



THE BIG

WHAT
NOW

BY **GARY GARRISON**

WITH

VICTORIA Z. DALY,

CHARLES GERSHMAN,

GARRETT KIM,

ELIJAH SHAHEEN,

KYLE SMITH,

SHAMAR WHITE,

AND **JANE WILLIS**



GARY GARRISON: We thought because this is the Reality Check issue, we should speak to a group of writers that are all in various stages of studying dramatic writing, either formally or informally. There must be common questions, worries, doubts, fears and advice that you're seeking. I've taught playwriting at NYU for 30 years in the Tisch School, and before that at the University of Michigan for five years. So I may not have all the answers, but I may have something to offer the discussion that might help you through to the next stage of your writing.

I'd like to start by you introducing yourselves and where you've studied or are studying dramatic writing.

GARRETT KIM: I'm studying right now at Fordham University in their BA program. I've also done a lot of work with First Stage Children's Theater in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

KYLE SMITH: I graduated with a BFA from Adelphi University in Theater with a minor in Writing. I am now at NYU where I am in my first year of getting an MFA for Dramatic Writing.

VICTORIA Z. DALY: I spent many years studying playwriting at HB Studio in New York. I've done workshops at the Actor's Studio and the Kennedy Center Summer Playwriting Intensive. In my own writer's group in New York City, the 9th Floor, we've arranged a lot of ongoing education where we bring in wonderful playwrights to work with us. I have a degree in physical theater from L'Ecole Jacques Lecoq in Paris, and now I'm in my second year of my MFA at NYU/Tisch.

SHAMAR WHITE: I studied theater in undergrad. I was a Theater Performance major. After graduation I was kind of lost. I knew I wanted to write but didn't have the confidence. Then 9/11 happened, and I joined the Army. I guess the Army was my the-

ater for a while. Fast forward ten years, now I'm in grad school at NYU/Tisch studying Playwriting, Screenwriting and Television writing.

JANE WILLIS: I graduated from NYU/Tisch many years ago with a BFA—actually, concentration on Film, but moved into playwriting after that, then took a hiatus from playwriting, graduated from Bank Street College of Education to go back and work with kids and writing creatively. And now recently, I've been taking playwriting classes at The Barrow Group.

CHARLES GERSHMAN: I have taken classes at the Einhorn School for the Performing Arts (ESPA) at Primary Stages. It's a terrific place and there's all sorts of dramatic writing forms that are taught by great people.

I also I did a Master's, an MA in Theatre at Hunter College and was able to do a year of the MFA classes with Tina Howe and Mark Bly there. And more recently I've studied with Rogelio Martinez in private workshops, and Beth Lincks a.k.a. Arlene Hutton at The Barrow Group.

ELIJAH SHAHEEN: I am currently getting a BA in the Screenwriting/Playwriting program at SUNY Purchase College, and about five years ago I had one of my plays professionally produced in Ossining, NY.

GARY GARRISON: You all come from these really interesting, diverse backgrounds, both as people, but then also as students of writing. I'm curious to



VICTORIA Z. DALY



CHARLES GERSHMAN



GARRETT KIM



ELIJAH SHAHEEN



KYLE SMITH



SHAMAR WHITE



JANE WILLIS

know, what is your nagging worry as a student of writing -- whether that's currently something you're worried about right now, or something you went into your education with and that you've carried all the way through and remains unanswered or unaddressed.

JANE WILLIS: My question is: when is my play ready to bring into class to actually have people read it and to be ready for feedback? I always have to check where my insecurity level is with that.

And now that I'm kind of back into being able to write full-time, I find that I have to sit with a piece. It's just part of my process. I have to kind of sweat it out through a first draft that I'm feeling okay about it—and it's not even a first draft. Sometimes it's a third draft, before I'm okay about bringing it in and being able to—because our work is so vulnerable at that point—being ready to field comments. And I have to say, Beth Lincks' class at Barrow Group is very supportive during the process; maybe you've had the same experiences.

That's one of my many burning questions today. How do we know when we can stop sitting by ourselves and bring it in and be open to feedback, which is how our work grows, right?

GARY GARRISON: Though that is a really interesting question, what's even more interesting to me is what's behind your question—which leads me to think: what do you expect out of a reading? What is your hope? Your great fear? Are you afraid that it's going to fall flat, that it's not the play you thought it was going to be? Or that it's not written well? Or is your great fear that *other people* will think it's not written well?

In order to answer these kinds of questions, I think you have to get really clear with, "What do I want out of any reading, at any stage in the process?" Of course, our very first reading is always the most tender and demands that you ask of yourself clearly—what do I need to know from this reading—because that points you in all the directions ahead of you. I've said this before: go into any reading with three things that you really want

to know about what you're hearing, and make sure when you get feedback, those three things are addressed.

GARRETT KIM: Yeah, whenever I feel like I'm not ready to bring something in or I feel self-conscious about what I've written, I often find that I'm not being as generous with myself as I would be in a writer's workshop. I think a lot of times with my own work, I'm like, "Oh, man—no, this isn't right, this isn't right." Whereas if someone else brought in a scene of similar, in process level, I would be like, "It's fine. These are the amazing parts of it," you know?

Something I've realized being in writer's workshop, is how I look at someone else's work in progress, and how I look at my own. So a huge thing that I've been doing this past year [*Laughter*] has been, like, "Okay, so the way I treat someone else's work, the generosity that I have—I'm allowed to do that with my own work." But it's, like, not—[*Laughter*] it's not easy.

GARY GARRISON: We will never treat another writer how we treat ourselves because if we did, we wouldn't have any friends. [*Laughter*] That's the truth. You would never say to another writer what you will say to yourself. Or you will never treat another writer the way you will treat yourself. It's just too unkind. And we do that to ourselves time and time again. I'm tempted to say we beat ourselves up before anyone else has a chance to. At least that feels sadly familiar.

