

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.

Courtney Oliphant: Hello and welcome to Writers Revealed. What you are about to hear is audio recorded live at a Writers Revealed in April 2021, featuring Paula Cizmar and Kermit Frazier. This episode was moderated by L. Trey Wilson. We hope you enjoy.

L. Trey Wilson: Hi everybody. I'm L. Trey Wilson and I will be moderating this evening. Kicking off the night, we have the lovely Paula Cizmar, a playwright and librettist. She will read Opal's Aria from the short opera INVISIBLE. Paula wrote the libretto and Guang Yang composed the music. Then Paula will read from THE WORD KEEPER, a special piece she wrote specifically for Lower Depth Theatre and Writers Revealed. Then actor and writer Kermit Frazier will read from two touching pieces, both inspired by his mother. One is a non-fiction/memoir piece titled IN THE NEAR-BLINK OF AN EYE. Kermit wrote the piece shortly after a specific moment with his mother. The second is an excerpt from a yet-to-produced play THE YEAR OF RETURN. The 80-year old character Claudia is in early stages of Alzheimer's and is in many significant ways based on Kermit's mother. And with that - let's hear what Paula & Kermit have to say!

Lower Depth The...: The following excerpt is from Paula Cizmar's works, Opal's Aria from INVISIBLE and THE WORD KEEPER. Copyright © 2021 Paula Cizmar

Paula Cizmar: Opal's Aria from INVISIBLE – an opera I wrote with composer Guang Yang.

Paula Cizmar: Overhead Overhead you are watching Watching through the trees but you do nothing. Overhead you peer through the leaves I fall to my knees but you do nothing. What good is it if you are a strawberry moon and the stars are so beautiful? What good is it if such loveliness is overhead yet here on the ground a scream is the sound-- the only one I can make-- and still you do nothing? How can you stars shine so purely and brightly tonight? How can the sky be so perfect? Why isn't the sky trailing blood, raining tears? Why is nature so sweet and the breezes just right And yet I have been broken, the worst of my fears And you do nothing. I watched you, cruel moon, dead stars, in the night skies I watched you glide from one place to another But did you offer comfort? No, you just kept slowing down time And my nightmare was unrelenting I hoped that if I laid there, focused on you, with wide open eyes pleading it would stop, pleading that if someone would not take pity that at least some thing would take pity and

my arms, my hands, my legs, my mouth my breasts, my mind would be returned to me. What good is it if you are a strawberry moon and the stars overhead are so beautiful yet here on the ground a scream is the sound-- The only one I can make-- And still you do nothing? While my body is used against me Again. Again. And again. You overhead! Look at me! Look at my face! How could I suddenly be invisible?

Paula Cizmar:

THE WORD KEEPER The things that were known The things that were unknown The things that were known always and forever The things that might never be known The things that were known by only a few The things that were unknown by the many The things that were known before the Dark Days The things that were unknown until the Dark Days It was not her job to put the things The known The unknown Into categories. It was not her job to sort them To even understand the difference. It was her job only to collect The things that were known The things that were unknown To seek them out To place them in a secret place To make sure that the things were kept safe for anyone who needed to know in the future. She was a Word Keeper. She sought out the things that were known The things that were unknown The things that were known always and forever and the things that were known before the Dark Days and the things that were known by only a few. She sought out the unknown and the might never be known and the unknown until the Dark Days and the unknown by the many And she placed it all in a box. Well, it was not really a box. She placed it all deep inside her mind, which could store anything, known or unknown, Which must store anything, known or unknown, because One day there would be a world that would need the knowledge. One day there would be a world where people no longer lived underground In fear One day there would be a world where people no longer were frightened by the surface of the earth Or at risk of exposure to the sun Or in danger of being in the presence of other people. Supposedly there was once a world like that. People lived on the land And lived beside each other And supposedly there was a blue sky overhead And you could feel the warmth from rays of light And people sought each other out And welcomed each other to be part of a... To be a part of... Was there a word for it? A lost word? Community? Yes. That was the word. She had heard of it. She had not found evidence of it yet. As a Word Keeper it was her job to keep looking.

