

**2008 TCG National Conference
June 12, 2008
“Theatre as Foreign Policy”
Kwame Kwei-Armah**

LYNN DEERING:

My name is Lynn Deering and I'm the president of the board of CENTERSTAGE in Baltimore. It is my high honor and privilege to introduce you to Kwame Kwei-Armah, a magnificent artist and a creative thinker. I've come to know him as a wonderful friend, too, and associate artist at CENTERSTAGE.

He arrived in Baltimore in 2005 for the premier of *Elmina's Kitchen*, one of the trilogy of plays set in London's West Indian community, that eloquently tackles family and fatherhood, violence and responsibility. It was also the first play by an African Caribbean playwright to be produced in London's West End. When he spoke of his personal connection to this play, and his own role and responsibility as a father, he touched people deeply and personally and, at the same time, he was a catalyst for difficult conversations across our community. He is a natural conduit for public discussion. Kwame's many pursuits are fueled by great passions and he has the rare ability to make fruitful connections in his myriad roles of poet, musician, television and stage actor, commentator, director, playwright, goodwill ambassador. The world is his stage. A rehearsal for the play, *Things [of] Dry Hours*, that he was directing at CENTERSTAGE in Baltimore in 2007, was delayed because he was participating in ceremonies with the Queen of England in the Westminster Abbey in London. During his stays in Baltimore, which I am pleased to hear him call his American home, he engages almost non-stop with the community through large forums, intimate conversations and spontaneous gatherings. When I hear him speak, I hear a deep human love that challenges each of us to be our best. In moments of disagreement, Kwame creates common ground, not confrontation. Kwame personifies the creative, unifying force of the arts. I love his big thinking and his great heart. He has a global reach, a personal touch and inspires all of us to be unconstrained by boundaries. My friend, Kwame Kwei-Armah.

[Applause]

KWAME-KWEI-ARMAH:

Thank you, Lynn, for that rather wonderful introduction. I did pay her very well for it.

[Laughter]

I have to say, well, first of all can I thank the TCG for asking me to speak here today? Words like “honored” are often bandied about, but I use that word in its truest sense: privileged, flattered and thrilled. Well, at least that's my Microsoft Word's definition of it.

KWAME KWEI-ARMAH

I am thrilled, because as a British playwright to be asked to speak before such an esteemed gathering—apart from the word petrified I couldn't find another one, really. But I say privileged because amongst the many wonderful speakers that have spoken to this conference over the years, one, the great August Wilson's speech in 1996, influenced me like no other 46 pages of thought have.

[Laughter]

Published in Britain under the title of "The Ground on Which I Stand," it illuminated and solidified to me that the role of the artist is to not simply be a conduit for entertainment—though that is honorable—to not just to be defined by what happens between curtain up and curtain down, but that the role of the artist is, should be and *can* be *all* of the above and yet so, so much more.

For those who didn't get to Google me before this session began, I thought I'd do a little biography.

Isn't it wonderful, Google? I go to every meeting now, I kinda put at least 15 minutes aside just to Google everybody who's in there. I feel terrible if I haven't done it, really. Anyway...not that I've actually seen my Google. My son does it all of the time. He says, "Oh Dad, there was this great picture of you in Google." I go, "No! Don't tell me what it says about me!"

Anyway, I was born Ian Roberts, the son of Theresa and Eric Roberts, two West Indian economic migrants who left the beautiful island of Grenada for the not-so-beautiful island of Great Britain. Actually, do you know what? When I was writing that I thought, maybe I shouldn't say that. I just had images of Reverend Wright.

[Laughter]

Like, being spun on the BBC: "Kwame Kwei-Armah goes to America and says *he hates Britain!*"

[More laughter]

So, I really, really should qualify that. I say not too beautiful, not because I am not proud of my country, because actually in many respects I am. But like all countries, it has a history and that history was not always kind to my parents or the community from which they came from. But they survived and they did more than that in fact. They strived in a terribly cold environment to raise a family and in many respects inspire, particularly in the case of my mother, *all* that touched their lives.

