circus atmosphere where the audience comes in and they are actually almost like in a, a circus ring, and they're watching these two characters just live their everyday lives. Because we do that every day. We see it every day, and we watch it every day.

And then we go home and, and live and live our lives. And so I just wanted to tackle that, um, theme, but of course, uh, make it bigger, make it theatrical with the actual, you know, making it an actual, uh, carnival, having whack-a-mole, having, uh, human whack-a-mole, and all of those kind of things. So it was, uh, it is different.

I realize that all of my plays are different. My first play is very linear. Um, I too, like ante love, intimate relationships, and I think there is some intimacy between charity and hope, but it is set in a world of foolery, you know, foolishness.

L. Trey Wilson: Yeah. And, and, and the thing that was so great and, and for our listeners who heard the pieces being read by the authors, is that one of the things that I picked up between both of them was this observation aspect.

We have characters kind of recreating other characters and we getting to observe the creation in terms of the dolls in your piece, Vasanti. And in terms of, uh, watching this circus atmosphere, Marlow, where there's a piece around observing and how to observe it and we're observing it. And, and that really resonated for me because I think in terms of, It's how we as people that, um, by the grace of the universe are not experiencing that type of experience at this time, are having to bear witness to it.

Like you said, you leave your homes and you walk out your doors and you, you cannot not see it. And it's how do we see things, but also at the same time, to what degree are we ignoring it? How do we almost are, are blinding ourselves to being witnesses and bystanders, uh, to this situation that's happening.

That's so prevalent all around us. Um, any thoughts around that in terms of your experience of how, what's the experience of being an observer to this, how that's impacting.

Marlow Wyatt: For me, there is a sense of hopelessness for me as somebody, I feel like there is nothing I can do because one of the things that I, uh, living in this country, which is, you know, based on capitalism, um, the idea to fix everything is to throw money at it.

And we see that that doesn't work. It's not about, you know, politicians love to say, we spent \$20 billion on to get homelessness and clean up the streets and da, da, da, da. And within that year, it's back in homelessness. Where I am in Los Angeles has only gotten higher since I came here. When I first moved into this apartment, there was nobody, you know, nobody on the street.

And now I expect it. Now it's to the point where I, I literally call them my neighbors. I say, Well, there, that's my neighbors. Uh, there's general, General, uh, a man that lives, he has built a home. And if I see him, I say, Hey, you know, I say Gordon morning, depending on where I'm going or whatever, because he is part of this neighborhood to me.

And it's not money. It's us. And I think it's easy for us to say, I can't do anything. I, because I used to be, I'm, I used to be one of those, Oh, if we donate, we donate. And I would always vote in the way of, Yes, I'll pay more taxes if, if all this money is going to end homelessness. And, and then I stopped doing that.

I was like, It's not the money, it's the mismanage of money. It's, it's people. If we have buildings, we have empty buildings, um, we could fill them, but then we

say, Oh, well we can't because this, this, that. It's the same way with food, how it's illegal for McDonald's, which is trash food anyway, to give away that.

They, they make them throw it in the dumpster when they can say, We have all this food left over at this that we can't sell so you can have it. And so we live in a country that we would rather be like, No, no, no, no, no. Cuz they could sue or whatever, whatever reason they have for not allowing people to give leftover food or food that is going to go to waste to anybody who wants it or needs it and throw it away anyway, and take away their dignity and have them dig in the trash for it.

Um, that's not an issue of finances. That is simply a human choice in my opinion. So just like the housing and development where I'm, there are so many apartments that are being built and I'm like, Who, who, What developer, what contract did they get where they were like, Oh, we're building housing and they're not afford.

They say that they say they may have one or two units, and affordable is, is a very generic term. What does that mean? You, you know, affordable to whom? Because we know that they fought for the minimum wage to be \$15 an hour. So if I'm working and I'm working 40 hours a week and I'm working hard and I'm making \$15 an hour, you know, I cannot afford to live anywhere near here, you know, And so that's, that's all a part of it too.

L. Trey Wilson: Got it. Got it. Yes.

Thank you Vasanti, what are your thoughts?

