

# Write True to You with Zola Dee and Wendy Graf

- 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](http://lower-depth.com). We hope you enjoy Writers Revealed.
- Courtney Olipha...: On this episode of Writers Revealed, you will hear from the internationally produced playwright, Wendy Graf, who will read from her GLAAD Award Winning play NO WORD IN GUYANESE FOR ME. Then emerging theatre artist and arts activist, Zola Dee, will read "Rain River Ocean", a piece she developed at CalArts as part of their New Works Festival. The readings will be followed by a conversation moderated by Gregg T. Daniel.
- Lower Depth The...: The following excerpt comes from a play by Wendy Graf, NO WORD IN GUYANESE FOR ME. No Word in Guyanese For Me is published and copywritten by Original Works Publishing - [www.originalworksonline.com](http://www.originalworksonline.com).
- Wendy Graf: Ramadan comes early that year. I observe the fast. It is not difficult for me this time, as it has been before....Auntie Mamee gets me a job with abedeze who owns video store across the street from Queens College. At lunchtime I walk around the campus and pretend I go there. There is a table set up with many other tables in front of Student Union. It is the table of the homosexuals-the... (reading) ..."Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Organization". I know what transgender is. I have seen men in my neighborhood who dress up like women. One was attacked while walking down Roosevelt Avenue, beaten with a metal pipe. And I do know about the city of Lot in the Qu'ran, where a whole city burns up because they are homosexual...And doesn't it say in the Hadith that homosexuals do evil and must be punished? In some Muslim sects it is a crime punishable by death. I try to walk past the table, but I cannot. Slowly I pick up a brochure, pretending to read. My hands are shaking and the words swim and dance before my eyes. I look up and my eyes meet the eyes of a girl who sits behind the table. She smiles at me with a kind smile I understand. "Would you like to come with me to the Center and attend a meeting?" A very long beat, then: It is as if the lens of the camera brings the world into hard focus. As if you have been holding your breath for such a very, very long time and finally, finally you can let it out. Still, I cannot answer her. I turn to stone. I know my family, my community.... Allah, why did you make me like this, why have you abandoned me? I want to speak, but when I open my mouth..... Protect me, Allah, I need you in this moment... She scribbles something...an address?...on a piece of paper and gently holds it out to me. Still I cannot move or speak. Yet I wonder...how can the Qu'ran say that this girl, with so very kind a smile, be evil?

The girl holds out the paper to her: "No one should have to think that God is not there for them." Hanna puts the paper in her pocket. 16. 5/2/12 I pray, I fast, I meditate three times a day and attend mosque regularly. Auntie Mamee couldn't be more pleased. She thinks it's to ask forgiveness for my failed marriage and make me pure again. "Dearest gyal, Allah is most merciful and the true desire of every soul. He will lead believers to the right path."

Please....please...Allah my God, help me to change, help me to get rid of this thing. Help me to resist these feelings! Did Allah make a mistake with me? I search the Qur'an, looking for its answer, and I am surprised I find only a very few verses about men together and nothing at all about women. It says nothing! Nothing! Yet my religion says it's forbidden. But haven't we been commanded in the Qur'an to learn, to challenge, to discover for ourselves? She takes out the paper with the address of the Center: I stand at the door of the Center and I am scared to death. Could it be the grace of Allah that has led me here? It all makes sense....I want to breathe! I find at the Center they are all so very nice, and soon I attend classes...lectures...movie nights....There can't be anything wrong with that, can there? The other women embrace me with a favor and acceptance I have never known. "Our little neophyte. Our newest little sister". I tell myself that now is the time for me to grow up, to accept the reality. This is the time to stop lying and be who I am. Aren't we all created in the best of forms? That's what the Qur'an says. We have no right, if we are truly Muslim, to alter His creation, do we? Still I know my family could never accept the truth about the way their daughter is. How can I tell them? There is not even a word in Guyanese dialect for "lesbian". I am Muslim, I am.... gay. Once again I am split in half, like the baby of the two mummas and King Solomon.

Lower Depth The...:

The following is an excerpt from "Rain, River, Ocean" by Zola Dee.