VICTORIA Z. DALY: I don't know the setup in Beth's class, but what we do at the 9th Floor is the playwrights ask the questions, so the playwrights have the opportunity to shape the feedback. If there's something that they don't want to hear, they don't have to. If they only want to hear actors read the pages, or just talk about what people are following or what they're leaning into, they can do that.

So, this is piggybacking on what Gary's saying; it sounds like you feel uncomfortable about how people are going to respond and whether they'll say negative things. But if you're the one who's

allowed to ask for what you want from them—

JANE WILLIS: Right.

VICTORIA Z. DALY: —you can also shape that, so you will hear what’s really useful to you.

JANE WILLIS: That makes sense. I think my fear is that I change my mind constantly. I am so suggestible, and I might walk in with a scene that’s maybe not quite there in my heart, and then somebody will make a suggestion and I’m like, “Oh, yeah!” And then I’ll go home and I’ll work on that, but it’s actually not what I had in mind, and then someone else will say something else.

So for me, choice making is hugely challenging. That’s why I need to sit until I have a draft, and then I’m ready for the kind of questions that you’re talking about, which I think are absolutely helpful.

CHARLES GERSHMAN: I totally relate to the things you’re saying. I’ve studied with a number of different people, and everybody has a different style. And so one of the tricky parts of being a student, I think, has been realizing the format and the atmosphere in the room and learning how to use it for the best, you know? Learning how to best use it for your own growth and the development of your play.

One of the most challenging moments has been when I’ve been with somebody who was a bit prescriptive, like anti-Liz Lerman, more like, “I actually think you should do this.” And usually their ideas are far more brilliant than anything I’m thinking at the time, but I can’t just let myself do that. I have to really sit with it and come to that point of view and fully see it—or on the flipside, argue with them—or argue with them in my own head but not say anything.

As I’ve gotten older, one thing I’ve tried to work on is listening to myself and asking questions, and sort of steering the conversation as much as I need to.

GARY GARRISON: What often happens in a room when public responses are being given is that we often jump about: “Oh, that’s a good idea” or, “Oh, I didn’t see that” or, “Oh, that’s such a bril-

“The world of commercial theater, and even some bigger nonprofit theaters, is pretty fickle and unpredictable. But when you take the work into your own hands, find that community to work with, you have the power to make a life for yourself.”

—Lisa D’Amour



liant idea.” Yes, it’s great to get intelligent responses. But whatever you hear, it should lead you back to one primary question: what am I writing about and is that reflected in this scene or act? Anyone can argue the strengths or weakness of a given character, scene, act, moment. But no one can talk you out of *why* you’re writing *what* you’re writing. No one should be able to seriously challenge you on why you’re writing a particular story because if you allow them to, and doubt yourself, maybe you don’t know as clearly as you should what you’re writing about.

SHAMAR WHITE: Are these scenes or plays that you’re hearing out loud? Does the feedback come from people who are just reading it? Because sometimes when you hear it, that helps you see, “Oh, this is what I want to write about, but that’s not what I’m hearing.” I had this class with Gary that really helped me hear my play—what was there, and what wasn’t. It took me out of my own head. That did wonders for me.

JANE WILLIS: Yes, people come in and read.

SHAMAR WHITE: Okay.

JANE WILLIS: We writers read around the table, or we have actors come in and read.

SHAMAR WHITE: Okay, so you do get to hear it.

JANE WILLIS: Yes.

KYLE SMITH: Before I go into first readings, I have somebody I trust—an editor or another playwrighting friend—read through it. And I feel like once

you have that first central idea articulated, you can show it to someone else that you trust and ask them if they see it in your work. If they do, I think bringing it in becomes a little bit easier.

GARRETT KIM: Yeah, whenever feedback can be almost objective, from the things that have been written down on the page, like, “What are you getting from it?” I find that’s when feedback is most illuminating for me. Listening to other people interpret something that is not ready to be interpreted is mind-blowingly frustrating.

And like what you said, when feedback becomes prescriptive, I’ve experienced that too, where feedback became about how other people wanted to do what I was doing. It gets challenging to find the pearls of wisdom. How you can take the kind of nasty, prescriptive comments and turn them into, like, “Okay, they’re coming from this point of interest, and that’s reading as this. I can take something away from that, even if I don’t write the scene [*Laughter*] as they want me to.”

GARY GARRISON: I’m curious to know—and if you could all be specific about this—do you know the difference between instruction and destruction? You’re all in learning environments, and we empower people who teach us in ways that are healthy and then sometimes, not so much. So how much do you empower those that teach you? Do you know what’s helpful to you? Do you know what’s not helpful to you? And are you ever surprised in the classroom by either of those, or anything like that?

ELIJAH SHAHEEN: I think this has to do with who you trust for feedback about your work. I think instruction includes good, clear opinions about what your piece of work might be about and what would help make your ideas work more effectively. And obviously, destruction, is the kind of person that says something like, “Oh, no, no. This is blahhh-hhh! Terrible! It would’ve been more interesting if it was more ambiguous!” That’s actually something someone said to me when I was presenting a reading. When someone is just giving blatant personal judgments, then that’s not constructive criticism.

I think it is best to listen most carefully to those people that you trust, who know you and know your work...people who support you and are also willing to be honest with you.

And I feel like it also depends on the type of story you’re trying to tell. Say you have a story about—like you said, a son becoming a man. If there is a certain part in the story that someone says they feel should be left out, but you know in your heart it’s supposed to be there to help move the story along, you can’t take it out, and you shouldn’t let anyone alter your vision.

GARY GARRISON: I don’t know if this will address this for you, but when we create our plays, we’re actually the only God in that universe at that particular point. So you need to take your position in heaven about it. Which I know sounds odd, but what I mean—

SHAMAR WHITE: I’ve never thought about it that way.