Vasanti Saxena: Well, first I just wanna say I really, um, think Marlow brings up all of these, like all of these different aspects that are, are part of the question. You know, food insecurity, housing insecurity, and um, you know, and there's also mental illness. There's also addiction.

There's, um, not feeling, uh, not feeling like you're seen as human, uh, or as equal to other others, you know? So when you ask for help, when a person asks for help, you know, how, how is help being given, Um, that I wonder as well. And, uh, one of the things that really strikes me as so powerful in Marlowe's play is, and you mentioned it too, Trey, how she, um, she.

She constructs things. So the audience is aware of their own spectatorship and of their own responsibility and culpability and makes you question that. And hopefully, hopefully it will do. Her play will do what theater's meant to do,

which is to change, you know, people and affect society, you know, and for the better.

So I just wanna applaud her for that. Um, Thank you. Yeah. And, and in terms of homelessness, the first thing that came to mind was, again, in my neighborhood. I think this was pre pandemic again with, um, all the construction that's being done around here. Um, landlords were raising rent. Um, Astronomically. I remember talking to one of my neighbors, you know, down the street who said that, you know, next month my rent is going up \$900 a month.

So on top of what they were already paying. So if they're already paying like a thousand, say it would be 19 hun, who has \$900 extra a month that they can put toward rent. Normally you, you find a place that. you can afford with your income, with your resources, and to have these, you know, huge increases.

And people were saying, Okay, that's it. I'm moving to Nevada. I'm going back to Atlanta. You know, I am leaving the state because if not, I will be homeless. And that, to me, that has changed, has changed an entire neighborhood. And I know like it's, it's the same old story. Like this is the same old story of gentrification.

Um, but it's hard when, when I have a little dog that I walk and, um, when the people who I would run into say 10 years ago are no longer there, or I'm taking my walks and I ask people like, Hey, does, does Cody still live here? And it's like, No, no, he's gone. When, when, when did he go? You know, what, what happened?

Um, So, so, so that's, that's a tough thing, you know, to deal with. And I have all these questions about, you know, each person's story. Yes. You know how everyone has dealt with it. Yes. In their own way.

L. Trey Wilson: One of the things that, as you're talking, occurred to me to want to kind of, this, this is such a full subject and there's so much to be said about it.

Um, but also one of the things that, uh, a lot of our listeners like to hear about is just our writing process. And so, uh, what made me think to ask this question is about, uh, Putting the focus on things to highlight things in our society that we want to draw attention to. Uh, can you share a little bit about how you started to write and what was your first impetus to write and what was maybe your first play or what was your first piece?

I'll start with you this time for Vasanti. What was the, what was the thing that had you choose writing as a form of expression for yourself?

Vasanti Saxena: Hmm. Well, my mom was a writer. She wrote short stories. Um, and so there, there were always books around and, and there was value placed on writing. Um, she wrote in. in Chinese though, so, um, I am unable to read Chinese.

That's that half of my family. I'm Chinese on my mom's side and Indian. Uh, my dad was from India, um, thus the name . Um, so, uh, my mom wrote short stories. I also tried, I grew up trying to write short stories and they were all very, um, uh, you know, when you're young you imitate a lot. So they were kind of imitations of the writers I was reading and I was reading like classics.

So the language was the language of the classics and my short stories were not good . Um, and I tried poetry that was very angsty and also not good. And then when, uh, at one point my mom and I were on a trip to New York, um, to visit one of my aunties who lived there, and they really, really wanted to take me to see a Broadway play.

And they were looking in the newspaper, you know, back when you looked in the newspaper for the listings of shows. And they got really excited because there's this play that was supposed to be like Madame Butterfly, the Puccini Opera. So they're like, Let's go to this. We'll get some, you know, good culture in this young Mind.

The play was not Madame Butterfly, it was David Henry Hwang's M Butterfly. , which is quite different from the opera again. Uh, Wong's and Butterfly is a, a, a different thing. And um, I remember my mom sat on one side of me. My auntie sat on the other, and at one point, both of their hands just reached out to cover my eyes, if you've seen the play, you know.