I'm going to apologize in advance, really, I am my mother's son. I reference her all of the time, in everything that I do from my plays to my speeches, so please forgive me. She's not with me now—she departed two years ago—but I know she would be terribly

proud to know that I would be speaking here today, so forgive me for constantly referencing her.

But, you know, Britain was a cold place when I was a child. The dominant white cultural youth group were the skinheads who, as you know, belonged and identified with the extreme Right. All of my cousins and myself were chased, stabbed, beaten, cut—we lived in daily fear of our lives.

You know, we speak today of the constraining horrors of political correctness, but before it existed it was not uncommon for me to be called a nigger, a coon, a black bastard, told to go back to where I came from on a near daily basis. And if I complained, the problem was with me.

Actually, the main problem was I wasn't actually sure *where I came from*. There's a wonderful statistic in Britain, where they say that there is a bigger propensity for mental illness among the first generation of immigrants than there are of those who have arrived in a country. Because, of course, they arrive there with something, they arrive standing on solid ground. Whereas we arrive, or we're born into a land that we still call our parents' home "home," and the land that you're born into sees you as a foreigner. As I said, it was kind of confusing, 'cause in England they'd be saying, "Go back to where you came from." When I'd go to the West Indies on holiday, they'd say, "Hey Englishman," and when I went to Africa, they'd go, "Yo! Bob Marley!"

[Laughter]

Which is cool, I suppose.

I remember declaring to my older cousin at a time, I said: "I am a universal alien—I belong nowhere."

I'm terribly proud that I've got past that horrible metaphor.

In fact, what was really interesting that year, I remember—last year as Lynn said, I was speaking at the Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade service at the Westminster Abbey before the Queen, and before last year, we couldn't really speak about slavery in Britain, without feeling—without feeling like someone's watching you and someone's judging you.

I remember the first time I heard the word "slave." I was about five years old, actually, and my best mate at the time was a guy called John, a white guy, and we were having a—I don't know—a fight that five-year-olds have. "My dad is stronger than your dad!" kind of fights.

And he said to me, "Anyway, shut your mouth! You were once my slave!"

KWAME KWEI-ARMAH

I was like, I don't know what that is but it sounds bad so I'm gonna beat on you some more!

[Laughter]

So, I remember going home to my mother and saying, "Mum, John said that I was a slave! What's that?"

And she gave me this beautifully esoteric answer. And she said, "Darling, once we were in Africa and we flew to the Caribbean and when we were there we saw the natives eating salt. And we decided to eat the salt. And then when it was time to fly home, we couldn't fly again."

And I thought, "Great, that's exactly the explanation I needed."

[Laughter]

I actually never asked about anything to do with slavery again. And knew nothing of it, actually, until I was 12 years old. And then the miniseries *Roots* came on British TV. I hear a—let's give me a cheer for *Roots*! Come on now.

[Audience cheers]

And in one fell swoop, that changed the image of the African from one that had a bone through his nose, shouting "hooba hooba" and getting beaten up by Tarzan to a proud African man that would do anything to supersede his circumstance.

I was 12 years old. I finally began to understand that I was taken from Africa to the West Indies and then our parents went onto Britain and that I was *all* of those things.

African. Caribbean. *And* British.

I remember after watching a particular episode I ran up to my mother and I said, "Mum. That's what I'm going to do. I'm going trace our ancestry and I'm gonna get us back to our African roots. I'm gonna give us back our African name."

Of course, she said, "Of course you will, darling. Now go and do your homework."

Let me stop the biography for a moment and just break down what happened to me. A narrative came into my life, completely and utterly changed my worldview of my self, and of the universe, and set me on a path that would affect the rest of my life. A single narrative!

The same writer co-wrote the autobiography of Malcolm X, another seminal book in my life, one that would change the course of my personal history. I was an actor at the time when I first discovered it.

One of my favorite quotes is: “History is like a foreign land: they do things differently there.”

