



THE  
DRAMA  
INTERVIEW

*Drama Editor Ezra Neighbors with Kandace Mack*

**EN:** *Your submission was delightfully singular not only comedic quality but also in the shaping of your character, Opal. Seldomly playwrights are just playwrights; many start their journeys as actors, directors, psychics, doctors, etc. How did your foray into playwriting come about?*

**KM:** I have been writing since I was very young. I was about 12 or 13 when I found out that I really, really liked it. I found myself mostly writing fiction and I liked short stories with lots of description. When I found theatre, which was also at a super young age, I jumped headfirst into acting and didn't think about writing as a possibility. I stuck with acting throughout high school and all through college, even though I kept writing poetry on the side and ultimately minored in creative writing with a concentration in Poetry. It wasn't until my senior year of college when I took Intro to Playwriting with Laura Schellhardt, whom I will sing endless praise for, that I realized the absolute joy of writing for the stage. It was so late in my college career that I thought there was no way I could be a professional playwright. All my classmates had written plays all throughout college, while I had written just one (which, admittedly was better than none!). I ended up receiving the Agnes Nixon award and had my play Elyse and Mae Play the Most Epic Game of Life Ever produced as a staged reading. That intensive workshop process cemented in my mind the fact that I was indeed a playwright. I've been writing ever since 😊

**EN:** *There is a distinct poetic quality imbued within your work right from the title page, through your character descriptions, place settings, and even stage directions. What steps do you take in your writing process? Is it a sole act of creation or do you employ readings of your work along with the process?*

**KM:** That's so funny that you noticed a poetic quality in my writing! I minored in poetry in college, and I guess that comes through in everything that I write. Laura, my professor, always said that it was in the stage directions that you would find the playwright's voice. I guess mine is poetic! When I write, I like to find out who my characters are. I create lives for them and try my best to get to know them first and foremost. Once you know them, it's easy to decipher how they speak, how they interact with others, and what they bring (or don't bring) to the table. Then, I write scenes based on my characters' wants, needs, desires, etc. From there a plot comes through! I also sometimes start with a word or phrase to jumpstart an idea. I wrote a ten-minute play based on the word "casserole." Since I'm so early in my career, I try to diversify the way I approach writing. Eventually, I'll figure out which strategy works best for me!

These days I mostly work on my own to get a draft out, and then I send it along to my friends for feedback. My friends are my biggest fans, and they always help me figure out which parts of my piece resonate and which aspects I was hoping to resonate did not. As I continue to write, I'm hoping to start getting some readings done of my plays and workshop them from there.

**EN:** *Your upbringing was in Omaha, Nebraska, which is rather different than Chicago, Illinois where you graduated from Northwestern. Were there any difficulties you faced in feeling supported in your artistic pursuits while growing up? Has your family been supportive of your artistic endeavors?*

**KM:** I was so fortunate to be supported by my family from the very start. They immediately sensed that I was creative, and they fostered that energy throughout my childhood. My mom signed me up for theatre camps that I absolutely LOVED, and I just kept on doing theater throughout middle school and high school. My high school program brought me some of my best friends. I went to an all-girls high school in Omaha, and our school was very small which meant our theatre program was incredibly small as well. We were lucky to be directed by the incredible Mr. Thomas Becker who is an actor, director, set designer, sound designer, etc. (the list goes on and on!) who, along with the help of his wife Mrs. Amy Becker created the most incredible environment which continued to foster my creative spirit. My friends and I created some very special art and I always felt like I had a family in them and in everyone who did theatre at my high school. I don't think I would be where I am today if my creativity wasn't nurtured by my incredible mom and dad who supported me in everything I did and came to every show that they could attend, as well as my little theatre family that I found in high school. Omaha is certainly very different than Chicago, but I value my time spent there because it made me who I am today.

**EN:** *I feel there is a current "Hail, Mary!" situation in American Theatre today; many theatres and programs have shuttered or reduced seasons, modes of programming are being re-thought, and audiences have not returned to pre-pandemic levels. It can be dismaying to see as young theatre artists (myself included) to see stalwarts like Lookingglass taking hits. In spite of all this, there really is an opportunity before us to take stock, readjust, and set the precedent for a "New American Theatre" that works for not just some but all.*

**KM:** Stories that call my attention the most these days are ones that ask us to laugh. Everything is so serious right now. And don't get me wrong, I completely understand why. The world is in crisis and every day there is something more to be upset about. But I love when I can go into the theatre and leave feeling lighter than when I walked in.

I also care about seeing Black and Brown people on stage, and not just in roles where they experience trauma, but in roles where they get to be free and uninhibited by the weight of the world we're all carrying on our shoulders. I want to see Black joy and humor and celebration. I also believe we can have a conversation about racial trauma and work toward justice through comedy.

**EN:** *Are there any contemporary artists (playwrights or otherwise) whose work influences you today?*

**KM:** My favorite play is Hookman by Lauren Yee. It's hilarious and uses elements of horror (a genre I love) to encourage dialogue surrounding grief and the woes of adolescence. It's so inspiring to me because it uses so many devices that I want to employ in my writing. I just think Lauren Yee is a genius (and so does the rest of the theatre world)!

I'm also so inspired by The Wong Kids in *The Secret of the Space Chupacabra, Go!* By Lloyd Suh. My professor assigned this to us to read for an assignment in college and I remember writing: "This is hilarious, and I want everything I write to be just like this from now on." Its snappy and ridiculous sense of humor compelled me so much and greatly informed my love for writing humorous plays.

I'm also inspired by Laura Schellhardt and Julie Marie Myatt, my two playwriting professors in college who are renowned playwrights themselves. They taught me how to find freedom in my ideas, piece them together, and produce a freaking play. And that! Is powerful!

**EN:** *Are there any words of advice you would give your younger self that would've made your current journey easier?*

**KM:** It's so funny because I'm so young still so it's hard to think about what I would tell my younger self. I think when I was younger (literally maybe two years ago), I was so worried about conforming and being perfect and groundbreaking with my writing. I would tell my younger self to just WRITE and not worry about being like anyone else. I would tell my younger self to just find freedom on the page and explore finding meaning as the piece develops. I would've never guessed *Opal* would be published, but this was the play I had the most fun writing and now I'd say it's a testament to what work I need to write and what works for me. So, young Kandace, just slap some words on a page and figure it out from there. Who cares about having the best idea in the world and being the most original and the best playwright ever? Not me (aka older Kandace)! You'll be original by being yourself. You'll be groundbreaking by writing from your heart. Stop striving for perfection and start striving for joy. And giggles.

**EN:** *Lastly, are there any projects you are working on currently that you are excited about?*

**KM:** I'm writing a couple of little pieces and I have some ideas in the works! In the same class that *Opal* came from, I also wrote a silly little character named Captain Lenny who is a student at a superhero academy who has yet to find out what his superpower is. I've written several scenes for him that I'd like to tie together into another one act and get that out into the world. I'm also writing a little retirement home romance called 'Til the End of Time that I'm forcing myself to write out in this interview because it'll motivate me to finish it. It's about love (I'm sensing a theme in my writing) and how it's never too late to find it and never too late to find yourself as well.

Lots of projects, lots of ideas, lots of love for the craft.

Thank you for engaging with *Opal* and with my writing and with me! Much love!

**EN:** *Thank you Kandace for sharing with me and FOTD readers. I enjoyed our exchange and keep writing!*