Um, but I was, I was so . I feel like that play, seeing that play transformed me because it addressed race and gender and sexuality, and it deconstructed the ideas of race, gender, and sexuality in ways that I didn't even know were possible. So I walked into that theater as like one person and I walked out A different person. Like it changed me and I thought, this is the power of theater. And that I think has informed, um, when I did start to to write plays, which was like maybe my, my, my last year of college, um, my very first play was, uh, produced. It was, you know, in a small on campus festival and it was dealing with, you know, issues of sexuality and it was hard to cast because, um, at the time a lot of the actors didn't wanna play lesbian characters.

And, um, that was a challenge. But I've been doing that from the beginning. Um, and hoping to, in some small way, follow in the footsteps, of, you know, David Henry Wong and other amazing playwrights who, you know, um, Who, who address these things and hopefully can transform, uh, some audience members.

L. Trey Wilson: Got it. That makes so much sense. It's so, what's so funny about that is that's such an example of how the universe works, how fascinating the universe can be because your, your grandmother and mother were intending on inspiring you for expanding your mind and thinking they probably didn't intended to go in that direction, but yet it did that nevertheless, it really, um, altered you and affected you and inspired you, it sounds like.

Vasanti Saxena: Yep. And I am so grateful, .

L. Trey Wilson: Oh, yes, yes, yes. And same question, MarloW, how did you start writing pieces and.

Marlow Wyatt: Well, it's so funny. I, I started out as an actor and I went to school for acting and I came out acting and, and I love theater and I believe that, um, when I came out and I started auditioning and there was not a lot culturally, uh, for me to audition for.

It's very funny because I'm, I'm, I'm a new playwright in terms of years. And so one of the things that, like I said, there was just things that were missing as far as the culture. You know, they would write generic pieces, but never anything. To the culture. That is why I started writing. I was like, Well, I know how to deconstruct a play because I'm an actor.

How do I construct a play and write about characters? And I grew up in a long line of storytellers, like, you know, I, I love language and I love culture. And, um, my family is, is mixed with a lot of different, uh, I have an aunt who's Korean and black. I have cousins who are, uh, black and mixed with, mixed with other things.

And um, we were very close. So all gather. And I remember as a little girl going to the beauty shop and listening to people tell stories. And so I really think. Made me a storyteller. That is part of my, it's part of the culture and just being on the porch, getting my hair braided, which takes three or four hours and nobody's quiet during that time.

Somebody's saying something about something, somebody's coming over, saying something about Ms. Johnson down the street. And, but it was, it was love. Like you see, you knew the neighborhood and you knew who was the, the alcoholic, or you knew who was cheating on who, and you knew who was in church and who was stealing from the church.

And, you know, and I was like, Oh, this is all a part of it. This is a world. And I never saw that world on stage or film for that matter. And I go, This is real. This is, this is where I come from.

Me becoming a playwright was really more out of necessity, if that makes sense. And I knew, and I was like, well, everybody wants to see themselves on stage in some capacity, and I don't mind seeing other people, but where am I in this American cannon of theater?

You know? Yes. And um, yeah, so even when I was studying at Howard, there's just certain things that weren't available to us because they didn't exist at the time. And, you know, um, even though they would have a study Shakespeare, but we would go out to audition and they weren't gonna cast. You know, and so you kind of go, Well, who's gonna cast me and what and how?

And so I just remember saying, I think the issue is, is that everybody wants to be in front of this stage, but there is no, there is no stage for you to be on if I don't write a story for you to have that opportunity. So that's how it came for me. And I love it. I do both, but I, I really love story tell, I love writing plays cuz I, I just feel like I don't know how this is gonna end.

Like, I'm excited to find out how it's gonna end even though I'm writing it, you know?

L. Trey Wilson: Yes, yes. Well, that's a, a, a wow. Every time you answer a question, you create another question for me. So I'm really enjoying this interview. You're making it so easy for me. And that is, when you start a piece, uh, are you still in the process of understanding what it is your Piece is going to be about how far, how much aware are you about what you are wanting the piece to be? How clear are you in terms of that understanding? Marlow?

