

Good morning. I'm Kimberly Senior and feel incredibly honored to be here, speaking with you this morning, sharing some thoughts that have been bubbling around in my head for quite some time. I hope I have the opportunity to talk to each of you today and I hope even more that this talk is a springboard for an exciting dialogue that extends beyond the conference.

First I would like to thank the Association for Jewish Theatre for arranging this conference and in particular to David Chack for his extraordinary perseverance and organizational skills in assembling us all.

I'd also like to thank the New Jewish Theatre and the JCC for their generous hospitality.

And a thank you to all of you for being here- it's not easy to make this time!- for battling traffic, child care, schedules, day jobs, night jobs, to place this conversation at a premium. What a tremendous gift to yourselves, to each other, and to the American theatre. We get so busy doing the thing we don't often get to reflect on it.

As the topic of this conference is "redefining jewish theater in an age of multiculturalism" I am going to address, among many things, the ideas of race and representation in our contemporary American theater- quite simply asking and revisiting the question: Who has the right to tell what story?

I'm almost 100% positive that I will say contradictory things that will hopefully ignite conversation to last over the course of the conference. I am one representative. I picked this question because it is one that I am still wrestling with from production to production, and day to day. I don't think I have a singular point of view but in the act of preparing these remarks, in the act of re-telling them to you, in the act of creating a meaningful and safe forum for expression and dialogue I am attempting to solve that for myself. And for our community. Just like the act of making theater.

Have you read Anne Carson's magnificent Euripides' adaptations? In the introduction, she states this:

"Why does tragedy exist? Because you are full of rage. Why are you full

of rage? Because you are full of grief. Ask a headhunter why he cuts off human heads. He'll say that rage impels him and rage is born of grief. The act of severing and tossing away the victim's head enables him to throw away the anger of all his bereavements. Perhaps you think this does not apply to you. Yet you recall the day your wife, driving you to your mother's funeral, turned left instead of right at the intersection and you had to scream at her so loud other drivers turned to look. When you tore off her head and threw it out the window they nodded, changed gears, drove away.

Grief and rage- you need to contain that, to put a frame around it, where it can play itself out without you or your kin having to die. There is a theory that watching unbearable stories about other people lost in grief and rage is good for you- may cleanse you of your darkness. Do you want to go down to the pits of yourself all alone? Not much. What if an actor could do it for you? Isn't that why they are called actors? They act for you. You sacrifice them to action. And this sacrifice is a mode of deepest intimacy of you with your own life. Within it you watch [yourself] act out the present or possible organization of your nature. You can be aware of your own awareness of this nature as you never are at the moment of experience. The actor, by reiterating you, sacrifices a moment of his own life in order to give you a story of yours."

Fantastic. And it gets at the heart of something ultimately very important. The actor as representative, as this vessel filled with our longing and despair, our steadfast and mercurial natures, our dreams, our fears, our hopes, and our love. They aren't *us*, they are sacrificing themselves to portray *us*. So how close does one's personal experience need to be to the heart of the narrative in order to tell it? Isn't it one's heart, mind, and soul from which we need the investment?

I directed a production of Wendy Kesselman's *The Diary of Anne Frank* last year at the much esteemed Writers Theatre in Glencoe, IL where I am a resident director. It was performed in their bookstore space, a very intimate 60 seat house where the scenic designer and I placed the audience inside the annex with its residents. Attempting to create an empathic experience for the audience, rather than one held at a proscenium distance, was premium for me. Floor plans and details were adhered to as much as possible. I cast a 13 year old girl as Anne,

knowing that her essence was of the utmost importance rather than her actor's toolbox. And of the beautiful 14 person ensemble that inhabited that play, only one actor was Jewish. The woman who played Miep. Our non Jewish helpmate.

People in the very Jewish community of Glencoe were up in arms! How could I do *Anne Frank* without Jews?! My point of view was even if I had cast all of the Jewish characters with Jews none of them would have actually survived the Holocaust so all of our range of experience was therefore the same. Nor are all Jews the same- we do not have a singular monolithic experience. That thinking is actually at the root of a dangerous problem. Reducing a people to a singular thing makes it easy for us to dismiss them. Furthermore, we don't hire serial killers to portray serial killers. It is our job as storytellers to find our way into the hearts of these stories, attempting to heal the trauma at the center of the story.

The play ran for 6 months with wonderful critical and audience acclaim. Just because one might have been descended from Jews who maybe survived the Holocaust doesn't give them the immediate access to enact that story. Many people credited my Jewish heritage with my ability to empath the play—however, I'm Sephardic. All my ancestors were either in Syria or the States during the Holocaust.