And I remember, actually, at about 18, going into my local library and saying, “Um, hi, I’m looking for the autobiography of Malcolm X.” And the librarian said, “Mmm...I think he was, like, a leading Black Panther, wasn’t he?” And I kinda went, “I don’t know, that’s why I’m trying to get the autobiography of Malcolm X.”

And she kind of looked it up and she went, “Oh, I’m really sorry. The last one went out about four years ago and hasn’t returned.”

I mean, it took me, like, five months to find the autobiography! You know, now I can go online and download that stuff.

But I was an actor at the time and I was struggling. How would I serve, then, this bigger picture of self-determination? This way of serving, how would I do this, being, for what many would have perceived, you know, being involved in what many—and what I do not—see as a frivolous pursuit?

Well, I then read a quote from Malcolm that I’d like to read, and it hit me quite profoundly. He said:

“A community needs and depends on three things in order for it to grow, develop and ensure its continuation and existence: Politics, Economics and Culture. These are needed for our selves, our family, our community, our nation, and our race. And if we neglect to provide, sustain, and develop our Politics, Economics and Culture then we will stifle, disintegrate and die.”

He tied politics, economics and most importantly for me—culture—into public service.

My mother would often say, “If you serve family, you serve community; if you serve community you serve nation; and if you serve nation, by God, sometimes you might just serve the world.”

I began to see the marriage between culture and change. And it was then that I really began to see that communal uplifting and entertaining art were not mutually exclusive. That these things were paths that were being beaten by Spike Lee in film, by Public Enemy in rap. I often say to my kids, when I grew up, you know, the rap I grew up on was Public Enemy screaming, *fight the power, don’t believe the hype!* My children listen to, “Now will you lick my lollypop.”

[Laughter]

You know, I began to see that these things were linked. And then, of course, the master hit me. The poetry and the consciousness in the writings of August Wilson.

You know, I flew over to hear him speak once, and I'd seen two of his plays—one at the National Theatre and one at the Tricycle. And I was so moved. And I remember, I heard, that *King Hedley* was opening in Washington, D.C. In fact, it was an American critic who was waiting for me at the door. And at the end of—it was one of my first plays, it was called *A Bitter Herb at Bristol*—and she said “Oh, you remind me of August Wilson!”

I was like, “You can take my whole wallet...my children...my family! You can have all that shit!”

[Laughter]

You can have all that! And she said, “I'm just about to fly over to see *King Hedley*, at the opening of his new play. And I was like, oh my God, when is it? And she said, “Yeah, next week.”

Now it just so happened, at the time I was shooting a TV series, the kind of equivalent of your *ER*, and I had, like, a week's window. So I kind of ran upstairs, booked it and I discovered that he was actually speaking at the time. I was like, oh my God, this is blessed by the gods.

I flew over and August was there. And there he was at the door, actually. Just kind of, like, shaking hands. And I don't know if it ever happens to you, I'm not really a kind of star-struck person, but I was star-struck. And I was—I didn't know what to do. And I just wanted to go and just kind of shake his hand or something. But I thought that, being an actor, and I thought that's really naff. So what could I do? I looked around and I saw that there was a kind of bookstore selling his books. I thought, that's the cool thing to do: go buy a book, come back, say “Mr. Wilson, would you sign it for me please.” And then, that would be real cool.

So, I ran and I got into the queue and I kept looking over and he was still there and I kept looking over and by the time I had paid, he had gone.

And I was like, oh my word. And so, in this conference, I stood up. And I said, “Mr. Wilson”—eventually, I never talk at these things—“Mr. Wilson, um, I'm a playwright and, um, I'm going to have a play on at the National Theatre.”

Now, it so happened, actually, that I'd been commissioned by the National Studio, which is very different from being on the mainstage.

[Laughter]

But I figured, I had to say something, right? But actually, it kinda hit me hard. He said, “Oh yeah, great, actually one of my plays is going there next year, I'll see you there.”

KWAME KWEI-ARMAH

I was—oh my days! I better start writing hard.