Marlow Wyatt: For me, it takes, I, I kind of, I, I, I open it, I write visually, and Vasanti always says that. She goes, You're stage directions, because I have to, That's what's in my head.

I see the world first, and then I put the people in the world, especially for this, because I, I knew that I was writing about poverty. I didn't know who the characters were gonna be, but I knew that the, I knew that I was writing about poverty and homelessness, I should say. So I knew that I had to have homeless people.

I didn't know who they were gonna be or whatever, but I, I wanted, I create the world first, and then I just start having conversations. And once I get like s. A really rickety framework of it. I say to myself, I say this all this time, and I ask myself this several times during the process, What is this play about?

What is this play about? Because a lot of times I'll go see plays and I go, I know what happened, I know this, but what is this about? Like, why did you bring me here? And so I ask myself as a playwright, even when a play is finished, even the first draft. And I'll look and I'll read, I'll, I'll, I'll read it and I'll put it on the back burner for two to three weeks, sometimes a month.

And then I'll come and read it again because I forget what I wrote. So I'm reading it with new eyes and then I'm poking. And I'm prodding. I was like, What? And I'll, and if I say, What does this play about? Then I know how much work I need to, to do because I wrote it and I don't know what this play is about.

And so for me, I just kind of work there and I love characters because I'm an actor. I think that I'm, I focus on the, the characters a lot in their background, even though it may not be discussed in the play, but I know very detailed things about these characters and I think that's the actor in me to be like, you know, hope is not just hope.

I know where she comes from. I know what her sign is, her, you know, I know what her, you know, those, those, those little things. I just started adding. Adding once I get the, once I get the framework.

L. Trey Wilson: Got it. And Vasanti, same question. Uh, when you start a piece, how far do you know? Would you know fully, uh, the end of it or what it is about? Or, or do you just kind of dive in because you have the thought about of a situation or a circumstance you just wanna explore and see where it goes?

Vasanti Saxena: I think Marlow and I have talked about this a little bit, how our beginnings, the beginning parts of our processes are sometimes kind of similar, like no outline, like I do not outline at, at the beginning because I don't know what it's about.

I don't know what my characters are gonna do. Um, Usually, um, I just start, I don't have a clear sense of place like Marlo does, but I know there are two characters usually in a space. I know a little bit, you know, the basics of who these characters are and, um, I let them talk and see where that takes me because I really, uh, have faith and believe that the first draft is when, um, well, in my case, I need to let, it's, it's all about the subconscious.

So just let them talk, let things, um, be discovered. Don't fight with your characters, because sometimes you want them to do something and they say, Wait, I would not do this. So let them do this other thing that you may not agree with, but okay, they can do that and, and see where it goes. In the case of the play for, um, for Lower Depth, um, I, I had to do.

I did a lot of research, and research is another word in some cases for procrastination, . Um, uh, and I read, there was an article that described a, um, a daycare and all of the little kids, uh, taking naps on mats on the floor. And so that was the first image I had. And I wondered, okay, what are the stories of all these little kids on the, on the floor?

Let's focus in on two. What are, what do they say to each other? That was the beginning of this one. Um, Oh, and speaking of procrastination, since I brought it up, , um, in terms of process, uh, I have a couple of quotes behind my desk, and one of them is there are two of you, one who wants to write and one who doesn't. The one who wants to write better keep tricking the one who doesn't. Mm. And that's Maria Irene Forez.

Marlow Wyatt: Mm. I love that. Yay.

Vasanti Saxena: I love it too. That's why it's there. . And, and I love her, like her work like. So, so deep and from, from the gut, like so visceral. Um, the other one is the scariest moment is always just before you start.

After that, things can only get better and that's Stephen King. And what they have in common is it's really, really hard to start. You just have to sit and make yourself begin and then trust in, in the process and the characters will take you there and just get that first draft done. And after that I go back and I, I pick out themes or moments and then maybe do a rough outline of how to structure it.