This Anne Frank experience reminded me very much of a conversation I had had a few years prior. Every few months or so I get together with a dear friend and colleague. He is a director of tremendous renown- both with artists and critics, institutions and audiences. He is as warm as he is determined; as fiercely intelligent as he is empathic. And he is also black. I was going to try to get through introducing him and telling this story without noting that, but it becomes essential. When he and I talk we discuss our projects, swap stories and complaints, and dream big together. One year we were very hot on the topic of being handed plays that "looked" like us- he has directed, quite successfully I might add, one production after another of August Wilson's remarkable canon. I was getting really tired of being asked to direct plays about being female, boys, and why boys don't always like our femaleness. He spoke eloquently of wanting to direct Pinter and Coward and Beckett. I

chimed in: Yes! I have a *A Raisin in the Sun* burning inside of me. The conversation stopped. It was like all the air left the room.

Oh, you'll never do that.

Why? Why am I allowed to direct plays about Irish people when I have not one Irish bone in my body and have only spent three days total in Ireland? I have lived next to Cabrini Green for years, I come from a ghettoized people, my Syrian relatives live in gentrified Brooklyn, I'm a daughter, a mother, wrestling with my present, navigating the past and present!

We wrestled this for a while. Because race was something to be seen? Wouldn't my cast be black and able to unearth what is deeply metabolic which I don't understand and would never pretend to? After back and forth for some time on this topic, I finally relented when he presented the argument that I would be taking a job away from a black director. This is something I didn't want to do.

Which leads me to this question of nomenclature. Why do we say "black" director, "female" director- why do we name it? Because to be black or female or both and be a director was almost unheard of for so very long. Think about it. We only put "male" in front of very few professions—male nurse, male teacher, and male stripper.

Naming things gives identity, right? But what drives that desire to name? I believe it is to place something "the other", to separate it from oneself and in so doing the namer becomes the higher status person in that situation. This idea really became clarified for me when I read Ta-Nehisi Coates wonderful book, *Between the World and Me*. I'm giving you so much homework... Anne Carson, this (pointing to Leonard Cohen.) This book... he has this wonderful quote...I would just sit here and read from the entire book. It really changed my thinking. It's not good or bad. Can we just change the way we are thinking about things? Here is a quote from that book which says it better than I can.

"Hate gives identity. The nigger, the fag, the bitch illuminate the border, illuminate what we ostensibly are not, illuminate the Dream of being white, of being a Man. We name the hated strangers and are thus

confirmed in the tribe.”

There’s a sense of belonging that happens there.

If we stopped using these names and went back to the idea of just, you know, being *human*, maybe our stories would be better, more inclusive and more challenging. It is a range of perspectives that drives us to be our very best. Sometimes it is our distance from a thing that gives us our best lens through which to tell the story. So I’m going to talk a little bit about my relationship with Ayad Akhtar and our very remarkable collaboration. So, since 2011 we have worked side by side, literally attached to one another, for four productions of *Disgraced* and two of *The Who and The What* and I went on to direct three other productions of *Disgraced* and two more in front of me. Really I’m done. OK. I ... I’m not. Which is crazy. Ayad and I, we meet in a lot of places—especially when it comes to aesthetic and values. We believe in a language that drives action. We believe in a theater that borrows deeply deeply deeply from our traditional roots. He and I, we can talk for hours, about Greek theater and Shakespeare and you see that evidence in the work. But that the work also has to advance and expand our language and the way we see theater. We traffic in the high and the low brow. Neither one of us is afraid to make a dick joke and refer to Emile Zola in the same sentence. We love to roll around in the places where we meet but most exciting is when we attempt to cross the great chasm where we differ. Tall/short. He’s got a solid foot on me. Male/female. One of our favorite. Our gender argument is rich. Muslim/Jewish. There is nothing assumed between us. Because of that, we must be vigilant about being clear since our backgrounds differ- although we both have very, um, *dynamic* fathers. For those of you familiar with *The Who and the Wha* , the character of Afzal is equally based on both of our dads. We ask better questions because nothing is assumed. So if you’re sticking me in a room with a female playwright, I might ask less questions. I’m gonna assume, oh she’s a woman so there’s assumptions. But when you’re with someone different than you, you have to make sure you’re clarifying all the time. There’s a danger in that, like with like. When we stay within our groups, we ask fewer questions.

If you think about it, what playwrights do is what I am asking for permission for directors and actors, for other storytellers—male

playwrights write female voices, black playwrights write white characters, and so on. This empathy should be implied. I'm sorry—not implied. Implied isn't strong enough. It is a responsibility of being artists. This is the privilege of being a storyteller. Is to be able to see a perspective outside of our own.