GARY GARRISON: You get to decide everything in the universe. Everything. It gets tricky, because our tools are human behavior, and human behavior is a fairly well-charted area of study. If you’re smart about *who* you’re writing and *what* you’re writing, you can say, “In my world, she is gonna behave this particular way, and this is why.” But that implies that you have to take ownership of the world you’ve created and be able and willing to defend it (in a manner of speaking) if necessary.

GARRETT KIM: Going off “instruction versus destruction,” the first thing I thought of comparing those two is how, I feel like I’ve been in situations where a teacher has been very hands on and has been very hands off.

One feels like they’re intentionally instructing you, feeding things into you, and then the other one—which, sometimes I appreciate more, actually, when I feel like I know what I’m doing is like, they kinda take a back seat, they let you suss it out in class. They’ll be there if you need them, but they’re more just like maintaining the room and

allowing discussions and stuff to happen, which sometimes is more helpful than someone telling you how to write a play. Like, I don't know think I've ever been told by a professor, "This is how a play gets written. It needs to have all of these things. If it's not, then it's not a play."

KYLE SMITH: Going back to the question of how much do I empower those that teach me—I do empower them a decent amount, but only under specific circumstances.

Specifically, I empower those who are intelligent note-givers and talented writers. Those are the people I give more agency in my rewrites. I do feel like I have the choice, and if I really do love something, I will not kill it, no matter what happens. If I make this choice that I think is really powerful and I feel really passionately about, no matter what note I get from a teacher, a friend, an editor, I will not kill that choice. I will fight tooth and nail to keep it in there.

GARY GARRISON: What I admire about that position, and what I wish I could convince my students of, is you can do anything in the world of your plays as long as there is thoughtful reasoning behind it. It's when dramatists respond with, "I don't know why I did that," that people can take a big pool stick and poke a hole in it. To be able to say, "No, this is the reason why I made this choice, and this is what I'm trying to do. It may not be fully successful at this point, but this is what I intend," is an incredibly powerful place to be in the process.

VICTORIA Z. DALY: I think being able to distinguish between instruction and destruction is a skill you acquire—or at least I try to—just like learning the craft of playwriting. How to parse feedback's a skill, just like learning about dramatic structure, conflict, character building—all those other things that are always drilled into us.

I don't give my instructors the kind of God-like status, perhaps, that I used to, or take it all at face value. I try to decide whether it's useful to me.

Listening to you, Kyle, talk about whether you were going to destroy something, I have to say,

I had one professor last year, to his credit, who believed in a play I had no belief in, [*Laughter*] and who kept telling me that he really thought it was going to be great. I rewrote it this semester, and I felt so much better about it. So that's happened, too. It's not just about people destroying your work, it's also about listening to the ones who are championing you, which I really appreciated.

GARRETT KIM: Or who push you to do something outside your comfort zone. I've had professors who've told me to write the scary thing, the ambitious thing, instead of taking an easy way out, which I think is so wonderful.

CHARLES GERSHMAN: I absolutely agree with you. Sometimes I feel like the most effective, or most instructive and least destructive approach from a teacher is to simply nurture and make you feel confident. There are particular people I've worked with who made me feel that way, and I just, I cranked out a first draft really fast because I wasn't questioning or doubting myself.

Of course, later, when I read the draft, I saw all the problems and rewrote it—rewrote it, rewrote it—but those people are sometimes miracle workers, I think.

SHAMAR WHITE: I kind of disagree. [*Laughter*] For me—and this might stem from my background in the Army—I kind of like to be broken down.

I mean, I like nurturing too, of course, but I need to be challenged. I want honest constructive feedback. That's why I came to grad school. It doesn't always have to be a pat on the back, it just has to be helpful to my process. I feel most empowered when a teacher reads or watches my work, and even though it's a hot mess, they get what I'm trying to do, what I'm trying to say. From there, we're able to workshop it, which I think empowers them in return. And I've seen it in classes, where some students have been broken down and they get very defensive, they take it personally—which I get, because writing is personal but for me, in that instance, it just pushes me more.

GARY GARRISON: Whether you're talking to teachers, directors, dramaturgs or producers, I think what is more important is for you to say in some form or fashion, "For me, this is how I like to work. This is what I respond to—and by the way, this is what I don't respond to." No one knows better than you how you like to work in any process, and it's probably one of the more essential tools of collaboration that you're able to communicate that to other people.

JANE WILLIS: I think effective instruction, and what I've found in teachers that have had an impact in me on my work, is: what kinds of tools am I being given in class? When I'm sitting by myself in front of the computer screen, what's coming back to me that's helping me to move along in my play? So I think effective instruction is kind of handing that off, and there have been a number of tools offered up in Beth's class that I've found extremely helpful. For example, I learned how to ask a question without couching it in an opinion. [Laughter] Which is like learning how to exercise a whole new muscle, because I'm so opinionated—of my work, of everybody's work. Using the father/son scenario that you brought up before, Gary: If we ask only the questions, we might ask: Why is Dad late for his son's birth? Why isn't Dad there when his child is born? What was he doing? What kept him from being there? Those questions would be truly helpful to me if it were my play.

And there's also language that goes along with it phrases such as what's the inciting event? What's the conflict? What does s/he want? Without the language of play craft, how can we help another writer develop his/her play? So again, these are tools that can keep us moving along when we're sitting alone at the computer screen.

GARY GARRISON: As a way of introduction to this area of discussion: you're all in school, or around a school, certainly, and there will be a time in your near future where that will no longer be the case. So, there's a moment where you will be set free of this very regimented environment that shelters and protects us somewhat. What, then, would you like

to know?

CHARLES GERSHMAN: I have a husband in North Carolina now, so that's why I'm asking this—what are the pros and cons of being an emerging writer, not living in New York City, if such a thing is possible?

SHAMAR WHITE: That was one of my questions, too.