Kermit Frazier:

In the Near-Blink of an Eye. She sat quietly in the half-light, stone still in an old swivel chair in the bedroom she still referred to as "Sheila's room." Wrapped in a faded blue robe. Gray-White hair pinned up tightly on her head, ever ready to don one of the curly brown wigs she wears at times when she's in public—at or away from home. It was already past seven, which meant she'd probably been up for nearly two hours. And she suddenly looked terribly alone, forlorn, discouraged, almost as though she were ready to be cast away, or put away. For the first time I realized that she was nearly an old woman, despite her spry, open, optimistic self—a true romantic at heart. For the first time she actually looked her age: 72. My mother. She was surrounded by clutter, by the looming shadows of accumulated objects, a background into which, if I wasn't careful, she'd appear to disappear, like a discarded department store mannequin in

some dark, dank storage room. Books and papers and file cabinets and clothes, desks upon desks, single beds trundled up, mountains of memorabilia—a thousand things to which she remained stubbornly attached regardless of the extent of their usefulness to her, or even her full awareness of their presence. She’d most certainly go to her grave still promising to “clear things out,” knowing full well that obsession and generosity and memories of a Depression-era childhood stripped early of her father by dreadful meningitis and ever short on material possessions kept her “illogically” trapped by ream upon endless ream of handy, just-in-case, drastically on sale, impulse-bought . . . Things. She smiled at me, but half-heartedly, without her usual enthusiasm or warmth. It was as if she were saying: “Yes, son. I know. But I don’t care.” Her appearance left me speechless, helpless, and incredibly guilty, as though I’d been grossly neglecting her, had somehow kept her out of sight and mind for years. “I’ve Been sleeping up here lately,” she said. “While He continues to recuperate from his operation. Your dad. I try to get him to go to sleep at a reasonable hour but he won’t . . . Can’t. The bedroom TV’s on past two in the morning. And he has it up so loud, too. Must be his hearing. I fall asleep okay, but eventually it wakes me up. He lies there flat on his back watching ball games or TV shows. He likes that ‘Walker, Texas Ranger’ show so much. And reruns of ‘In the Heat of the Night.’ . . . Before, he’d sit downstairs in his chair watching, remember? Fall asleep down there. Come to bed finally but long after I’d gone to sleep for good. For the night, I mean.” She laughed. A short, high-pitched, somewhat reflexive kind of laugh that is her trademark. A tentative, nervous laugh with a down-turned edge that to this day I think she’s completely oblivious. She gestured to the trundle bed. “It’s Really amazing how comfortable this is,” she said. “I Drop right off to sleep.” The gesture seemed one of consolation, or defense. Her voice dropped off like a withered brown leaf fall-falling from an old oak tree. I should have stepped from the dark hallway then. Gone to her and hugged her sweetly. Knelt by her side and soothed her with reassuring words. But instead, I remained stuck in time and space—stuck in a place from which she had long since left me unaware. A thankless caricature of a prodigal son. It was a moment between us that I’ll never forget. It will haunt my deep love and care for her like a vague itch one can’t ever seem to reach. An unfair, unanticipated moment that will remain even more painful for its unmitigated truthfulness. .

Kermit Frazier: Excerpt from THE YEAR OF RETURN.

Kermit Frazier: CLAUDIA (calling from the dark) Jeffrey. JEFFREY Yes, Mom. CLAUDIA (calling from the dark) Are you there? JEFFREY Yeah, Mom. . . . I’M still here. (Lights Fade out on Jeffrey and come up UL on CLAUDIA HENDERSON, an 80-year-old African American woman wearing a house dress and slippers. She looks out as though looking for her son. But she’s actually looking through a picture window.) CLAUDIA I see. . . . I see them dancing out there across the field, dancing like children in the moonlight. Joyously, happily. Like those I used to teach, always taught, even when I wasn’t in the classroom. When I was not as I am now. It’S a wonder, wandering as they do like that. Nomads. Normally stiff and erect, so solid and sturdy, communing with each other, each to each, for the sake of