This refers me to an event that occurred at a post show talkback during the very first workshop of Ayad's *The Who and The What* which we did at La Jolla Playhouse. The play concerns Zarina, a devout Muslim, who writes a book about the Prophet. Her book is an interpretation of the Prophet's life and reveals the possibility that he is as fallible as we are. An Imam expressed vehement opposition to the content. This wonderful guy, he was in the audience, there was a great discussion afterwards. Ayad and I attempted to talk to to him, to expose Zarina's motives to him and I tried to speak from a Humanist perspective and Ayad spoke from a Muslim perspective and this Imam, he looked at us and said "I understand what you are doing, as a Muslim, I get it. I am concerned about what (he points to the white woman next to him) *she* thinks." The woman laughed: "You have no idea what I'm thinking!" and this conversation emerges where explore the complexities that she experienced. I began to see how much this question extends to the audience. This really exciting moment where we have been asking "how do we engage our audiences more? How do we create an authentic dialogue with them?" And to suddenly see them begin to talk to each other about what each of them had *assumed* the other was thinking was so thrilling! And the play had brought that up- We had had eight hours of rehearsal and one reading of the first draft of this play and that night the artistic director (Christopher Ashley) immediately wanted to know our next steps for the play were- and that was because of the quality of that discussion- it was like the holy grail of what we are trying to get people to do, is to break that down. And so, is it possible to create work that is as diverse as the audience we seek? And are we able to create authentic dialogue?

We need to give our audience more credit. They want to dive in. They want to break down their assumptions. None of us go to the theater to be confirmed. I don't show up to be told exactly what I am thinking, parrot it back to me so that I can leave here feeling confident about who I am. We show up to be transformed. So that's *our* job. That's *our*

responsibility to do that for them.

There is a national conversation currently surrounding our other collaboration, *Disgraced*. I know you've had a production here as well. *Disgraced* is the most produced play in the country this year with something like 30 productions all over the country. It tickles me to no end to think about this conversation happening all over the place, weaving its way into the public consciousness. I have my google alert on it, "oh it just opened in Florida! Oh, it's running in Pittsburgh right now!" This conversation is becoming part of the cultural consciousness so thrilling to me. Ayad is only the 2<sup>nd</sup> person of color to win the Pulitzer Prize and I think the first non-white playwright to be the most produced playwright in the country. Amazing for him and I have a tremendous sense of pride for having worked on this play for so long. I'm sure most of you know what it's about or saw it but to recap a little...*Disgraced* is an incendiary look at identity from several different perspectives. At the Goodman Theatre in Chicago we discovered this great hunger of the audience to discuss the play. The Goodman, normally hosting two post show discussions a week, with 50/60 people staying but during previews 200 people were staying so we wondered: should we do more? Should we do them after every show? "That's what the people want! Let's do it!"

The participation of the artists was always optional but all of us felt compelled to attend. At almost every single show, at least three actors were there, almost all five of them attended all of the discussions. Every time I could, I was directing another show, but I would race down to the theater for the post show discussion. Just to listen to what emerged. Just sitting in the audience. I didn't want to sit up there talking. I so often found people would ask me questions but I don't want to be the expert on this play. This play has lived with me for four years. For me to tell you about my experience is unfair to what your experience is- the curtain went down two minutes ago. Where are you right now? I am more interested in what you have to say than me unpacking for you my long journey with this project. The exchange between the work on the stage and the audience witnessing it became a character in and of itself, of several minds and dissenting opinions. A lot of audience really fighting with each other. The actors and I would joke it had become- the second act of the play. The play is only, when performed, 82 minutes.