And, actually, I'll come back to, one of the greatest things actually—I wrote to August and Marion Clinton, who directed *King Hedley*, when I got back to London and I just said, please, can I just sit at your table, to just be there and take this in.

And, um, one of the greatest things in my life, actually, was when I—one of the things that allowed me to feel really blessed, was when I walked into my agent's office one day, and there was an email from CENTERSTAGE in Baltimore, saying, "We'd like to do your play *Elmina's Kitchen*, and the director will be Marion McClinton."

And I cried.

I was driving 200 miles back to location and I was filled with *joy*. Because, actually, I wrote the first few pages of *Elmina's Kitchen* after seeing *King Hedley* in Baltimore. I mean, how blessed is that?

And actually, one of the nicest things was that, when I first spoke to Marion, Marion said—I'd said, "You know, I'd written you this letter," and he said, "It never got to me." And I said, "You know, I said I just want to sit at your table." And he said, "Oh, you are my son, you are."

Hearing August speak on that day, he said a really interesting thing. He said, "I was ushered into manhood by the Black Panthers on one hand and Muhammad Ali on the other."

It changed my life. I'd never heard a black man speak in those terms, certainly not one who had been successful. It challenged me. Often when I'm asked now, I say that I was ushered into manhood by Muhammad Ali on one hand and the rap band Public Enemy on the other. But I was ushered into artistic responsibility by August Wilson.

So as you can see, narrative creators, be it in film music or theatre have defined my life—has guided my life.

Therefore you'll understand when I say—not out of a pomposity or an artist's ego—that I believe the artist is amongst the most honorable members of our society. Amongst the most powerful. That the artist can profoundly affect life in a way that no politician, no business leader can. Because it deals primarily with the personal, speaking one to one with all its participants, yet by its very nature knows no boundaries.

It's a grand boast, but civilizations and cultures are remembered and judged by their art, their architecture, literature, men and women of letters. We remember cultures in this way. I say Egypt, I say Greece...they are remembered not because of a great accountant (though that's honorable too) but through the lens of their artists.

So why then, if we judge a civilization through the lens of the artist, why is it that we play such a periphery role in modern society? Why, when you say to your parents, you want to be in the performing arts, do they want you to be a doctor or a lawyer? Well, apart from the financial insecurity, the constant life on the road and the abuses of every kind and variety of drugs known to man by some artist—I do say some, of course, not wanting to stereotype—it is, in my opinion, because the artist, over the years, has allowed herself to become contained. Contained within the narrow bandwidth of entertainment. We, the ones that hold the mirrors up to society and ask the difficult questions, we who often toil away at the bottom end of the pay scale simply to create works of art that can be a catalyst for debates, that can lead us into the dialogue that leads to change. We, who are charged with this huge responsibility, a responsibility that whether we like it or not, comes with the territory, have allowed ourselves to be sidelined away from the center of civic society.

To me, that's an outrage.

Now, it can sound as if I am trying to say that every artist has or even wants to engage head-on with mainstream politics. I am not saying that at all. But the school of thought that art is for art sake is what I challenge here. The received wisdom that we cannot, that we do not serious effect the course of societal development, is what I challenge with every fiber of my being.

We do it by default. Like it or loathe it we just have to look at Live Aid to see the role of the artist in full effect. The combining of many talents to articulate the desires of millions to see a fair and equitable world was heard loud and clear by all the powers that be. My question is, can the performing arts do and be the same? In my particular case, can theatre do the same? I don't mean in structure or execution, but can it have at its core a global aim?

Let me tell you about a project that I'm developing in London at the moment. We have the Olympic Games coming in 2012, so the world is going to be looking at us. We have a most magnificent moment in history right now. We have some of the leading players in all of our art forms, are from the new, young black communities. Chris Ofili in art, David Adjaye in architecture, Zadie Smith in literature, myself in theatre, Robert Beckford in theology—world leaders, people who are known within our culture and outside of our culture, as being at the top of their trade. It's unique in black British history—in British history. So I'm arranging and producing a festival of Britain too, where I will get all of our artists, in all of these disciplines, and I will get them to invite—if we are doing it—get them to invite artists in their disciplines, or not even in their disciplines, from across the globe and we will have a discussion through our work. Not even through words, through our dialogue of work. We will have a discussion about what is the power of art.