Zola Dee:

Hi. I'm looking for the pieces of myself. Have you seen them? I lose everything. Always have. I lose my keys, my phone, sometimes my mind. (laughs) Just kidding. My daddy says I'd lose my head if it wasn't screwed on tight. Daddy says to put my things away, he always has, but I don't listen. Like those summers at grandma's house. We all knew something was gonna get left behind. We'd pack everything into the Purple van but something always got left in grandma's house. The house with the photos. Photos of people I've never seen or met. Photos of a time before. Photos of family and friends and Jesus...and another photo of Jesus....and that other photo of Jesus and a photo of the white family grandma took care of back in the 50's. Photos of the rural South during segregation. Photos of survival and joy. The photos are what made grandma's house, grandma's house. And every summer somehow something of mine got left in grandma's house. A stuffed animal. A Gameboy color cartridge. A bag of unopened Doritos. Something got left. And now I'm looking for my pieces. The pieces of me. You seen them? Maybe they also got left in grandma's house? Think I left my mouth in grandma's house. Have you seen it? Have you seen my mouth? My voice. Help me cus I'm looking for all the parts of my mouth? Have you see my lips? Perched to kiss at age 13. Did each lover I've ever kissed give me back my lips? 1st kiss from a boy with brown skin. 2nd and 3rd had brown skin. Brown lips. Don't remember when but they got light and then they got white. Not sure if that's my subconscious trying to tell me something or a coincidence. Maybe too many years of Southern Baptist Christianity got me

falling in love with white men with long brown hair and tan skin who look like they've been traveling barefoot in the deserts of the Middle East for 13 years. You know the type. Long haired hippies on a quest to save mankind. Or is it all just a coincidence due to the spaces I'm currently in. All of them filled with gatekeepers and the gates locked tight....all of them predominantly white. All I know, in the summers when I spent time in Grandma's house, in the living room there was a big ole' painting of black Jesus but in the room where I slept, white Jesus stared back at me. So maybe, white savior stole my lips? And while he was at it, I'm sure he stole my voice? I guess it wouldn't be the first time... Can you help me find my mouth? Maybe it was lost later in life. Maybe it was 9th grade honors class when I was the only Black person in the room and someone yelled "Dee turn around" and I turned cus they were my friends. I wasn't expecting what was to come next. So I turned around and they asked among themselves whose lips are bigger. And it was between this white boy Brooks and I and when I think about it now, his lips were not big. Just full and symmetrical lips like mine but his eyes made me not like my lips then. His eyes did all the talking and his eyes said he was ashamed. Ashamed to be compared to me. Maybe those kids in that 9th grade math class took my lips from me. Can you tell them to give 'em back?. And while you're at it tell 'em to give me back my hair too. You seen my hair? Don't remember what it was like since it all broke off from me burning it with that flat iron and hot comb. Strands that became so brittle and weak from bending into a shape it didn't want to be. Bending it straight. And constantly running and running and running from the rain because if it got wet it would turn it back to it's kinky coily state. God, how I hated the rain. Tell me though, do you know what happened to my hair? Seriously, I don't think I seen it since all the kids in my class made fun of me and said.... "You got that nappy hair. That bad hair." And there was no running from that. Those words. They said..."Your daddy must be straight from Africa. Straight off the boat" Other Black kids telling me that I wasn't regular black. With this type of hair I was African black. Whatever that means. But truth is my father has been trying to find our roots on Ancestry.com. The roots on his daddy's side because grandma's? Well we don't talk about them roots. Those secrets gon stay in grandma's house along with all the knick-knacks and items that I think I left there. And Daddy been searching and searching but you can only go back so far cause the records ain't there. Because you was a slave and you belonged to someone else and when they set you free, who was keeping up with you? No one. My ancestry only exists in stories. Stories about people who may or may not be from the West Indies and people who talk that Gullah and Geechee way and light skinned niggas who claim to be part Cherokee. Only stories we got. No documents. And although now every document I check African-American, I really don't know what that means. Cus there are still parts of me trying to reconcile the African with the American part. Still trying to reconcile my feelings with the colonizer, with the slave master and trying to fit all the pieces together but the edges won't stick and the edges won't stay down and you know, my edges never laid down although I've tried very hard with grease and gel and brushes and combs and mama's hands with the hot comb straightening my hair. Those pieces of hair that I'm looking for. The ones that were always too scared of the rain. Maybe it wasn't the kids in class who took my hair from me but maybe it was me who discarded each strand. Wanted to banish it from my life so I wouldn't be labelled

as different or other. Please, can you help me find the pieces of myself. Help me reconnect with my hair.