order, society's order, orders from society. And yet now, their bodies bending in the breeze of my being like trees with swaying branches. Like the deer that come by sometime. More and more at ease. Encroaching, taking over, taking back the field, the land, the city. (Slight Pause) He doesn't believe me, though. Jeffrey doesn't believe me. About the dancing, prancing poles, the men tickling them with their mountings, their vital work. I can see it in his eyes, in the click of his tongue and the subtle shake of his head. That characteristic shake he's had since like forever. . . . Why do you look out so much, he says? What are you looking for? Come away from the window, he says. Shut the blinds, it's dark out. . . . But I'm not blind, I tell him. I have clear, clean sight still. Insight! A master teacher in my day. Sight inside of sight. Showing them the way. The children. Sight inside of me pushing out to sights across the field, to sights I've seen all my life. Still. . . . Silent. Soft as you go. Don'T touch, though, for now I must go. But no! He won't let me go out anymore. Not alone, that is. Let me go where I could show him what he cannot see, refuses to see. Or even imagine. . . . No. It's not me. I am not the problem. Whispering, heads shaking, fear creeping, pushing through their mouths, their voices. Slowly, though. Softly. Their kind of gentle. That childish, condescending kind of gentle. As though I were two years old instead of . . . Whatever age I am now. . . . Still. Still as the wind when it's not blowing. Still. Never to be let out on her own again. Still! . . . No! . . . It'S not me! . . . I am not me. JEFFREY (calling from the dark) Mom? CLAUDIA (coming out of it) Yes? (Lights Come up on Jeffrey.) JEFFREY Are you okay? CLAUDIA Yes. JEFFREY The telephone poles? CLAUDIA Yes. . . . They dance. JEFFREY Come away from the window. CLAUDIA (to audience) You see?

- L. Trey Wilson: Well, thank you so much, Paula and Kermit, not only for that amazing, those amazing pieces, but your amazing performances of those pieces. Bravo, Brava, amazing. Paula and Kermit. I understand, you know, each other you said, I overheard you say that it's been about a year since you've seen each other. Is that the case?
- Kermit Frazier: We were both commissioned to, we were both commissioned by the Lower Depth Theatre to write a 10 to 15 minute pandemic play last April, right, Paula?
- Paula Cizmar: I think it was, you know, unfortunately it seems like only yesterday, but also 2000 years ago.
- Kermit Frazier: Yeah. Yeah. I think they gave us a couple of weeks to write a play and then we, they performed put, put in 9 or 10 plays on in July, beginning of July.
- Paula Cizmar: Right? So in the various playwriting sessions cocktail parties, if you will, but you know, we were home alone drinks having our own coffee.
- L. Trey Wilson: They were both fantastic. And we already have some come in, some questions coming in, but one thing I want to follow up just on what you just said, what was this past year like for you and how did it express itself or show up in your writing and in your work. And either of you can start, and this is a casual conversation. You can ask each other questions, ask me questions, but just keep asking each

other questions But what was the last year and a half year and a half now almost. Yeah. How's this landed on you?

Paula Cizmar: Well, I'll start. As I said to everybody, when I met them all last year, the other wonderful playwrights and as Yvonne and Jason and Veralyn and Gregg convened us when the first quarantine started, I was somewhat paralyzed by it, you know creatively. I mean it, first of all, I also teach. So I felt that it was really necessary for me to devote most of my energy to keeping it together for that and try to act to my students as if everything was fine. And this was perfectly normal and meeting online was okay. So I spent a lot of energy on that, but it was just, you know, incredibly depressing. So the commission was the first thing that I wrote in months. So and I was really, really deeply grateful that it got me out of a very non-creative spell, but also I would have to say, you know, a depression about what was going on in our world,

Kermit Frazier: Right? Yes. I remember the commission was really wonderful for me too. And ironically three days before the lockdown in New York, which I think was, I think March the 12th that they canceled, that all plays were canceled March. The 11th was, was of 2020 was the last time I've been in a theater to see a play and I see two or three plays a week normally. So that was very depressing for me. But I had just returned from Los Angeles, I think March the 8th, March the 9th, because Gregg Daniel had an informal reading of the play The Year of Return. Then it was the first reading of that play that the play, where the monologue from Claudia comes from, and it's a three character play. And we were all excited about that. And no one in LA, you know, we'd gone to a couple of events and things like that.