GARY GARRISON: My answer now is different than my answer would've been even five or ten years ago. Because we are in the age of electronic media, anything is possible, and you don't have to be in New York City at all. You have to have internet access and you have to be tech-savvy—you really do. When I hear someone say, "I don't know Twitter, I hate Facebook, I don't want to Skype..." my first thought is, well, that's silly. You need to know all of those things and know them well. Ignorance of technology is not an option. Why? Because you want to be able to live anywhere in this world without feeling disconnected to your career. So, yes, you have to know how to Skype (for example). I mean, you can have a *dramaturgical* Skype meeting and you can watch *rehearsals* on Skype. The ramifications of that are huge.

Is it easier if you live in a metropolitan city? I guess you could argue that, maybe. I'm not convinced of it, though. I mean, we have Guild members in every far corner of this country and the world. Some writers are amazingly connected; others sadly position themselves with, "I'm too old or too tech-phobic to learn these tools."

SHAMAR WHITE: How would you get your footing in another place? NYC is where I'm building my career. This is my community right now, but I'm from Chicago where I'd love to have my plays produced. I know it's a great theater scene, but still, I don't know the theater community there. So I'm not sure how to get established. I don't know where to start.

GARY GARRISON: Right now, anywhere in the country, you can walk in the door of any theater

and say, “Hi, my name is (fill in the blank), I’m a playwright. What can I do to help you?” Every theater in this country needs help—large or small—everybody’s looking for a volunteer of some sort. They depend on them, right? So it’s easy enough for you to walk in the door and say, “This is who I am. I’d like to get to know more about who you are.”

I know we all have limited time. But we want something from these theatres—a production, their attention, to be considered for a writing group, etc. And instead of walking in with our hand out in that “what can you do for me” posture, maybe a more productive approach might be to walk in and say, “I want to get to know you, and I want you to get to know me. And the easiest way for that to happen is if I help you out. Can I work in your box office? Can I work in your theater? Can I be a reader for you?”

JOEY STOCKS: I’m going to interject here. I agree with Gary and—if you’re a Dramatists Guild member and you are not living in New York City—we have 30 regional reps located all across the country. Find your nearest regional rep and take them for coffee. Connect. They are all volunteers, so ask *them* if they need help. It’s all about networking, which is exactly what Gary is saying. Connecting with the DG reps might help you connect with other local playwrights and general theatre community more quickly than if you were just on your own. It’s a valuable resource you should explore.

JANE WILLIS: I couldn’t wait to come today to listen and to learn. I had a reading at the Barrow Group that I initiated and I was lucky I found a wonderful director, and she brought with her this incredible comedic cast. My staged reading was in November. Now I’m wondering, “What next?” [Laughter]

GARY GARRISON: Just as a point of clarification—what’s next in terms of what do you now that you’ve had a successful reading?

JANE WILLIS: With that experience—yes.

GARY GARRISON: I guess my first question is, what do you want to be when you grow up? And I don’t mean that flippantly. Your thinking might be, “I wanna be a working playwright, and I want my plays produced all over the country” or, “I want my plays produced in the Northeast” or, “I want my plays produced in New York” or, “I want my plays produced at the Barrow Group” or—whatever that is—you need to figure out what you want in the bigger scheme of things, and then let it resonate down to a few smart choices.

If I’d had a really successful reading, maybe what I’d want to do—for example—is to do a rewrite based on that reading, get a finished draft of the play that feels complete and that I’m really content with. Once that’s accomplished, maybe I need a residency in a development organization like The O’Neill to take the play to the next level of development. So, I apply to The O’Neill with this draft, and if I get accepted, I take all that I’ve learned about the play with me and work on it with another group of professionals that will elevate the work even more. And that’s what I did with that initial reading.

I’m curious: now that you had this successful reading, are you feeling overwhelmed with what you learned?

JANE WILLIS: No. Just—curious. We put a lot of energy into it, and it was really fun. Our purpose was to play with it, and there was great energy around it. So now I feel like I’ve reached a certain place with it where I’m sort of detaching a little bit because I’m working on a new piece now, but there was a certain amount of momentum and enthusiasm around and among us who worked on it. So that’s—

GARY GARRISON: I think I misunderstood your question. Is the question what do you want to do with that play, now, or what do you want to do with that experience of the reading?

JANE WILLIS: I guess what to do with the play, or where to go next with it.

GARY GARRISON: Ah, got it—got it, got it, got it. Sorry, I misunderstood your question.

JANE WILLIS: No, that's okay. What you said before was really helpful.

GARY GARRISON: One of the very first things you want to do is look around the country at who's doing the kind of play that you've written because that might suggest who's interested in your material. If it's a broad comedy, say, with five women—I can tell you 100 theaters right now that are going to be interested in that play. You do your research, you figure out who's doing the kind of work that you're writing and you look at the theatre as a means of sharing your stories. What's the best fit? Just because a theatre does new, original work doesn't mean it's the right theatre for you. What's the mission of the theatre? What kind of work do they typically do? What kind of work do you typically do? Is that some sort of match?

JANE WILLIS: Usually comedy writing. It just felt good to see people laugh.

GARY GARRISON: Right. So you target where to send your play by doing your research. Do you know that you can go right onto the Dramatists Guild website and key in comedies for women and it'll generate a whole list of theatres for you to consider? Or Google "playwriting contests comedies." Couldn't be more simple.

KYLE SMITH: Another good resource is the Play Submissions Helper, which has—you can subscribe to it, and it'll give you this big list of theaters that take submissions, and you can look into each—

JANE WILLIS: I've seen it.

KYLE SMITH: Yeah, and you can look into each individual theater and go from there based on all of those criteria that Gary was talking about, like all women cast, or mostly comedies. They have things for specifically women playwrights. It's just a big list of theaters that take open submissions.