We'd take a 5 minute break and there would be a 45 minute discussion. So it basically did become the 2<sup>nd</sup> act of the play. The audience wasn't just talking to the artists. Let's not call it a talk *back* – let's talk to each other. The audience isn't just talking to the artists but to each other. In the act of unpacking the play together, minds are changed and perspectives shifted. People began to see oh this person sitting next to me, there's a lot of talk in the play about if Amir's actions are that of a stereotypical Muslim man and many were agreeing, and this one woman spoke up and said when he did those awful things that's when he became human, not Muslim. That's when he became a man. And I thought that was so brilliant and I had never heard that before after four years of making the play. We then moved the Goodman production to Berkeley, went back into rehearsal for two weeks because I'm OCD. Very exciting- new play, new city, new conversation. The day of our opening was the night of the Paris attacks. At the preshow dinner, donors and trustees and staff approached me, wondering how I would address the attacks. They were looking to me to shed light, to expose, to provoke, to comfort. That this idea of artist, especially when we are losing faith in our politicians, that maybe there is something that we can look to the artist to help. To heal, to do something. To bring us together somehow. This tremendous privilege and responsibility suddenly clarified. I addressed the attacks in my remarks, about the continued terrifying relevance of the play, about our moral imperative to remain vigilant, to talk to each other. After the final bow of the play that night, we cut out the music, we brought up the house lights, my five actors silently joined hands and bowed their heads for a moment of silence. And it maybe took seven seconds for the audience to know exactly what that was about. We didn't explain it, we didn't do anything and it was one of the most moving moments that I have spent in a theater. That was all that needed to happen- simple- there was no explanation. There was something about that single powerful moment where I realized I have to make work that demands conversation, that expresses opposing points-of-view. Work that challenges the artist and audience. The staffs of these amazing theaters. Work that represents our ever shifting cultural and political landscape. That's our job. Work that does what F. Scott Fitzgerald so brilliantly put: "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function." That's what the play *Disgraced* asks of us and that's what all of our work should ask of us. We contain multitudes.

While I'm on the topic of *Disgraced*, I want to address a word that has come up in discussions of the play. The word is *appropriation*.

As defined by Oxford Dictionaries:

The action of taking something for one's own use, typically without the owner's permission OR

The artistic practice or technique of reworking images from well-known paintings, photographs, etc., in one's own work.

For those of you not familiar with *Disgraced*, the character of Emily is a visual artist. She is white- we have very little other information of her- and she is married to Amir, a self proclaimed apostate of Muslim background. Her work is a tremendous study of the Islamic tiling tradition. She claims she is "in service" of the work. Over the course of the play she even gets a show at the Whitney. Is her work "appropriation"? She is well read, well versed, and well experienced. There's a whole thing in the play that she's read more of the Koran than Amir has. It reminds me so much of one of my dearest friends, Annika. Blonde, Swedish, gorgeous, doll-like human. She's just converted to Judaism and she is the person I call when I have a question because she knows way more than I do. She's such an amazing student of the religion. Emily's like that. She is no dilettante. But it's not genetically hers, does that mean she can't authentically experience it? Again, that same friend Annika and I were walking on the Upper West Side of New York and I said "I just feel so at home here. I just know everybody here is Jewish" and Annika didn't feel that. That's not her experience. Are we so limited that only the origin or genetic inhabitant is the only person who has the right to admire the form? Isn't that limiting us? What's the difference between appropriation and reverence?

I spent seven months traveling in India and I came home with all these things from India and I love India so much and an Indian friend said "It's a little bit offensive." Why is it offensive? I lived in India. I put money into the economy. I was there and loved it. I wasn't there for seven days, I was there for seven months. That was real on my part, why is that offensive? Why am I not allowed to want to cook this food?

So, it makes me think of something I often tell my students. I teach a

ton. I've taught at Columbia, DePaul, University of Chicago, School at Steppenwolf for ten years. Teaching is a tremendous passion of mine. As well as mentorship but that's for another day. It doesn't fit into my topic. I do have this thing I tell them all the time. The four "I's". INSPIRATION: we see something and it triggers something in us, an emotion, a spark- we then seek to, the second I, we IMITATE it- by copying it to the letter, we trace it, attempting to understand its impetus, how it came to be- we then INTEGRATE: we take the idea we have imitated and then add some of ourselves into it- now it's through my lens, I'm not simply drawing the apple, there's something of me now put into it as well. Hopefully we get to the final I- "I'm an artist now!"- if I can do this, which is INNOVATION. So we have Inspiration, Imitation, Integration, and Innovation. If we get to innovation, is that appropriation? No. Maybe that stuff of imitation is. But that's how we learn. We as parents model for our children. We have to imitate.

I think about music—I'm a huge music junkie- how our music is passed on and reshaped. How was have an entire culture now of "sampling"—I grew up on the Beastie Boys. what is sampling other than *sharing*? Aren't the Beastie Boys attempting an homage by sampling Bob Dylan's "just like tom thumb's blues"? Isn't art how we are actually building bridges? That's our privilege. Let's stop naming, defining, and separating. Let's beg, borrow and steal. Let's in the words of Tom Robbins stop "honoring and obeying" and instead "aid and abet."