Kermit Frazier: And then a couple of people were wearing masks when I flew back from LA to New York, March the 9th, and then two days later, boom, it all stops. So to get that commission was just absolutely wonderful. For me, the thing that was, I, that was sort of lucky is that I had the privilege of being chosen by Paula, Paula Vogel in her Bard at the Gate series of plays to be zoomed. And my play was one of the first place chosen. It was a week after George Floyd that Paula chose my play. And I was fortunate enough then to be featured in the New York times as a result of that in June. So that was that that kept going in an ironic kind of way. And then in the past year I have been, I actually did a silent retreat in January and I was able to write a new full length play doing that silent retreat. And so being in a virtual silent retreat, that really helped me a lot. So that's been, these have been my activities over the past year,

L. Trey Wilson: Virtual silent retreat. That sounds interesting.

Kermit Frazier: It's interesting. Yeah. Yeah. So you're watching everyone else on screen, silently working at a discreet moment in time. And then you pledge over the eight days, my cell phone was turned off radio television for eight straight days. I missed the insurrection because it was January the third through January the 13th. So it was really interesting, but I did manage to write a play. So that was helpful.

L. Trey Wilson: That's amazing. Yeah. One thing that about last year that is very odd for me. And I'm curious if it's the same for you that sometimes I feel like last year went for forever and sometimes I feel like it went by fast because I'm thinking, wait, what happened? Like that was in 2019, but that was over a year ago. So in terms of time are you, have you had that type of experience at all around this at all? Kermit and Paula?

Paula Cizmar: Oh yeah. I mean, I barely know what day it is most of the time. I have, I have my, fortunately my phone tells me what to do. It's just been so disorienting in so many ways and you know, what's really weird is that writers write alone anyway. So it's not like we tend to deal with time out in public except like Kermit, I, I used to go to a lot of plays and you know, it actually, even if I'm going to be, you know, a hermit, I actually do like to see other people because it's just a mental health check-in as well. So to be, you know, essentially forced indoors and forced alone was not the same thing as choosing it. And it just for a while, didn't set well with me, I eventually managed to figure out a routine, but it was originally very, very odd and seemed like everything was both taking forever and also happening in a flash.

Kermit Frazier: Right. Well, one of the things also that I clearly missed because book-ended in a way, is that, you know, as a playwright, I also, you know, I also, Paula writes in different genres. I, I write, I started out as a, as a prose fiction writer. So I've had short stories published and I, and I write essays and nonfiction pieces. And with those, you write alone the way a playwright writes alone and then you send it to whomever, an editor or a reader or whatever, and you go as a playwright, we need, we crave other artists. And that's what I miss more than anything. I mean, that reading at Gregg's on March last year was the last time I was in a room with actors and other theatre folk listening to my work and zoom is fine and you can hear, but that's not the same thing as being in the room and having the vibe and getting the feedback and that sort of thing, which is really, really important for the development of any play at any genre in any, at any stage.

Paula Cizmar: I mean, it's very, very good thing. I became a playwright because I started off as a poet and a journalist and I liked sending things off and then not being bothered.

Paula Cizmar: And then I realized, wait a minute, as a playwright, I get to go to rehearsal and I get to feed off of other people. I'm not like an energy vampire, but yeah, it's, it's been, it's been very interesting working and alone and alone online.

L. Trey Wilson: So you touched on something that came, that followed right into one of the questions from Louisa Cariaga for Paula, she asked you displayed your wonderful talent as a good as I'm sorry, as a poet, in Invisible, do you write other poetry or do you just include it in your plays? So that's for Paula and for Kermit has your mother appeared in any of your other writings? So Paula first and then Kermit.