GARRETT KIM: I also have just creeped on playwright bios. Like, I've just looked into where

they have worked—like, people who I admire and people who I think my work is like, I've just looked at where they've gone, where they've had their plays produced, and I've just [Laughter] creeped into what those opportunities are like.

Yeah, because no one is gonna come in and be like, "Here you go! Here are the five places to submit this play!" [Laughter] You have to, like—it's like the treasure hunt of finding them. You have to do it yourself.

CHARLES GERSHMAN: It's so funny, it's like—you know, when you're starting out, the doors feel like they're bolted shut, and then I feel like at some point, there is this demystification that happens, and you realize, "Oh, it's not impossible to do," but it just takes time and putting yourself out there.

GARY GARRISON: Part of your responsibility as a dramatist—and I know it's drudgery, but it's part of the contract of being a playwright—is to do the research to find out what theaters are doing your kind of work and to get to know them by both reading and seeing what they're doing. It would be the same if you had written historical drama. Who's doing historical dramas? I'm sure somebody is. Who's doing nonlinear drama? Who's doing musicals? Who's doing ten-minute plays? Target your research smartly.

KYLE SMITH: I have a question. I've noticed playwrights receive criticism for writing outside of their own experience, whether that be sexual orientation, gender, or race. Should I write these stories outside of my own scope of knowledge, or leave them to those who have lived that life?

ELIJAH SHAHEEN: Well, I know that there are a lot of people who've come from a particular experience or background that might say, "Well, no, you can't do that because you haven't lived this." I think that if you do a lot of studying and research and you get a really clear knowledge and understanding of who these people are and what the issues are that they are facing, then I think it should be fine.

I mean, George and Ira Gershwin basically made an entire musical about African Americans in the South when they were these two Jewish white guys from Brooklyn writing a musical.

GARRETT KIM: I think you have to. Like, I think that's part of what we do as writers is to go into other people. It's like the same thing—like, I started off, I feel like, as a lot of people do, with acting, and part of the reason that I loved that is that I could step into someone else's shoes for a little bit. I didn't have to be myself, I could experience and empathize and understand other people, and I feel like it's the exact same thing, as a writer.

Now, there is, obviously, the ethical question of, "Should this get produced?" and maybe the answer is not always yes, but I think if you—like, I feel like I'm gonna write such boring plays if I only wrote to my own experience. *[Laughter]* Like, I don't want twenty plays about myself! That's horrible, that sounds awful—that sounds like a nightmare! *[Laughter]*

SHAMAR WHITE: What draws you to write about another experience? You know, whatever that is, that's what you should stick to and then go with it. Don't worry about the outside, what other people think, just find what draws you to it. I wrote something recently and I was terrified, because it wasn't my world, but I loved the characters and I wanted to write about their unexpected relationship; that's what drew me in. So maybe their backgrounds were not mine, but that was kind of the point. I still told the story I wanted to tell.

CHARLES GERSHMAN: I'm dealing with this, too, because I'm writing characters who are very far from my own experience, and I'm terrified that someone's gonna want to murder me because I have misrepresented somebody. So—I don't know. I feel like we can research, maybe, and we can be as sensitive as we're capable of being, but I'm still scared.

GARY GARRISON: I know you've all heard the old adage—"Write what you know." I'm a big proponent, though, of writing what you don't know

because writing what you don't know means that you'll have to step into a world that you don't understand, you'll have to do your research and you're going to have to be really smart about the choices you make. You know, you will never be an African American, Kyle. You're a young, Caucasian man. But that doesn't mean that you can't or shouldn't write an African-American woman or a man. But it does mean that you have to write—as Charlie said—with thought, observation, sensitivity and research.

GARRETT KIM: Yeah, I think—I feel like there's so often, like, the fear and worry of offending people completely censures what we do sometimes. And I'm so glad that there is a, we live in a time where things like sexuality, things like race, things like gender—all those things can be on the table and discussed. And part of the thing that me and my friends have talked about is, until you put it onto the table and until you kind of mess up, it's hard to know.

It's like, if you write a perfect play every time in a playwriting class, you're not gonna learn how to become a stronger writer. If you write about *[Laughter]*—like, if you write only plays about yourself, you're never gonna learn anything else about the world. And so, like, sometimes—I'm sure I'm going to write a play at some point where I didn't get it right and where it's not, it does not accurately represent someone. But I think that conversation is so important. Then, at least, we can talk about why it wasn't right and how it could more accurately reflect someone's experience.

GARY GARRISON: By the way, you can write your own culture, ethnicity, race – what have you – and not get it "right" or honest.

GARRETT KIM: Yeah.

SHAMAR WHITE: I was gonna say that, too.

GARY GARRISON: You can not get it right writing your own family—easily. So this is always kind of a non-argument or a non-discussion to me because it's partly our political correctness that leads us

into this discussion.

ELIJAH SHAHEEN: I have a question. So, say you've made a name for yourself as a writer, and you decide to take on an issue or tackle a topic that's very controversial and that could cause some arguments. Some people are very happy about it and love it, and a lot of other people are very angry with you.

During, say, press interviews or discussions—what would you, as a dramatist yourself, say or do to try to avoid confrontation? Or is confrontation necessary as an important part of the discussion or debate?

GARY GARRISON: If you're writing into controversy, the potential for some sort of conflict is always there. But that certainly shouldn't keep you from writing what you want to write. What it does, though, is beg you to answer the question that we addressed earlier—why did you write this play?

There was a young man I taught this year who was writing about a group of people in the world called bug chasers. Bug chasers are people who purposely seek out HIV to be infected. This subject is so crazy controversial, as I'm sure you can imagine, and he was frightened to write it. And I kept saying, "Why are you frightened to write it?" And when he said, "I don't know why," I then pressed with, "Why are you writing it?" to which he responded, "Because I'm fascinated with something I so completely don't understand." Well, there it is, right? Just take it on and own that and understand that at its core, it's going to be controversial. I think writers are sometimes frightened away from subjects because of the "you are what you write" perception. That's simply not true. And I think we get into trouble when we tack on the responsibility of being all-knowing, all understanding about a particular subject.

