



A play of options

Exploring how love—its manifestations, iterations, challenges and blessings—is unbounded by blood, age, color, gender or faith

BY JENIFER NII

I try to be appropriate. I try not to poke at people. I try to keep my soft bits under armor. But early on in the writing of *The Weird Play*, I could tell all of that was headed out the window, and that things were going to get funky.

The Weird Play began as a very personal, inward-facing story about romance because I wanted to remember what it felt like to want and believe with my whole body and soul and was terrified I'd forgotten how or couldn't. Which would make me...what? Empty. Inhuman. Dead. I wanted to try not to be dead, so I sat down with my notebook and wrote scenes with titles like "Swoon" and "Quid Pro Quo" and "Temptation" and for the first few drafts it was all very drippy-melodramatic and I thought I might pen myself into a diabetic coma.

Then something weird happened. I began to look underneath, to the questions I really had about what it was to not be dead. And I realized that romance was the least interesting part of it. That being not dead is really about love. It's about connecting heart to brain to hands, and extending mine to you and them.

So *The Weird Play* became a love story. As honest an examination as I could muster of the questions I had about what and how and why and who. In the writing, I unearthed a lot of ugly truths about myself, and even more empty spaces. But it also opened my eyes to the possibility that while I am lost and heart-sore and still looking for answers, I might not be alone, and that it might be nice to see

whether there are questions we can ask and things we can discover together. Because I also began to wonder whether, though we are so blessed in so many ways to live here and now, we're seeing what happens when love slips behind devices and divisiveness and fear.

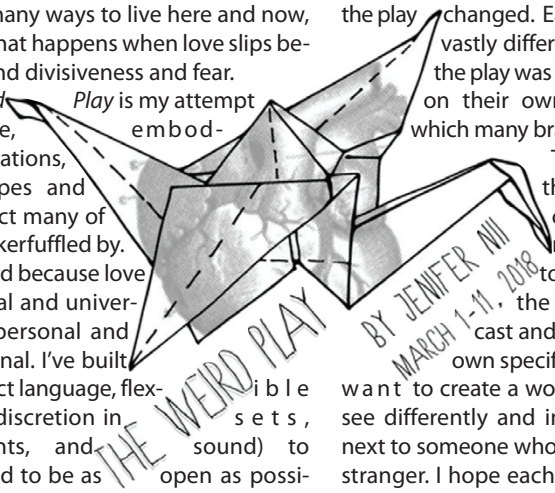
The Weird Play is my attempt to put on stage, embodied, those sensations, questions, hopes and doubts I suspect many of us feel and are kerfuffled by. The play is *Weird* because love is. It's individual and universal, intensely personal and utterly communal. I've built it weird (abstract language, flexible casting, wide discretion in sets, costume, lights, and sound) to reflect that, and to be as open as possible—as love is—to interpretation, expression and presentation.


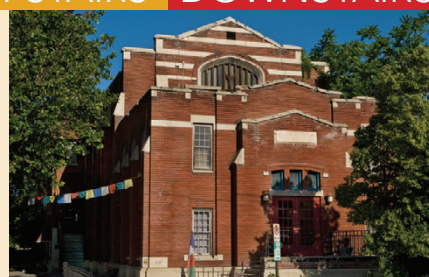
In the play, the characters are named One, Two and Three. There are no age or race specifications, and only the character of One is written specifically for a woman. There are no "character descriptions" beyond what's in the text. I did this to allow for maximum flexibility, to see how different casts, comprised of different mixes of age, ethnicity and gender, might impact the experience of the play. And to underscore my belief that love—its manifestations, iterations, challenges and blessings—is unbounded by blood, age, color, gender or faith.

Over the last year, the play has been read by actors of varying genders, ethnicities and ages. Each time, to my delight, the tone and focus of the play changed. Each time, audiences had vastly different opinions about what the play was about—often depending on their own personal experiences, which many bravely shared.

These readings were thrilling to me, and I'm excited for Plan B's premiere, because my goal is to invite everyone, from the production team to the cast and audience, to create their own specific theatrical experience. I want to create a world that each person can see differently and individually, seated right next to someone who might be a lover or total stranger. I hope each participant experiences something that speaks to their own, and asks them to look at the Other. That's what theatre can do in a uniquely powerful way, and ultimately what love is: mine, yours, ours. ♦

Jenifer Nii's plays WALLACE (co-written with Debora Threedy), THE SCARLET LETTER, SUFFRAGE, RUFF! and KINGDOM OF HEAVEN (music by Dave Evanoff) have premiered at Plan-B Theatre. THE WEIRD PLAY, one of 10 recipients nationwide of the inaugural Writers Alliance Grant from the Dramatists Guild Foundation, premieres at Plan-B March 1-11 in a co-production with Sackerson. Tickets and information: PLANBTHEATRE.ORG



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