Paula Cizmar: So the poetry tends to mostly just turn up in other writings in my, in my play writing or now in libretto for opera. But I do occasionally write, write poems that are standalone pieces, but you know, I'm not in the playwright poetry submission mode anymore, so I don't really send them out. So they remain private pieces unless unless I then decide, okay, I'm going to cannibalize one of these things and stick it into, in, through a play because, you know, we writers, we don't like to let things go to waste, right? Yes.

Kermit Frazier: Can you hear me? Yes. Hello?

L. Trey Wilson: Yes, that will do. Okay.

Kermit Frazier: Good. It was frozen just a bit oh, with regard to my mother that's when that when someone asked me in my plays you know, which characters you are, which characters this person, that person. And I always say, first of all, all of the characters are me because they all filtered through my consciousness age or race or whatever. And no, I don't think specifically that my mother has appeared in a play of mine or really any my, my father or my brother and my sister. What's ironic for me is that the piece that I read the nonfiction piece I wrote 25 years ago, I wrote that 25 years ago. And I'm closer to the age that my mother was 25 years ago and well, when I looked upon her as an old woman. So it was really interesting to sort of think ironically, and the reason that she appears in the year of return is that it was about travel to Ghana and about other things.

Kermit Frazier: And my mother had been to west Africa. So her west African journals were very, very important and significant to me and the whole notion. And I lived, we all did lift through her suffering from Alzheimer's and what that was like for her and for us. And I sort of felt privileged to remember and characterize that as she's, as the character of Claudia is going through what she went through. But again, the character is the character. Claudia is not finally my mom, but my mother certainly inspired all the wonderful things that I've been able to find in that character.

Paula Cizmar: You know, I loved both of those pieces because they created this stark reminder to me of the very first time I looked at my mother and thought, oh my God, she's an old woman, you know, and that's an amazing and you know, it's, it's a very interesting moment when you finally look at this parent who you have in your memory, or, you know, in your, you know, even day-to-day dealings and think of them as you know, who they were, maybe when they were in their forties. And then you look up one day and you realize, oh, she is old. And then it just it's, it's starts to make you question your own mortality too. So I was stunned by that. And the, the, the desire of your character that is so strong to maintain that those dancing telephone poles are the, you know, memories of these children that she remembers and all of the visions that she remembers, and that she's not the one who's wrong. It's the rest of us who are, I just thought that is such a beautiful way of looking at this loss of memory that she's suffering.

Kermit Frazier: Yeah. Yeah. And I, and one thing I really found really wonderful about, about your work was the poetic nature of it. And I'm looking forward to, is this, is this a is this a musical, an opera that you're working on? It's your writing?

Paula Cizmar: The first one was, the first one was actually going to be done at West Edge Opera in in Berkeley, in June. It's a short, short opera with a, with a number of other short operas and they're doing it live. So I'm going to go, and it'll be the first time that I will have in a group. I'm, you know, a little nervous about that.

Kermit Frazier: It'll be great.

Paula Cizmar: Usually the only groups I'm with are, you know, my, myself, my husband, and the other mask people at the grocery store. So it'll be...

Kermit Frazier: Terrific. It will be terrific.

L. Trey Wilson: It will, it will be terrific. AA Watson as something that you've kind of already shared this, but I want to ask her questions. She says how much of your writing is based on personal experience?

Kermit Frazier: You know if, if we could only write about what we've actually experienced, we would be limiting ourselves, you know? And so in other words, you know, think of just sort of very bluntly think of the person who murder somebody. And I said, well, you can never deal with that until you've actually physically murdered someone. Then you can really from the gut right about that. I don't, I, I, I, my characters come from all over the place. So I can, I can say sort of interestingly that a lot of Claudia comes from my mother, but I could say almost definitively that most of my characters come from all over the place. I don't feel if I, go ahead.

Paula Cizmar: Oh, I was going to say the thing that really resonated what, what you said earlier was that they're all me, all the characters are me. Yes. That's the thing, they're all me, but I also deeply, deeply, deeply mask these characters so that you can't really figure out exactly. Which is the one that is actually thinking when I'm thinking right now. Sure.

