

## **Q AND A WITH NATALIE PARKER-LAWRENCE ON HER PLAY *UPRIGHT POSITION***

**Q:** *What prompted you to write this play?*

**A:** At the time I wrote the play in the late 1990's, black and white people weren't seen sitting in the same theatres in Memphis. I took the topic from the newspaper about the airport authorities having to deal with homeless people living in the airport because the city had no plan for housing and keeping them safe. Lots of homeless people would freeze to death every year.

I believe theatre is a time for all people to see universal fears and struggles. I have an MA in Linguistics with an emphasis in dialect and literacy. And I taught at two all-black schools in MCS for fifteen years. I knew their lives and their stories. I took them to plays all the time around town. One patron at TM asked one of my students who was also a football player if he was a bouncer. August Wilson, whose plays I love and teach, was a playwright who wrote from his culture. I wanted to share the culture of my former students. So, I thought if I wrote a black character in dialect, then black people and white people might show up at the same time to see it. Then it wouldn't matter if the playwright was white or black, as long as the story was true. When it was produced as a staged reading in Orlando for winning a regional playwriting contest, all kinds of people came. In 2002, when it was produced here, black and white people were sitting side by side in the theatre. And afterwards, several black people from the audience told me they were surprised a white person wrote the play. I like to see all kinds of people sitting together. So now I have black, white, Vietnamese, and Latina female students. I hope they all remember to see everyone and not to make anyone feel invisible.

**Q:** What is the likelihood that these two women would meet and have conversation today?

**A:** After the tragedy of 9/11, no one can go to the concourse gates without a ticket. Their story might happen in the foyer close to the ticketing areas. But I see people move away from people waiting at the gates all the time. I guess people will always be afraid of something, of strangers. I have faith it could change.

**Q:** How relevant is WTFM to Memphis or the USA?

**A:** The Women's Theatre Festival of Memphis is a powerful force in the theatre community. It has invited women to submit their work for many years now in order to get female voices heard and diverse audiences together. Ruby O'Gray and I have a great relationship. I am not an actor, director, or producer, but she can take a script and see the things I see as well as the things I cannot envision. She also directed *A Box of Yellow Stars* two years ago, and I was thrilled by her creative decisions. I trust her to surprise me with my own words. Every playwright in the world wants their work in spirited hands like hers.