JANE WILLIS: I think it's a big job enough to be responsible for our own work and be true to ourselves and to be curious. That's a big job: to be willing to write it out and ride it out and to share it.

I can't write with any sense of freedom if I am feeling responsible for other peoples' reactions to my work, because they're going to bring their own experience to it anyway. If we do our jobs as playwrights and tell our stories the best way we can, if our work gets a reaction causing hearts to beat and blood to flow, then good job. Maybe our job is to write as truthfully and passionately as we can. I know that's why I go to the theater. I want to be shaken up. People go for various reasons, but when I see something that makes me look at the world differently and moves me emotionally, then it was a night well spent.

GARRETT KIM: Yeah, I almost love when I see things I don't like more than when I do like, because then I can ask myself, "Why don't I like that? Why did that get me upset?" I feel like it's the same thing as being willing to write something you don't know and fail. You learn more, almost, from the negative than from the positive.

GARY GARRISON: That said, I just want to be real clear about something, since this is the Reality Check issue—there are a lot of people who are adverse to controversy and that includes theater producers and artistic directors. Just recognize that there are some people that will shy away from controversy because they can't or don't want to introduce that into their community. And even if they aren't adverse to controversy, they have a Board of Directors that are. And we can't really fault them for that. They know their communities far better than we do.

I've heard writers get really upset when somebody says, "We can't or won't do a play about X or Y." But I think we have to reasonably understand that theater is a business and that nobody wants their doors shuttered.

SHAMAR WHITE: Speaking of the reality, and if you do have something controversial, or you have something you're really passionate about, how realistic is it to try to put that up yourself?

GARY GARRISON: Self-produce?

SHAMAR WHITE: Yeah. I don't really hear about self-producing. Is that something we should consider? Especially, if you're getting ready to graduate, and you're submitting to different fellowships and maybe not getting into those fellowships, and you're kinda sitting around. Do you just do it yourself?

GARY GARRISON: I don't think there's a blanket answer for this, but I will tell you, were it me, I would. I'm not waiting for anybody.

SHAMAR WHITE: You would do it?

GARY GARRISON: I would. In a heartbeat.

GARRETT KIM: I don't think you should wait.

GARY GARRISON: I mean, whatever gets me down the hill fastest. So if that means self-producing is part of that equation, fine. There are a lot of people who don't like the thought of it—never mind the expense of it, the organizational aspects of it, the headache of it, the heartache of it—the very thought of self producing is not appealing to them.

CHARLES GERSHMAN: I'm self producing a play soon, and some part of me really resists the idea of it, and then I'm like, "Okay, Young Jean Lee self produces. Richard Maxwell self produces. What is a good reason not to do what they did?"

SHAMAR WHITE: Money? Is that the only reason people don't—I mean, mostly?

GARY GARRISON: Well, I think we want to be chosen. We want somebody else to validate us, right? And more power to you if you can hang out and wait for that to happen.

SHAMAR WHITE: *[Laughter]* Wow. That's why I'm thinking about doing it.

GARY GARRISON: I have self-produced many times. And I would do it again. Because what's more important to me? That I wait until somebody says, "I love your work," or that an audience hear my stories? Isn't that why I'm a writer anyway, so folks can hear the stories I tell?

VICTORIA Z. DALY: Well, there's also the financial risk—that's no small thing. To scare you off, you know?

JANE WILLIS: Can you speak more about that, Vicki?

VICTORIA Z. DALY: If you're going to self-produce, then part of producing is getting the financing. Whether it's your own money or somebody else's money, you're suddenly responsible. When you're chosen by a producer or a theater that produces, they're also taking on the financial risk. In self-production you're master of your own ship, but that ship needs to be funded. Where is the funding going to come from? It's not just the organizational aspect.

KYLE SMITH: On this topic, how do we feel about Fringe Festival and other festivals like that, where you're bringing your show and you self produce it, but they give you the venue and the time slots? I'm wondering, is that a good route to be going, at this point in my career, at least? Gary? *[Laughter]*

GARY GARRISON: Be mindful—they can be great experiences, but look at everything around it and make sure it is the right thing for you to be doing. And what I'm referring to, specifically, is make sure that you're not giving away something that you don't intend to give away—in sub-rights, in future participation by the Fringe Festival.

And you'll also want to know what are your assurances? You're going to all this effort to participate in a festival (money, time, energy, casting, rehearsing), and what are the assurances that you or they will get somebody or anybody there to see it? Admittedly, it's a festival so there are people that take the ride and so you are assured a little bit of a built-in audience.

But here's the most solid piece of advice I can give you: if you're going to work in a festival, make sure that you talk to at least three, four, or five people who have been part of that festival to ask, "How was your experience?" Because I would want to know what their experiences were so my expect-

tations are managed. That way, I'm not blindsided by the fact that I do all that work and then there's two people sitting in the audience, or I'm in an un-air conditioned space with people sweating down their backs, or that I've given away a five-year financial participation to my play or musical.

KYLE SMITH: And there are cheap spaces that you can rent out, so might as well just go do it yourself.

GARRETT KIM: This is something that I've been wondering as I've been looking at applying for grants, or to groups, or to residencies is—how do you talk about your work in a way that is appealing to someone who is on the other side of the table? [Laughter] Because I write about it how I know how to write about my work, and I'm not always convinced that I'm doing the best job communicating what it is that is on the other side of that ten-page sample.

GARY GARRISON: One of the things I ask when I start teaching class anywhere is, "What is your strength as a writer? What is your weakness?"

And inevitably, somebody will say, "Oh, my weakness is dramatic conflict" or, "My weakness is story" or, "My weakness is character." And so the first thing I would say to you, Garret, is when you start talking about your work, talk to your strengths [Laughter] and stay away from your weaknesses.