Kermit Frazier: Right. Yeah. You can. And we can be thinking all those things, you know, we have all sorts of things inside of us that we, that, that filter out through all the characters that we, that we're connected to. And it's okay. We're human beings. And these are the things that we feel and we control them. And we, and we've funneled them one point or another. But if we are not willing to open ourselves as writers to all of them, we're limiting the universe in which we write and humanity.

Paula Cizmar: And I would say that I interpret personal experience different than my own personal biography. My feeling is if I have lived through that emotional experience, or if I can empathize deeply with that emotional experience, then I

feel I can write about it. But I really do feel as though, rather than you know, you always hear this old cliché, "Write what you know" well, then I have to question what is know, you know, it's, it's not, you know, just what I've actually personally lived through myself, but it's what I have intuited and what I've observed and what I've heard from other people and what I've emotionally experienced. That's, that's where I feel the authenticity has to come from. It has to come from an authentic reaction and authentic emotional response to something,

Kermit Frazier: Right. And even, even that, which we've had have experienced, there's a difference between experiencing something and writing about it, writing about it means the experience is filtered through your imagination and consciousness. So even the real, whatever that real is, becomes a different kind of reality. When you write about it, when you reimagine it,

L. Trey Wilson: That is so true. And I, I was reading or hearing something recently that even said, even sharing a story changes each time you tell a story, because every time you tell it, you revise it based on how the listener is hearing it and receiving it. And so when you tell it, the next time you incorporate those shifts based on how it was received the time before. So it's always evolving what we're writing, what we're thinking, how we're seeing, and even what we're speaking. It's so fascinating. One thing that you mentioned that about last year that went to piggyback on, in terms of how you were experiencing last year, we had, of course the pandemic happened and then a few months later, or not even a few months later, but the most impactful one, I guess, was George Floyd. We had the incidence of racism. So it's like this double whammy. How did that, how did that magnify or add to the experience you were already having from having this concern around health and a pandemic, and then have this other very present, other virus begin to really express itself in ways that they've always probably been, but we just saw them in such a different way, because we're all settled down from the pandemic to kind of see it and receive it differently. How was that for you and did it shift for you and how?

Paula Cizmar: I think that's a really interesting way of putting it too, because as you know, we were all we're paying attention, maybe more attention than we might normally, because we were all focused on screens. We were watching television, watching, you know, reading things on our cell phones and sharing things on social media and in zoom rooms. So the murder of George Floyd became one of those things where I felt this is going to really shape how we think about the world when this pandemic is over. And I think in fact, it exactly did that. It was extremely tragic, but also extremely important for, you know, many people to go through this and to try to figure out how are we going to fix this? We're all here alone in our rooms, but we still have to fix this.

Kermit Frazier: Yeah. I, you know, a couple of, a couple of plays that I had already written in one way or another have dealt with killings and things like that. And 20 years ago, 20 years ago, I was commissioned to write a play, which became the American American journey about a, it takes place in Milwaukee. So it was commissioned by the Milwaukee Repertory Theater. And it was the first, first play I've written,

only play. I've written co-written with someone else and another writer, Milwaukee writer, and it was about two motorcycle cops killing a young black man in 1957, planting a knife and getting away with it. The coverup for 20 years, the family suing the family had come up from Louisiana and lived in Milwaukee. And the sister was involved in all of that. Three trials, 18 bankers boxes of, of testimony all in Milwaukee with some of the characters still alive. And my partner and I on that play, we thought every time something like this happens, we think this is not new. Look at that play that we wrote that was premiered in 1987. And the, so this whole notion that all we're really finally discovering X, Y, and Z, no, it's not true. And another part of me sort of wanted to sort of curl up and say, what do I write now? Can I write something that's worthy of what is going on? And until I pulled back from that and said, you can't, that is the reality, but you are a writer and you have to do what you do, and you have to let it take you where it has to take you. And that's, that's your goal. That's my goal. And that's, what's important. So that's how it's affected me. I've been catatonic a couple of times, but I've pushed out of that and continue to work.