Now, for me, why that's important and where it came from is that I want my children to be able to say, we have role models within our community. I want our artistic

community to recognize that we are at the forefront of the world. I want Britain to recognize that it is a new Britain that we are dealing with.

Art at the center of global discourse—can we do it? Now, please don't get me wrong—I am in no way saying that as a writer one has to sit down and say, "Here's a world problem: let me write about it." I am a firm believer that in cultural specificity comes universality. When I speak of specificity, that can be your home, your head, your block. But our natural instincts as artists is to mine the universal, mine all that we all share. But in our ever shrinking world—a world where every society has several communities within it that interlock, not just nationally but internationally—a play I write about a West Indian restaurant in Hackney can find itself playing and speaking to an audience in Baltimore and Chicago and Sweden and Pakistan.

A play written by James Baldwin 20 years before my intellectual awakening can speak to me in London today as well as my cousin in Australia. Narratives travel. And in their traveling they do more than just represent the playwright or the actors, the choreographer or the dancers; they represent their nations, their nations' view of itself, their nations' questions of itself.

And like in Alex Haley's *Roots*, a personal story, it can change a community's complete view of itself and the nations view of the said community, the *world's* view of the community. Like the character King, when he screams to the gods to help him supersede his circumstance in August Wilson's *King Hedley*: how that can touch me and empower me in England to construct a policy for my life, for my artistic life.

Yes, in my opinion theatre more than just the play. It's more than even just an ambassador. Theatre can be and *is* national and even foreign policy. I say foreign policy, because when I write a play in Britain, I write it in the vernacular, often, of African Caribbeans. I have two angels on either shoulder. One is a kind of black community that says, "why are you asking these kinds of difficult questions? We don't want this in public!" And the other is a kind of white National Theatre audience, that says, "What did he just say, darling?"

[Laughter]

And I haven't even got to America yet!

You know, I have to see my art as almost foreign policy, introducing dilemmas within my front room, the theatre of my front room, to a wider audience, and balancing the view that it has of my community, whether I am perpetuating a stereotype or I am exploding and deconstructing it.

For me, theatre is foreign policy, on a micro or macro level. It is bigger than the sum of its parts.

KWAME KWEI-ARMAH

You know, it's not just a theory for me. I personally have found myself as a playwright invited to attend meetings and roundtables with government ministers and the prime ministers.

It's very funny, actually. I have to tell you the funniest thing. Actually, two very quick ones, if I may.

The first is, I was invited round the cabinet table. They kind of had all the representatives of all the major arts institutions and kind of, two artists who have absolutely no constituency whatsoever. I was one of them. And we kind of sat around the cabinet table, and I think I was sat in the place where the Minister for Defense sits. And at the end of this meeting, which was very nice, I kind of looked down and I tried to work out, who else was this the first time here for. And I could tell because we all stole the pencils.

[Laughter]

Those that left the pencils were like, "Yah, man, I'm back next week, so, yo." I kinda went [mimes putting it in his pocket] so I could take it home to mom and dad.

And again, it was really quite interesting again, I was there the other day and the Prime Minister's wife came up to me and said, "Oh, we saw you on TV last night!"

Which is really weird.

[Laughter]

'Cause I thought you should be looking after the economy.

[More laughter]

You were looking at popular television.

I find myself invited to these roundtables, not just to talk about race, which is very important to me, or theatre, as you know, is tremendously important to me, but the role of the arts in creating a new British identity—a post-colonial British identity. Now, you know, being one that struggled for so long trying to find his own—I identify with a country trying, struggling to find a new and truthful definition of itself, a way to view itself and to communicate that new view to others.

You know and that leads me, really, to America. If I may say respectfully, whoever's looking after your international PR is not doing a very good job.