L. Trey Wilson: Wow. Fantastic. Lovely. And, and both of you mentioned, I think the word faith. It's about having faith and trust in the process, uh, which is I think part of it as well. Mm-hmm. . Cool.

Marlow Wyatt: It is for me, for sure. I don't, I've learned to, um, I have issues with deadlines, but I also have a personality that needs deadlines because I am, um, a pleaser.

I'm the good daughter, so I'm gonna make the deadline. Do you know? I don't wanna be the one that didn't make the deadline because it's just, you know, um, that kind of how I was raised. But I, it's very difficult for me because I feel, you know, when, uh, Vasanti was talking about procrastination, what I realize with me is that it's really not procrastination.

A lot of times I'm sitting and I'm doing nothing, and I mean, literally sitting on myself, I don't watch TV really. And so I'm thinking. I'm creating these things in my head, and they'll be pieces of paper. Like even, even on this little piece of paper here, it's something will happen. I'll like, Okay, that's, that's what she does.

She doesn't, love him. She blah, blah. And I'll just put there. So you'll see just pieces of paper from napkins, whatever's near me that I can reach and I'll write it down. And then I have all these pieces of paper and I go, This is, this is what it is, but it's not ready to be written yet. It's not ready to be written yet.

And so I had to understand that about myself because I was always beating myself up. It's like, deadline's in four days and I haven't written anything. And it's like, for me, if it's not there, it's not there. It's like that song, if it don't fit, don't force it. Just relax and let her go. Um, it's that literally Energy. And I have to say that to myself because you can't force a story out of somebody. That's why I always get scared when people talk about the writer's room. It's like, Oh, they're looking for playwrights for tv. And I was like, I don't know if I could do that. Cause you, I can't. Do, you know what I mean?

I don't know if I can force a story out every week, that's somebody else's story.

L. Trey Wilson: once again, one answer leads to another question, and maybe not a question, but another intro, introduction to another conversation, which is, I think the reason why we have this, um, understanding or relationship to procrastination is because we have this, um, I don't know how to describe it, but almost this belief that if it's not quantifiable, it doesn't merit.

And, and sometimes you can't quantify what one has done during procrastination, but I think what you just said was so on point that. What happens in procrastination? Could be contemplation, could be exploration, could be those, uh, that's the forming time, that's the kind of, you know, things

churning that you can't, it doesn't show up in a tangible way, but that doesn't mean nothing's happening.

Something is happening that is just like, it's almost like an incubation state in which, uh, things are being created and informed that you may not be able to see right now. But that doesn't mean nothing is occurring.

Marlow Wyatt: I agree a hundred percent. Amanda Gorman said something about creativity and writing and something about the idea of what you said to have to produce, to have all of that is rooted in capitalism.

This, well, you're not a writer. What have you done where you're not a, you know, or you have to, you have to put these pages out. You have to put these things out. And so then you get in this mechanical mode, which is the opposite to me, of creativity, of simply trying to produce a product. to say that it's there, you know?

L. Trey Wilson: Yeah. To almost have to justify yourself to validate yourself. Yes.

Marlow Wyatt: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah. And so I've learned, um, for me, I, I'm in such, I made a decision in my life a year ago that I wanted to do this for a living. This is not gonna be, Oh, this, this is what I wanna do. This is what I do. And whatever happens with the money happens with the money, but it doesn't because I am not famous or because nobody, I'm not a household name.

It doesn't mean that I'm not a playwright. It took me a long time. to really understand what that means. I'm a playwright, that's what I do. Yes, yes. And even when people see me at a party, he's like, What do you do? It's like, I'm a playwright. Well, they ask another question because it's like, not an acceptable answer.

You must be doing something else. Really? And I say, No, I'm a playwright. I had a friend. He goes, Yeah, people are asking about where's Marlow? You know, she doesn't work at the place anymore. And I just told him, I said, Oh, I don't know. And I was like, What do you mean you don't know? Tell them I'm a playwright.

I'm making a living writing plays. And he got quiet because that concept is so unreal to people.