Paula Cizmar: Yeah. And we keep hearing this thing, you know, we're better than this, or we can do better than this, or this is not who we are. And I think what last year proved to us is this is exactly who we are and we can't, we just can't stay in this state of, of who we are. And, you know, it was all compounded by the fact that we had a completely different person in the white house. So it's it's, you know, it's kind of a relief to be on the other side of that as well. And it's a relief that some certain amount of justice was given in the murder, a verdict of, you know, the man who murdered George Floyd, but it's not enough. And I think that's the whole thing. I generally feel unworthy of writing these stories, but I have to do it anyway. As Kermit says.

L. Trey Wilson: Jacqueline Jones Lamont asked what has this past year taught you about yourself, your work, and maybe the world in which we live?

Kermit Frazier: Huh. Well, you know as a, as, as a writer, as an artist, you have to continue. I mean, you could give up at any time, but you can't and you shouldn't. And you have to say what it is that you want to say. I mean, because there was all kinds of pressures of write about this, write about that, write about whatever. And, and you have to stick to your own sense of how you see the world, because we all, we're always taking chances, whatever, no matter whatever happens in the world, it's always a chance that the story you want to tell and who will be interested in it and who will listen to it and who will not listen to it, or will it ever be produced. And those sorts of things are constant and the world is, can be an awful place and also an exhilarating place. And you have to live in it and with it and continue in it and with it, and just keep working, keep writing. But what Paula and I want now is more theater.

Paula Cizmar: They need to open. I mean, I am really, really thrilled with a lot of the advances and new, interesting technology that's been developed. So that zoom theater looks a little more like it's a live event, but we know we really want to be in the room. So yeah, I mean, I guess what I learned about myself last year, but I

already knew this is that if I don't push every day, I can be very, very, very lazy and go withdraw. And so last year absolutely forced me to not do that, even though I really wanted to, most of the time

L. Trey Wilson: Yvonne Lee asks, what story is sitting on the shelf that you have avoided to tell up to this point? Any stories that are up there on the shelves there, Paula or Kermit?

Kermit Frazier: Well, I just, when I wrote my new play in January, that was a story that I've been a bit reluctant to tell sort of fearful of whatever. And it in fact, engulfs this year in a sense that in the play people do eventually put on masks. So it's, it's, it's a play that happens at, at the, just before the pandemic starts. So the pandemic is a part of the play itself. And I would have been a little been kind of reluctant to deal with this because it's in a lot of ways, deeply personal, but in some ways the pandemic and the isolation allowed me to go deeper into myself and say, yes, this is a story that I can still, that I can tell. And so in that sense, I'm grateful for that. So that's where I am now with regard to that, and the play

Paula Cizmar: Tossing around the idea of wanting to try to get at the heart of what makes people hate. But I have to say, honestly, every time I tried to go in and figure out who these people are or what this story is, I draw back from it because it's, I have to remember that I have to live in this world with these people. And I want to not glorify them. You know, I want to glorify them or romanticize them in any way I would like to understand them. But every time I try to do that, I realize this, that this question of hate is terrifying and is upsetting. And I don't know how to do it without, you know, you have to humanize your characters. So I don't know how to humanize them without also romanticizing them. And that's the big dilemma.

L. Trey Wilson: Got it. Perfectly understandable. One thing that you mentioned Kermit, that I wanted to touch on, because I've done this without it being a retreat, but that is taken news and media fast. So I'm curious, what was it like for you take those 10 days and then reemerge and see all the things that happened for those 10 days that you were not present for what was going on and what was it just in general to kind of be removed from just the whole noise of the world and Paula, you've done the same thing. I'm, I'm curious too, what's that like for you

Kermit Frazier: It was really very satisfying. I recognized that I could hear myself in a different sort of way after getting out of the habit of looking at my cellphone, the number of times I looked at my cell phone and of course didn't realize there was nothing to see because it was off that I recognized how much I looked at my cell phone to check whatever I did. Losing myself from that gave me so much space, gave me so much space to sort of think, and also sort of to recognize that, that your thoughts, whatever they are, are valuable and important, and that you can mine them and use them. And you can find so much to self about the world by doing that. I really just really appreciated that being being in that kind of silence, I would not do it forever. I was glad to have been able to come out of it, but it is, I think it's worth doing, it's worth doing you know, of course, a lot of their people

there amongst and people who do this for a living, I could not do that for a living, but it certainly did open up some things for me, which I find really important, I did a silent retreat also in 2019 at a ranch in Texas. So we, we, we were playwrights who also remained silent, but we had our own individual cabins and we saw each other, we just didn't speak to each other. So this notion this time of being virtual and being in isolation was just an added sort of thing to sort of intensify it. So it was important to me. And again, as I said, I got something out of it. I wrote something and that was in fact important also to me.

