

Lisa Kirazian

When I once told a fellow playwright, far more famous than I, how I rarely write about my own ethnicity, she looked at me incredulously and said, “I can’t imagine *not* writing about it!”

But isn’t that what our playwriting, and our life in the arts, should be about? Doing the very thing we *cannot* imagine? Getting out of our comfort zone, losing ourselves in the wonderful and scary ‘otherness’ of life, of our world, of our friends—and enemies?

One of the best compliments I ever received as a playwright was when I wrote a play about an African American poet/civil rights activist. At the first staged reading at the Fountain Theater in Los Angeles, one of the elder actors (African American) looked at me shocked when I was introduced as the playwright. He told me later: “I thought the person who wrote this was black. There are things in here I thought only a black person would know and understand. I was a boy sitting in the pew at my Baptist church in Chicago when Dr. King came and spoke—no one talks about that speech. But you did.”

I relish the opportunity to research about ethnicities and histories other than my own—just as I am always beyond thrilled and honored when non-Armenian playwrights choose to explore “my” Armenian history. I serve on the board of the Armenian Dramatic Arts Alliance, which helps get the Armenian story, and other human rights stories, told onstage (www.armeniandrama.org). And when the work of non-Armenian playwrights writing about Armenian topics gives me insight into my own ethnic identity—strengths and weaknesses alike—it inspires and reminds me that the interdependence of art and artists across boundaries makes us *all* better, wiser, and stronger.

Several years ago, I wrote a play about multi-faith immigrants across ethnicities living in San Diego, commissioned by the Playwrights Project, which builds literacy, creativity, and communication by empowering individuals to voice their stories through playwriting (www.playwrightsproject.org). In researching the writing of other playwrights—and in speaking with everyone from a surviving Lost Boy of Sudan, to a Vietnamese refugee, to recently emigrated Muslims trying to navigate their post 9/11 community—I found such resonance with my own Armenian history, and that of so many other people’s groups: the pulls of passion and pride, misplaced trust leading to tragedy, glimmers of grace and help amid war horrors, clinging to hope over bitterness, perseverance over surrender. Audience members of all backgrounds came up to me after the performances, thanking me for ‘understanding’ and sharing *their* story.

Our story.

Shared suffering, shared survival, shared triumph. Oh, how we are not alone!

The responsibility I hold in writing about other ethnicities works hand in hand with the responsibility I believe we all have as artists—to understand and encourage our audiences and each other. Writing outside of our ethnicity, embracing and sharing its new insights, helps us recognize that our ‘otherness’ is, perhaps, not so ‘other’ after all.

LISA KIRAZIAN’s plays include *On Air*, *The Blackstone Sessions*, *Switch*, *The Visitor*, *Six Views*, and numerous one-acts. Productions & readings: *Fountain Theatre*, *Long Beach Playhouse*, *Scripps Ranch Theatre*, *DG Friday Night Footlights*, *Playwrights Project*, *Barrow Group*, and several festivals. Publications: *Los Angeles Times*, *Performing Arts Magazine*, *San Diego Union Tribune*, *Audition Monologues for Young Women #2 (Ratliff)*, various literary journals. Boards: *Armenian Dramatic Arts Alliance (ADAA)*, *Playwrights Project (Past President)*. Lisa is a Stanford graduate. www.lisakirazian.com.