Gregg T. Daniel: Um, I have a question which is, which will probably be a two-part question, like why choose these pieces and that will lead into the Genesis of the pieces themselves. Why, when we put out the, the ask to you, Hey, we're doing this new initiative, uh, can you choose pieces. And when the obvious you chose no guy, No Word in Guyanese for me and Zola D. You chose this. So, so why, why those pieces,

Zola Dee: Um, you know, it's really interesting. I thought I would write something. I was really inspired when, um, you all first reached out to me and I think you had mentioned just, you know, I was like, well, what, because when someone asks you like to, uh, provide content for something, I'm I, my first brain always just goes, my brain goes blank. And I'm just like, Ugh, like, I don't know, so I was like, what kind of content? And you said a couple of different things, but one thing that stood out was Amanda Gorman and all of us like saw how brilliant she was. And as a poet myself, I was like, that's it, I'm going to write some poetry. Um, and the more I tried to write something, nothing was coming out in the ways that I wanted it to. And it kind of hit me this piece, rain river ocean. And to be completely honest with you, I don't know why it came into my head for this. I haven't revisited this piece since 2017 when I first, uh, put it up. Um, but it kind of hit me. And then when I thought about it, so much of that play, I've been, uh, kind of going through the motions of healings because the play is about healing and this summer with, uh, George Floyd and everything that happened around, uh, the protests, um, and you know, these uprisings for like social justice, I felt that weirdly my healing, um, I've been healing from that moment. So

Gregg T. Daniel: Thank you. Wendy?

Wendy Graf: Gosh, I'm not sure. I think I th I think, um, that I'm, you know, I've always been drawn to subjects of people finding their voice. And, um, and I, you know, as I, as I talked to you about before, um, really in exploring what to me are the evils of fundamental religion, you know, and, and this piece combines, you know, all of those things, it's a journey for her to find her voice. And I found it like, as soon as I read Zola's piece, which so knocked me out, I was like, that's, that's, that's Hannah's problem too. She's, you know, she came as this little girl and she, and that's another thing that I thought was so brilliant about Zola's piece was, you know, that little girls start out and they're so pure and they have their voice, and then they let it either have pieces taken away from them, or they take away the pieces themselves.

Zola Dee: And I loved about your piece because, you know, so funny once I started reading it and I connected so much, even though the, um, Hannah is Muslim, I was like, oh, I was raised like Southern Baptist. So like that same way of thought that same, like religion, it being such a core value of life. I was like, oh, no, I feel this. Because even in the Southern Baptist church, especially the black Southern Baptist church, like, um, like homosexuality is not okay. It's not okay at all. And I remember growing up being like, I don't understand how, because most of my friends growing up too were gay. And I was like, I don't know how my God can

hate these people. There's no way that they're. And I, and I don't understand how a God full of love, um, can hate,

Wendy Graf: Well, there's a line in the play where, where she says, it's not God, you know, God, oh, she says to her first lover, she says, God hates us for this. Or God looks down on, you know, Allah looks down at us on this. And the lover says, not God only, man. You know, but I don't know. It was almost like serendipity or something that your piece and my piece, because I mean, I read your piece that I was like, oh my gosh. You know? And, and I had some really interesting questions that I wanted to ask you about them. Um, and I don't know, maybe I was coming from a standpoint of Hannah, a little Hannah, because the play starts when she's five years old and she's free and she's, you know, she's out in the country and her she's squishing her toes through the red soil. And you know, she's not holding back. She's got, this is who I am, you know? And she does later say to her brothers, I'm still me. I'm st- I'm just who I'm always been. How can you have a different feeling about me now? How can you say I'm evil? I'm just me. But I thought it was kind of interesting. And maybe you'd never intended this, but I thought that there was a tiny little strain running through your piece where you maybe blamed yourself.