L. Trey Wilson: What I tell you , that once again, that that reminds me of something happened when I first was going to college. Um, a a, a parent, I was used to play tennis and a parent of one of the other tennis players, uh, knew I was going off to college. I said, Where you going now? I told him where? And he said, Oh, okay.

What you gonna study? And I said, Theater. His whole disposition changed. And he actually said to me, Oh, well that may be fun, but there's no money in it. And I thought to myself as a 18 year old at that time, I thought, You're kinda whack , because I'm a young person who has a decision, has made a decision about what I want to do and what I wanna become.

And that's what your response is when I share with you that I wanna do this, that you put whatever your standard is and pose on me in, in a very discouraging tone. And I, and I don't think, like you said, as an artist, he would say that, but if I said, Oh, I'm study accounting, you know, he'd be like, Oh, congratulations.

And, and I thought, and, but actually fortunately for me, it did the opposite. I thought, Oh, alright, I'm gonna show you, you know, because it's like, and I wonder how often people think, once again, that quantifiable thing, you know, what qualifies you? Can you say something? Unless you have these dot, dot, dot things to legitimize that as being something you're stating of who you are.

But I believe it's the other way around. I feel like you state it. And then it become it and evolve into it and realize it once again, the power of the word. Right? Yeah. Vasanti. I'd like to have your thoughts around this as well. Cause I see you nodding quite a bit. Mm-hmm.

Vasanti Saxena: well, yes. And I'm also mad at these two people that both of you came across with their discouraging responses.

So I hope I don't run into them . Um, and there's also this, this, when when you start out, there's also the, the, the response of, Oh, well, so that's your hobby, but what's your job? And, um, that can also like, feel very, very diminishing as well. And, um, I have, um, in terms of my like money job, I've managed to have like, um, I have a skill.

I've been proofreading for many years and that has allowed me, um, that doesn't take creativity. It takes meticulousness, um, which is sort of the opposite of what I do when I'm writing. Um, so it doesn't use that part of my brain, and that's been pretty great. And also when you mention the quantifiability of, uh,

playwriting or work in the theater, one thing that people will say is if you say, When I say I'm a playwright, um, have I seen anything you've done?

Yes. Or do you have a show up now? And it. That is not a constant thing for some of us. Um, so no, I can't direct you to a theater right now that is doing my work at this moment, and you can just go tonight. That, that, No, no, But there will be something and I will keep you posted. And, and that's also with the, the, uh, temporal, you know, fleeting nature of theater and performance.

Um, it's there and then it's gone. As opposed to like TV and film where you can say, Oh yeah, I did this. You know, this thing. Look it up and you can watch it. Um, but that's also what makes me love theater so much because you're there and you're also as an audience member affecting the art that is happening in front of you.

It's an exchange and. That is magic. That's why people compare theater to church, you know, ritual and communion. Um, so I wouldn't, I wouldn't trade it for anything. Yes.

L. Trey Wilson: Yeah. Me either. Well, I, I, I have to tell you, um, I know we have to, uh, in this, but I've, as I said at the start, I knew I was gonna have a delightful conversation with the two of you.

And I think for anyone listening to this, I believe that they, if they're a writer or an artist of any sort, or even wanting to, I believe that they have been encouraged by the two of you, uh, and supported in the idea of being that regardless of how it's quantified or not, uh, if it's something in you, uh, go for it and do it and express it and, and have it realized, and just you stating.

Is enough. Yes. So I wanna really thank my guests. Oh my gosh. Thank you so much, Vasanti. Thank you so much Marlow, for this, uh, encouraging conversation as artists, uh, for other artists. Yes. And for people in general in terms of following your dream and having that realized and, and even just full on expression, just be self expressed and highlighting things in our world that need to be highlighted.

So thank you so much and thank you all of our listeners, uh, for joining us for this amazing conversation with these two amazing writers. And check out their work at Lord Depths if you can. Thanks so much.

Marlow Wyatt: Thank you for having me. Thank you, Trey.

L. Trey Wilson: You're welcome. All the best.

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