For example, if somebody says to you, "What's your new play about?" and you know that you're lousy on story, talk about the characters. Because that's what you do well. You might say, "I'm writing a story about a woman in the turn of the century who is"—. If you're lousy with story, your description is often all over the place. When you're in that kind of position to actually talk about your play, there comes a whole pocketful of responsibilities, and one of them is you have to sound like you know what you're talking about. If you're the authority on your play, you have to sound like the authority.

Writers are notoriously inarticulate when it comes to talking about their work. [Laughter] Seriously. And if words are your trade and you're wildly

inarticulate—think about that—that sounds bad. If words are supposed to be the thing that you do the best and somebody says, "What are you working on?" and you're like, "Uh, uh"—and you choke on that question.

Screenwriters have this down pat. They know their pitch. They know and rehearse their pitch. Seriously! They have it down. They write it out, they commit it to memory, and they're ready to let it spill out when somebody asks. I don't know why dramatists don't do that.

CHARLES GERSHMAN: Somehow the idea of giving a verbal synopsis doesn't do justice to the work. My synopsis is never gonna be as good as my play, so why should I say anything? Of course, saying nothing is not gonna do any good, either.

GARY GARRISON: Enthusiasm, excitement, positivity is very contagious. If I'm excited when describing my play, maybe you (the listener) will be excited. I guarantee you, if you're not excited, you can't expect me to get excited.

JANE WILLIS: So, Gary, should a synopsis include the story or the narrative, or should it talk about themes? What kind would you like to read?

GARY GARRISON: Charlie is quite right. You'll never write a synopsis as good as the play. It's just not possible.

JANE WILLIS: What kind would you like to read?

GARY GARRISON: I want something that excites me to want to read it.

JANE WILLIS: So, would the story, "These two people meet, and"—

GARY GARRISON: I think it's partly about character and partly about story, but you're never going to write a story more interesting than the people that are in it. So a synopsis of any play of mine is always going to be heavy in the discussion of character.

JANE WILLIS: Right.

GARY GARRISON: Stories are finite in their detail, and people are infinitely complicated and com-

plex. So you can talk to me about people all day long.

JANE WILLIS: You like to read about people?

GARY GARRISON: I do.

GARRETT KIM: Well, I guess, like, that's where conflict is. You can't see a play where nothing happens. So I want to know enough—I guess I'd want to know enough that I'd pay the \$15.00, \$20.00, \$40.00 to go see it. *[Laughter]*

GARY GARRISON: What world are you living in, sir? *[Laughter]*

GARRETT KIM: Student discounts. *[Laughter]*

VICTORIA Z. DALY: I like to set up a synopsis with a question; either a real question or an implied question. Set up what the major conflict is, something about the time and place, the inciting incident, and a kind of a cliffhanger question to hopefully get people to want to know what the rest of the journey is going to be.

JANE WILLIS: Be curious to want to read it.

CHARLES GERSHMAN: One thing that made me feel better about all this is having a couple of opportunities to be on the other side of the table, reading scripts for some theaters. And then you start to see right away—and I wasn't reading synopses, but when you read a script, I mean, and you're reading a huge volume of them, you start to see what's exciting and why it's exciting. And I feel like just being on the other side of it was pretty instructive.

JANE WILLIS: You could have it validated.

CHARLES GERSHMAN: But you can do stuff like that.

GARY GARRISON: Look, there's no set formula for it. Keep it short. Nobody wants to read a synopsis that is pages long. Keep it a page or under. Make sure the dramatic conflict is evident in the details. Make sure there is some detail about the characters, particularly the central character. And then address, in whatever way you think is interesting, why would an audience want to see it.

One last question: if you could change anything in the landscape of the American theater, as it relates to you as a student of writing, what might that be?

GARRETT KIM: I would change that it takes so long for a writer to get taken seriously. There seems to be a notion where you can't be right out of a school, and you can't be young and have compelling, interesting ideas. It seems like it takes a while for people to warm up to whatever it is you're saying, rather than people just saying yes and jumping on board.

CHARLES GERSHMAN: I would say every American high school student should have the chance to try writing a play. I wish that I had been introduced to playwriting when I was much younger than I was, and it was obviously, probably for all of us, life changing—so you can imagine what would happen.

JANE WILLIS: That our government would fund the arts, and fund them abundantly, via lottery, etc. in the way that other countries fund their arts. Support and funding are an ongoing struggle for the arts here.

ELIJAH SHAHEEN: I wish that the world of theater and the world of movies were more connected, and that the modern day moviegoer could develop a greater appreciation for stage plays and musicals. I feel today, that the world of theater and the world of cinema have split apart, and I'd like to see more plays and musicals adapted into film and appreciated by film audiences.

SHAMAR WHITE: I would like to see theater be more affordable for all people, and I really would love to see a change in the audience so, when I go, I see a variety of people in the audience, not just one type.

GARY GARRISON: Can you—can you talk a little bit more about that?

SHAMAR WHITE: When I've gone to the theater here in New York City, and in Chicago—mostly everywhere I go—usually the audience consists of older white people. And I always look around,

out of curiosity, to see who's there. I get excited when I see a young person or a black people. But I realize going to NYU, living in New York City, I'm exposed to the theater, and I agree with Jane and Charles, it's about funding and trying to plant the seed of interest early on in our schools—instead of cutting programs.

GARRETT KIM: Can I say another one?

GARY GARRISON: Well, yeah. *[Laughter]*

GARRETT KIM: I'm very worried about stepping out and being seen as one type of a writer, or that I'm going to—like we were talking about before, that I'm going to write about one type of experience. Being a person of color, being a gay person, that I will be expected to write about that experience as if that is all I have the authority to write about.

SHAMAR WHITE: I feel that way, too. I've written some military pieces, and I'm like, "Man, I don't want people to just think that I write about the Army."