There's no such thing as one type of woman. One type of Jew. I grew up in a community that is now predominantly Jewish, but growing up me and Craig Greenwald were the only Jews at school. You know you go to somebody else's house in 4th grade for a sleepover and they do things differently than you do? You go home and say mom it's so weird at so and so's house! They eat sugar cereal. Whatever it is, the things that are different. That you're struck by. My mother, who had me very young and is an incredibly brilliant woman because I'm about to make her sound maybe not that way. My mother, her explanation for me whenever I would point out the differences was "Jewish people don't do that..." It was her easy way to reconcile differences between myself and my peers. It was really "our family doesn't"—I know that now because she told me Jews don't sleep with top sheets or eat raw onions or mustard. It's now a running joke in our family. I now do all those things

and believe I am still a card carrying member. There's something about identity, what we do, what we don't do. We cling to our tribes for answers, for a sense of belonging and identity. So instead of fearing our differences, let's investigate them. There is more crossover than we are willing to admit. Again, it's just about changing the thinking. There's no condemnation involved in what I am saying here. There's so much stuff we don't realize that we wear.

So back to our conference topic:  
"redefining jewish theater in an age of multiculturalism"

Why does it have to be *redefined*?

What is Jewish Theater? I was looking stuff up on the internet. Are we retelling stories from the Old Testament? Is Jewish Theater *Yentl*? Is Jewish Theater *Fiddler*? Then I found this HowlRound article written by David Winitsky and I think it's the best definition of Jewish Theater.

"The tools are there:

- A millennia-old tradition of argument and dialogue. (A good place for theater to start.)
- A gorgeous mass of mysticism and magic. I'm talking dybbuks and spirits and archangels and flaming swords. This stuff is made for the stage.
- A love of the intellectual and the idealistic stretching from the minutiae of every day life to the grandest notions of human justice, goodness, and righteousness.
- A deep attachment to text. *We love* our texts.
- A cultural history filled with great stories.
- A bit of tragedy. Can't make theater without that.
- Funny. Definitely got some funny."

So I thought I don't want to redefine that. I want to be a part of that. That's awesome. It's how all theater should be, that's not only Jewish. Let's take that label off.

WE ARE HUMAN. Let's take this terrific genetic predisposition and make messy gorgeous art with people who aren't us. For people who aren't us. Let's learn more about ourselves reflected back when people

from other cultures and backgrounds hold the mirror up. It's going to take work. We are going to have to be brave, face things we might not like to hear. There's a lot of talk about dirty laundry and putting that stuff up. I can tell a Jewish joke but my friend who is not Jewish can't. We have to stop that. Yeah they can. They can tell the joke. Reflect it back to me. We have to address these issues. We have so many wonderful, I mean whatever your personal opinion may be of him, Woody Allen has been doing this, Philip Roth, Tony Kushner. We are seeing a lot of this being exposed. It's very brave to do that. We need to open our ears and break down our barriers. We need to mentor young artists and raise them in a world without barriers, without fear. Give them the courage our mentors did not have, the voice we are still trying to find. Let's not rely on institutional leaders and playwrights to do the work for us. Can we give them a break? Can we stop yelling at Artistic Directors? "You need to hire more people of color! You need to hire more women!" How about let's raise up some amazing artists. Why does it fall on them? That becomes a token hire. Again, that's part of the problem. We are all culpable, we are all empowered, and we can make a difference.

Who has the right to tell what story? We spend so much time protecting our cultures, and in that protection we are creating boundaries. What if we saw how something is advanced and expanded through the ideas of others? No one is trying to take anything away from us. In the act of representation, greater empathy becomes available to us.

When I think of things that make me most proud to be Jewish I think about two separate traditions. One is during the Passover seder, where as it as much celebrates our freedom from slavery it reminds us that as long as there are people enslaved, none of us is actually free. We can't forget that. And that slavery takes many different forms. In a world where we are constantly terrorized- we can think of super recent history Paris, Brussels, a plane hijacked in Egypt- as long as innocent people are dying, we are all victims. And we must band together and rise above. The earth is screaming out its stories and we must tell them, create conversation, raise questions.

The other tradition is the breaking of the glass at a Jewish wedding, There are obviously many interpretations but my favorite is one where

the glass serves as a reminder that even in times joyous as a wedding we must be reminded that we live in a broken world and hopefully through our new union of love can put that love into the world, that we can begin to heal these fractures.

It is our calling, spiritually and culturally. It is our obligation, our responsibility and our privilege. We cannot limit ourselves any longer. Let's be less careful. Let's be brave together.

“So you must wake up every morning knowing that no promise is unbreakable, least of all the promise of waking up at all. This is not despair. These are the preferences of the universe itself: (this is our charge) verbs over nouns, actions over states, struggle over hope.”  
— Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*

Thank you.