Zola Dee: Hmm. Yeah.

Wendy Graf: And I wondered if that could be one of the things that are taken away and that's one of the things that are taken away with people when they learn to blame themselves. And then the next step is to take away those things. Hmm.

Zola Dee: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I think it's interesting because that piece, um, I actually never finished that piece at all. Like, it kind of started off as this thing was like finishing up my last year of undergrad at CalArts. And I was, uh, I knew I had to put something up for the New Works Festival because I made a commitment to it. And I got, uh, it was three sections, rain river ocean. And then, and so I finished the rain section, started on, uh, the river section and didn't really get that far into ocean. Just kind of like wrapped it up. Um, but it's funny because I do take these body parts. I take my mouth, my hair, um, you know, just like all the parts of like woman is all in r-rivers. So like talking about like my vagina and sex and just like coming of age. And so picking apart, what of those moments in my life that I actually, I discarded them or other people kind of put the hatred of that body part onto me. And because at the end of the day, I do feel like it, it does come from other people, like you said, it's like, we're, we're young as a kid. We're just like unbothered by everyone else in the rest of the world. And it isn't until other people or society, they put these ideas onto you that you start thinking that these traits are bad, but it does become a point to where I think like I have to acknowledge, like I perpetuated this self hate in myself, as well.

Gregg T. Daniel: Sure, well you both chose to talk to, uh, women who went somehow trying to reconcile themselves with themselves or as you put it Wendy, to find their voice, uh, whether it's, whether it's sex, sexuality, or gender or religious or racial, they're all trying to find themselves and claim a voice. And it's interesting Zola, because I met you as Dionna Mitch Mitchell Daniel. Correct. So it's interesting you went back to pick up this piece that you wrote four or five years ago,

because you've also gone through a transformation with your name now you're using, which is great. You're using Zola Dee, but is that part of the transformational part of the reclaiming of reconciliation that you might be going through or trying to go through?

Zola Dee: Yeah, I think that, um, the, the pandemic has made me think a lot of who I am and who I want to be moving forward from this point, I feel like there's kind of been this schism. Um, and I've had to look back of all the things in my life that currently were not working anymore. And, um, and I, I did feel like there was kind of this new rebirth, um, and especially in my art where I want to go forward with who I am and giving myself a new name felt affirming to that. And I think though at the, the root though, it's like, you can't move forward until you like heal the things of the past. And again, yeah, I guess you're right. The more that I think about it, having to come back to this piece, um, there is some healing that still needs to be done. And I always do think that healing is a process that is always becoming itself. Like, I don't know if you ever get to a place, you always will have that scar, you know, like the scar is not going to go away, but, um, it's letting that wound close more over time.

Wendy Graf: Well, I was just going to say I'm a little older and I've gone through many variants of healing. And just when you think you're healed, guess what, but that's what that is, you know, for you as an artist, that's what I believe will feed you. And that's what continues to feed you because sometimes you get to this point where you go, I have, I have nothing left to say. I mean, it's like in Sunday in the park with George, I have nothing left to say, there's nothing left to say, um, not anything that hasn't been said before, and then you go through it again and you push through it and then you find you heal again and you find new inspiration. I have one more little question about Zola's piece, which I just love so much, but, um, I also was very taken with the concept of leaving things behind. And I wondered, I wondered if there was purpose in the leaving things behind.

Zola Dee: Yeah. Um, it's funny because to my friends who were viewing that piece, cause it mostly was just a, uh, uh, uh, audience of my peers. They know that I am, uh, notorious for losing, like it's true. I actually really do lose every thing and it's gotten better. Um, but at school I was that person who just left everything in different places. Um, so there was that kind of like inside joke at the time. But I, I, I think, you know, as I was writing it, there is that reclamation that it's not that they were necessarily cast away or thrown out or burned, but the leaving behind it, they can, you can come back to them and you can reclaim them. And, uh, yeah. So I think there was a little bit, but it wasn't until after the fact that I noticed it. Well

Wendy Graf: Also I think, you know, it gives you a feeling of permanence. You know, you leave your, you were leaving a place and clearly it was a place that meant a lot to you, but also seemed to have a lot of questions for you too. Then you were going to maybe go on in your life and ponder them further. So it's like you had to leave your little placemaker. Yeah, I'll be back grandma. And we're going to talk about this further. When I get back. Don't forget about me!