And then I forced myself to write something completely different, because I want people to know that I do other stuff. But then, thinking about the audience, I'm like, "Oh, well, who would actually see this? Maybe I should be writing something for this particular audience so that they feel something." So there's that.

GARY GARRISON: I grew up in Texas. And for most of my life, I didn't write about being southern or Texan because I thought it was easy. I thought only southerners could appreciate what I had to say.

The truth of the matter is a lot of my honesty and my truth resides in the fact that I am southern and gay. A lot of my life story is there. A lot of my truth, reality, my experiences reside in those two things. And though I stayed away from it from years, I'm now embracing it because I have things to say that I now understand transcends those two things.

GARRETT KIM: And I feel like I do have things to say about my own experience, but I would rather

that not be my introduction. I would like to be able to control the way that I get introduced to people, and I don't always know if that's the case.

VICTORIA Z. DALY: I think what you want to be as a playwright is what's embedded in your work. So you get to choose what you write about. This year, at NYU, I've written two plays that are wildly different in tone and style. And that surprised me: "Oh, I can do that. It doesn't necessarily have to stay in this box that I do"—highly physical theater, for example, which I do a lot, and I like to do, but I also wrote another play very different from that. So I think it's about where your stories compel you to go.

SHAMAR WHITE: Sometimes, though, people do put you in a box. Maybe that's not what you want, but especially for minorities, it happens. You write something people love and then, all of a sudden, you feel that pressure to keep writing the same thing, and everybody thinks your story represents all black people or women, etc.

GARY GARRISON: Not only do people want to put you into a box, they want you to come out of it as well. It's like a forever-conflict in both directions.

SHAMAR WHITE: *[Laughter]* It's true.

GARY GARRISON: Kyle?

KYLE SMITH: I would just like it to be easier to keep my work safe from sketchy opportunities and harmful theater companies that are predatory and out to exploit me—

SHAMAR WHITE: Amen.

GARY GARRISON: Well, the Dramatists Guild is here to help you always, and any time you have a question about any situation, you can always call us—always. That's what we're here for.

VICTORIA Z. DALY: And I'm still concerned about access. I mean, yes, I know we have all the information on the Dramatists Guild website, and lots of other, different places to go to find out about opportunities and do research. But it can still feel overwhelming. There are some people I know who

send out hundreds of submissions a year. I wish there were an easier way to do this. Because the beauty of the Internet is that you can submit your stuff way more easily now, but it also means that theaters are getting absolutely inundated with submissions. So it's easier to send out, but it's harder to actually get a production.

GARY GARRISON: Playwrights have a tendency to be hosed in terms of, you know, we just want somebody to do our work. It really doesn't matter who—just somebody.

VICTORIA Z. DALY: Yeah.

GARY GARRISON: So we cast the net wide in hopes that somebody will pull us in, right? Instead of indiscriminately throwing your work out there, find theaters that you really want to focus on, and understand why you want to focus on them. What does their work mean to you? And then, court them—"I love your work, because it's political, it's theatrical, it has movement in it, you often, you produce a lot of stories about women." I think a lot of theaters get upset with writers because too often they're indiscriminate with their submissions; over half of their submissions in any one year don't pay attention to what that theater's looking for.

VICTORIA Z. DALY: To their mission, yeah.

GARY GARRISON: Yeah! So that's what feels indiscriminate to them, and it's bad for everybody. Thank you, guys, so, so much. We can continue this conversation at some point, if you'd like. 📧

VICTORIA Z. DALY's plays have been developed at Actors Studio and produced at ATHE Conference, Gi60 Festival (NYC/UK,) Warner International Playwrights Festival, Berrie Center, Spokane's KPBX-FM, Edinburgh Festival, and elsewhere. She is founder of NYC's 9th Floor writers' collaborative. Education: A.B., M.B.A., Harvard; Certificat d'Etudes, L'Ecole Jacques Lecoq; current MFA candidate, NYU/Tisch. www.victoriazdaly.com.

CHARLES GERSHMAN's plays have been developed and produced around New York City and around the U.S. His work often bridges the absurd and the realistic, capturing extreme situations in the everyday. He is indebted to Tina Howe, Arlene Hutton, and Rogelio Martinez for their mentorship. www.charlesgershman.com

GARRETT DAVID KIM's plays include The Great American Novel Project, The Buck, and Pilot's Wings. He will be graduating from Fordham University in May with a BA in Playwriting. He's proud to work at the 52nd Street Project as their Program Director.

ELIJAH SHAHEEN is nineteen years old and currently working on his BA in screenwriting and playwriting at SUNY Purchase College. His play The Movie Story was successfully produced at the Blueberry Pond theater in Ossening. Other writing endeavors include his award-winning short films Princess Issues and Mute. Elijah is very honored to be a member of the Dramatists Guild.

KYLE SMITH is a playwright originally from Orinda, California. He is currently attending NYU for his MFA in Dramatic Writing. His plays include Blinded, The Part of Me, Inherit the Earth, Revolution, Frisky, and Squashy. His plays have been produced at The Treehouse, The Robert Moss, and Shetler Studios.

SHAMAR WHITE's plays include Battles and The Virgin, which were both winners and received readings at the NYU/Tisch Dramatic Writing Ten-Minute Script Festival. Originally from Chicago, IL, and a combat Veteran, she is currently in the M.F.A. Dramatic Writing Program at NYU/Tisch. Member, Dramatist Guild of America.

JANE WILLIS' plays include: What She Wished For (directed by Melissa Skirboll) staged reading, November 2015, at The Barrow Group, Slam! and Men Without Dates, (Ensemble Studio Theater's Marathon of One Acts.) Slam!: anthologized in Ramon Delgado's Best Short Plays of 1986. The It Girl, screenplay, (Martin Poll Productions/HBO), and outline/scriptwriter As The World Turns.