Paula Cizmar: I've never, ever done a silent retreat like that. I went to a couple of playwrights retreats where you're silent during, you know, from nine to five during the day. Right. You can speak at dinner time.

Kermit Frazier: Right at a, at an artist's colony or something like that.

Paula Cizmar: Exactly. But yeah, I, I would really like to unplug from social media and from the news for awhile. Last year when we had a different president, I didn't feel as if I could this year, I think, okay. Now that we have, you know a president who is refreshingly boring I'll be able to do it.

L. Trey Wilson: Got it, got it. Gosh, the time has gone by so fast, but one of the thing that I'm curious about is what's something that, from all the things that you've done in the number of years that you've been writing, what's something that you would say to someone who is interested in writing or haven't really started and wants to, but just hasn't begun. What's the, any type of insight or perspective or thoughts that to encourage them or support them, or have them kind of start the process. What would you suggest Paula, I'll start with you this time first.

Paula Cizmar: Well I teach and so everybody my students always want there to be a magic magic formula. And unfortunately this is it. You just have to sit down and start doing it. I do a lot of reading. And so I think going to plays, reading plays, reading really good essays reading really, really wonderful fiction is a great warmup. Ultimately, you just have to sit there, even if it's just with a journal and start putting your thoughts on paper and you can take a class, you can do writing exercises, but really it's just, you know, if you have the burning desire to do this, you simply sit down and do it and you don't worry about the form or whether you're doing it right or wrong. You just do it because you can fix anything. You can't fix the blank page, but you can fix something that's on a page.

Kermit Frazier: Yeah. I one of, one of the things that James Baldwin said, you know, one of the quotes that, that, that I appreciate is, and people always say, you know, I have all this talent and I want to write, I think I'm really talented doing X, Y, and Z involvements. You know, talent is talent is cheap. There's all sorts of wasted, ruined talent all over. And what's important to a writer is not the talent per se, but the diligence and the endurance. And of course, it's Baldwin so he also said the love, all of those things are very important. And that's, that would be my, my advice that, yes, okay, you've got talent, you don't have talent, but you have to

endure, you have to decide that you're going to do this, despite all. That is important to you. And that you're going to sit down, even when you can't, even when it doesn't the writing doesn't come and wait for that, those moments to come because that's, then what you do. That's what makes a writer, not the idea of being a writer or the fact that someone tells you how much, how talented you are, but the actual doing of it. That's the labor and that's the work. And that's the hard part as Paula knows and also the exhilarating part. So it all comes in one package. That's what would be the advice that I would give someone.

Paula Cizmar: And what I've come to understand is we have to give ourselves -- ourselves permission to write badly. Yes, because that is really, really important because if we sit there with our inner editor on, we will never write anything. Right. We write one sentence every 10 days. So you have to give yourself permission to just express something. I, I, it's kind of gross, but I call it the vomit and retreat method where I vomit something onto the page and then put it back, we'll get it. And we'll fix it. If it feels as if you're writing something that is just so dumb and expository, just put it on the piece of paper because we have to give ourselves permission. And I think, you know, we tend to, you know, we want to have written the great masterpiece, but we have to start by just wandering through this, you know, world of words first, no matter how they come out.

L. Trey Wilson: Right. Absolutely. Thank you for both. Those are great comments and those are great recommendations and suggestions. Well, thank you both. I wish you both all the best and thank you so much for not only your incredible work but your incredible reading and this incredible conversation. I could continue talking to you for hours. But thank you so much. Thank you to Paula Cizmar and Kermit Frazier for a lovely and insightful conversation and for sharing your pieces with us.

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