Gregg T. Daniel: Your character is trying to find--reconciled, religion, her religion, her beliefs with who she is with her sexuality. And that's, uh, I mean, the struggle for that is so poignant. It's just so touching when she feels, how could I have been made this way in a very, very sincere and moving way? How could I, how could I be wrong? How could Allah have been wrong and in creating this person that I am? Um,

Wendy Graf: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, on so many levels, you know, the play takes you through her whole, her takes you through her whole life, to her final healing. And she never really reconciles with her family because they just won't accept her. But she, because she comes to a place where she can-- says I'm okay, I'm okay. And I don't dunno, I've done this before. I've, I've actually done this before in other plays where she, where you find a place, there's a place, you know what the girl says, no one should have to feel that God is not there for them. I feel that there's a place in every faith, every religion, every belief system that you can make your own and that you can own and that you can be comfortable with. And if there's people who say, you're not that because you're not this, you know, you're not, you're not a Jew because you don't believe X, Y, Z, you're not a Christian because you don't believe XYZ. You're not a Muslim because how can you be gay and be a Muslim? We don't even have a word in our, in our, um, dialect for you. We have no word for you at all. And I think that a lot of my plays, including this one so strongly is the journey of someone finding who they are, but not, not giving away, not giving away their faith that's and they find a way to reconcile their faith. You know, that's one of the things in the play that she does give away. You know, finally when her parents say, you know, that's it, we don't accept you, you, you renounce this or you're out of our lives. And then she says, how can, how can this religion that has meant so much to me be that way? And I'm not, I'm not interested anymore. And she takes off her hijab. And she spends some time not as, you know, rejecting the religion. And then she ultimately finds a way that she can own her religion, but also own her authenticity as well.

Gregg T. Daniel: And give us the title of the play, please. When you saw everyone--

New Speaker: No Word in Guyanese For Me

Zola Dee: I can't wait to pick up a coffee and read the whole thing now.

Wendy Graf: Oh well I'd love you too. Actually I have, I've actually had, it's probably my most produced play. And, um, yeah. And it was, I think when I wrote it, it was, it was just so strange. It's just like this voice just spoke through me. Um, I can't tell you where it came from. And I remember I saw one of the, one of the productions in Washington, DC, and I saw it sat in the audience and I thought I wrote this, how did I ever write this?

Gregg T. Daniel: Wow. And what was that? What year was that? That it was, cause I know you had a production, then it went all over the place. It's been produced a bunch of times as you was saying, but originally it was written in what year?

Wendy Graf: It was originally in 2011 here in town with Anacostia originated the part and then, um, and then it went on and um, yeah.

Gregg T. Daniel: Yeah. I have a couple of questions. I just wanna grab them from our wonderful audience. Oh, uh, Susie said she missed Gunshot Medley of your play Zola D and she wonder--, is there a video of it that can be viewed?

Zola Dee: I don't know about that. I, um, I can talk to some people at Rogue Machine though and see if there is, but

Gregg T. Daniel: Cause it was started when did it start before I went to Rogue or it was

Zola Dee: Actually it before it went to, so it was a collaboration between Rogue and Collaborative Artists Block, which is the Sean Carey, um, and Kiana Richards, uh, uh, company. And before that though, I had to, I took it as my directing debut, um, to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. That was, that was where it was like, what was that like? Oh, that was insane. It was probably the best experience I've had of my life. And also one of the worst, the worst in terms of just like I've never, you know, perf I was also performing the play, um, as well. So, um, getting up for that whole month, I think we only had two days off. Um, and we performed every single day in the cold, uh, cause it was cold and rainy and Scotland in August, so wow. But it was just so rewarding to be in an international festival of that caliber with so many people from all around the world, people who, you know, there were people from, um, like New Zealand and Australia, like uh, black people from New Zealand, Australia who were like, oh, this story is for me. So for people like all the way on the other side of the world to still feel it and you know, black Brits who like saw the show and, you know, got something out of it, it was amazing.

Gregg T. Daniel: Right. What is your writing process? Both of you, Wendy and Zola. What is your writing process like these days? Has it changed much since 2020, since nothing has really gone up in terms of theatre's being closed, we couldn't physically mount anything. I'm just curious. What has that done to your writing process?

Wendy Graf: I've done nothing. I've done short things. And I also rewrote three of my plays into screenplays, but I swear since the pandemic, every time I've sat down and I feel like, I have this great idea, I'm just blocked. I just can't write anything. It's very scary.

Zola Dee: Yeah. I feel that it's, it's weird for me though. Cause I've been in that, um, before the pandemic, I was always like, oh, I had all of these ideas where like now I actually don't have as many ideas for things. Um, but because for a bit of the pandemic I was furloughed and I didn't have a job. So I had all this time and I was like, I'm going to write, I'm going to write. No writing happened. I actually wrote a play. Um, once I was back at work, but um, wrote this new play, came out of, I won't say it didn't come out of nowhere actually worked, um, in the festival that happened for LA. I wrote this piece called African hyphen American.

Gregg T. Daniel: Both were in the festival, by the way.

Wendy Graf: Yeah. I mean, how long was that? That was



Zola Dee: Like, it was just like a 10 minute play but for that, that piece kicked off something. And I just kept thinking about the ideas from that. So then in December I just like kind of went crazy and wrote a play, which was so nice. But now I don't know if I have anything else in me. Like I think that was the one thing that's going to come out of the pandemic and hopefully something will come soon.

Wendy Graf: Well, it's hard because you know, at first everybody was like, oh, and um, Shakespeare wrote King Lear in the last, you know, pandemic. And, and then, and then they think it was like Dramatist's Guild or something where you like, okay, you're going to write every day for a month and then you're going to get a play out of it. So I'm like, okay, I'll sign up for that. They'll be forcing me, first day, I'm sitting here. I type one sentence. And I'm like, eh.

Zola Dee: yeah. It's like the more that, this also just kind of like drags on. Cause I also, I saw this meme a few days ago and it was like, remember when we all were going to stay home for two weeks and then Coronavirus was going to be over.

Wendy Graf: Can we stay home till, can we do it until April 15th? Alright we will.

Zola Dee: It was like that, that whole thought where like, oh, this was going to be done. But as it kind of like drags on, you know, it really makes me, cause I, I am of that like thought everything happens for a reason. And so I'm really in the space of like, oh, I have to slow down. I have to slow down. I have to, and to just tell myself it's okay not to. Right. I don't have to be Shakespeare in this moment has been really great.

Gregg T. Daniel: Now you were writing before CalArts I mean, before you got into it you took your minor in writing, you were writing.

Zola Dee: Yeah, I, yeah, I, I minored at CalArts before that. Um, when I was like 15, I joined this group called offering action in Winston-Salem North Carolina and they are a, uh, group, uh, or it's a group for teens. Uh, and they specialize in writing, uh, performance, uh, spoken word performances and going around North Carolina and also outside of North Carolina and performing thing pieces that are specifically social justice oriented. Um, so that was kind of like my first foray into writing. Um,

Gregg T. Daniel: And now you're being now you're getting commissions to do writing. Yeah.

Zola Dee: Yeah. But also it's, it's that thing too, where you look back in life and like, Wendy you, when we were talking about like us little kids, like, even though I, I like I can pick apart like, oh, there was offering action though. There's another thing I did with writing. I was also that child on the playground who was making all the kids. Like I remember I wrote this, this movie, this movie about a pizza, um, and it was like an evil pizza and I made all the kids on the playground, like act in my movie that we were going to shoot somewhere and you know, that was the child I was so.

Gregg T. Daniel: No, that's great. Wendy did you have another question for Zola? Or Zola, did you have a question for Wendy?

Zola Dee: No, I just, you know, I didn't have any questions Wendy but I just wrote down all of these thoughts I had, and you've already touched on so much, but I wrote down like family and tradition and religion and healing from religion, which it's so amazing to hear that that is a reoccurring, uh, bit of your, um, work because I too am still grappling with these ideas of healing from religion. And I, when I was looking through your work, it seems like not only, um, just like, uh, Islam, but it seems like there's like healing for religion, um, and different, different religions through your work. Could you talk more on that.

Wendy Graf: Well actually, No Word came out of a play. I wrote a play in, I think it was around 2010 called behind the gates that asks some very, very hard questions about the ultra Orthodox in Israel. And I actually loved doing that play because we had a ton of talkbacks and I mean, people would hunt me down in the streets and they would be so angry at me, you know? Um, and, um,

Zola Dee: Why were they angry?

Wendy Graf: Very, very--cause. Cause I asked these questions, I challenged these questions and they were, uh, they were like, how could you do this? And you know, you're a terrible Jew and, you know, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. And you know, it's funny because, um, I was, I was having a conversation with, um, an artist who was in a production of that play in, um, Florida, oh, 10 years ago. And he said, he said, did you ever hear about the talkbacks? And I said, no. And he said, yes, one night we were there for like two and a half hours and these rabbis were yelling at us. And as you know, and they were telling us, you know, it was terrible what what what we were doing, and we shouldn't ask these questions and it's not true. And I remember actually there was, um, Gregg, you know, we had talked about, um, uh, what killings, killings--honor killings. And there was, there was a, there was a strain of that in that play. And, um, I did a lot of research and it was true, but I had people who wanted to do that play, but they wanted me to change the end because they thought it was so distasteful to their, um, their theater goers. And I said, you know, that's the truth. That's the way it is. You know? And then finally, I just came up with, you know, if you like the painting, you don't ask the artist to change the colors, to match your living room, you know, then don't do the play. What can I tell you? I mean, I get a thrill when, when somebody I've had people hunt me down in the street, saying, how can you do that? But I think if I've evoked that kind of reaction for people, how great is that? What could be possibly better than that?

Gregg T. Daniel: Well, in many ways, theater is a disruptor. I mean, the whole point is not to be complacent, I think in theater. And that doesn't mean you just stage controversial works, but it is to put it is to challenge it is to disrupt. So we've gotten really good at it with any material at any time could be good for it, depending on, you know, what is the time, what does the time dictate, but that's quite a story to track you down in the streets. Wow.

Wendy Graf: I just like to ask the questions. I don't have any answers for anybody. I just want them to go across the street and have a glass of wine and argue it out with each other. You know, they think I'm a, you know, heretic or whatever, you know, great. What, what can I say?

Zola Dee: Yeah. I've been thinking about this recently with a lot of works that have been coming out actually, and, uh, this more from a black lens, but, um, it's something that I find deeply troubling and maybe it's just, you know, going to art school that like you have to ask the questions of the art and take the art for what it is. But I've been noticing, like for instance, the [Judas and the Black Messiah] movie that came out, Soul that came out, I've seen a lot of, um, people commenting on it and they're like, that's not the black experience or this isn't getting too much into blackness that I, and that I feel, I don't feel like this is a good example of blackness. And it's so interesting because what I'm hearing from a lot of these critiques of art is people wanting it to be a certain way, that is not what that artist intended. And we're not looking at the art through that lens. And I just feel, and for me, I love art that is asking you to ask the questions and go home on that car ride and talk about it on the way home, you know, but I'm feeling, you know, people have this, uh, are bringing almost like an anger and the discarding of the art, like, oh, this isn't representing my views. So I want nothing to do with it, almost like this cancel culture. And so I don't know why I brought that up. Um, but

Wendy Graf: You brought that up because that's about people wanting you to take your things away. Yeah.

Zola Dee: Now the young writer for me, it's interesting, just because I feel where my work is going is getting a bit more like, oh, well, now I can say this and I feel more okay to say this thing and this thing, and I'm getting scared. I'm getting a little, I can't say that as a writer, I'm not getting scared, especially in this world of cancel culture now, but it makes me feel great to hear you say these things. Like, I, I don't care. I love asking the questions. Cause it gives me the want to just be like, oh yeah, I'm going to be like Wendy.

Gregg T. Daniel: So every time I've had a writer, I just read a friend whose work. And he was a little hesitant in giving it to me as about a gay world, homosexuality, but it was also about sex. And it was, it's a beautiful piece, but he was so sort of fragile when he gave it to me. And it's always, when they're in that place, that their truth really does exist. It was a beautiful play, but he had some sort of, I don't know if I should do this. I don't want to truly, and he's a very experienced writer, but because he was going in a new direction, maybe even a different form with this work, he was saying, oh, okay, Greg. And I just knew what, this is kind of strange. He seems to be a little timid and giving this a minute. I read it. I'm like, oh my God, I didn't know he could write this. I didn't know he could write this way, but what a wonderful thing to find out, especially in a long career that, he was challenging himself to tell a story in a different way and a different type of story. But that's always what playwrights do that. Don't you think Wendy and Zola when you do that and not, and find yourself, okay, I'm going to give myself permission and license to do this.

Wendy Graf: That's what I, I can't. Oh, that was like with Behind the Gates. Behind the Gates opens with a 25 minute monologue and everyone said, you can't do that. You can't do that. Well, Tony Kushner did it in Homebody/Kabul And they said, no, you can't do it. You can't do it. You know? And I said, well, I'm doing it. You know? And you know, you, of course, when you do these things, you have to be ready for the critics, you know, sorry guys. But there's people out there, you know,

Gregg T. Daniel: You're not writing for the critics, you write it because there was something in your life.

Wendy Graf: You've just, if you're, if it's so authentic to you, you know, you have to know, it's like, you know, maybe you're not going to be nominated for Ovation Award, or maybe you're not going to, you know, have rave reviews across the board. But I mean, God, for me, and in my career, the, the flip side is, so, I mean, being chased down in the street, are you kidding me? You know, that person, that person

Gregg T. Daniel: Conversations you want to have with your audience. I mean, when we did Br'er Cotton at Lower Depth theatre a few years ago, you know, it does end with the execution of a police officer and, uh, other theaters that were going to do the play. This is across the country. We're wondering how we were going to handle it. Are you really going to show in the end, a youth does shoot a police officer and, and we thought, yeah, we're going to do it that way. But again, everyone was so, uh, do you really want to do that? Is that, but what, that's a conversation we wanted to have with our audience. That's what, that's what we wanted to engage with. It's not done capriciously or anything like that as part of the drama, but there were theaters just like waiting in the cut to see, well, what's lower depth going to do with that particular production. It was a rolling premiere. What are they going to do with that production? But you know, what is the conversation you want to engage in with our community, with our society, with our audience. And sometimes those are the ones that are the most difficult to engage in.

Wendy Graf: Yeah. And also after all is said and done, and when you look around your room at all the posters or whatever, you got to feel good about what you did, you know, you gotta say I did something and it was important.

Gregg T. Daniel: Yeah. I got-- Gina said to both of you, which I think is just a wonderful way to sum this up also. It's thank you. This is from Gina S for, for Wendy and Zola. Thank you for your words and raw honesty. When people's responses, let you know your words hit close to home, you know, you are successful. Keep it up. Yeah. Keep it up.

Wendy Graf: Well, thank you, Gina and Gregg, thank you for introducing me to Zola because I'm her biggest fan now.

Gregg T. Daniel: Yeah. I hope you to continue to support each other in the work because the theaters are going to reopen. They are even, uh, Fauci said, you know, Fauci says, it's like he said that maybe this fall, even if it's 2022, it doesn't matter, theatre is

going to exist and it's going to come back. So please support each other support, Lower Depth support, art support it. Cause God, we needed now more than ever. And it was so great. You guys are the inaugural pair of writers in this and, I could not have had more of a frank and candid conversation with each other about your work. Thank you for sharing all that.

Wendy Graf: Oh, thank you for having us. We were honored.

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