[Cheers]

I think America more than ever, Barack or no Barack, needs to challenge the debased view that the rest of the world has of it. Now, that's not just of George Bush or Iraq or Enron or whatever mortgage crisis we find ourselves in—but more insidiously, the images that America throws out of itself to the world through the TV and film is horrendously damaging. You know, who out there is monitoring your exported self? Your African American community is seen exclusively through the images of gang violence and over-sexed music videos. Oh, and yes—the occasional exceptional politician. Your Italian American community is predominantly seen as gangsters or sons of gangsters now in therapy. Your mainstream society is seen predominantly through the lens of over-simple monosyllabic isolationists, in both politics and the media.

I mean, it may be entertaining and profitable in the short term but the images America exports of itself via its visual media is not the sophisticated America that I know it to be. Each time I touch down on your shores I feel a rush of blood to my cerebral cortex, for the depth of conversation and ideas I find here are often giddy. And this negative perception even extends to theatre. Yes, you're noted for a few great playwrights but the image I had of American actors before I worked on *Elmina's Kitchen* at Baltimore's CENTERSTAGE was that your actors were, in terms of stage, inferior, in discipline and in training. But I found it to be the opposite. The dedication and professionalism of the cast and the whole building—as it was in with Congo Square, when they did my play there—was second to none, second to nothing that I have experienced at the highest level of art in Britain.

But unless you have some access to America on the ground, only the vacuous-ness of America gets through internationally.

Why do I say all of this? I say it because I think this presents a unique opportunity for theatre to take the reigns and as we say in the black community: represent.

I'm not speaking of an old school left or right political agitprop theatre. Nor am I speaking of indulgent narratives that, to be taken seriously, latches itself to unnecessary negative criticisms. I'm speaking not even speaking of the artists that are creating magnificent work, like Suzan Lori Parks, Naomi Wallace, the works like *Jesus Hopped the "A" Train*—all using the transformative power of artistic creativity to imbue values, dreams, aspirations. I'm actually speaking to the administrators in you, for the role of taking these artistic impulses and negotiating their way to the stage locally, nationally, and internationally lies with you.

How will you look and find new ways of getting your theatre, your brilliant theatre, out into the world some more? So that we can actually see the intelligent America, the caring America, the brilliant America.

I'm speaking of how you create bigger and better international partnerships and relationships, that feed you not only here at home and us abroad. The Royal National Theatre—which I'm glad to say I am an associate and now on the board for—has a wonderful relationship here with New Dramatists in New York. I came and I spent two

weeks with great writers and theatrical practitioners. I went to the theatre each night and saw the great work that was coming out of Off Broadway and Off-Off Broadway—and occasionally Broadway. I saw a show for instance, *In The Continuum*, that is still with me today—that was three years ago. Truly international in its scope: a two hander that links the global black narrative in a most amazing, entertaining and simple way. I'm trying to get it to London, and if I did I'd want every black teenager to come and see that America produces more than just hip-hop comedies and sexy videos. This play represented to me a new America, an internationally conscious America that was as comfortable mixing the personal with the international and the international with the personal.

We need theatre that truly represents who you are now! The Arthur Millers and the David Mamets will always get played in London, but what of the Now Generation? What are we doing to get those voices out? Internationally?

The financial imperative of TV and film pushes them often to play to the lowest common denominator. Theatre—serious theatre—can be just the opposite. Like it or not we play to the franchised: the influencers of the influencers, the people who can change things if they wish to.

This is theatre's time, in my opinion, to be at the vanguard of change. If Barack gets in, it will be a new dawn for America. Can we afford to let that opportunity slip by? Should we not be seizing the day? But for artist to lead or at least contribute to society in a recognized and measurable way, the power of what we do has to be taken seriously by the artist, by the administrators, by civic society as a whole.

You may wonder why I am so concerned about America looking after its image. But you know, you lead the world. You sneeze...believe me so many of my young people get colds and don't even know that they have one. The symptoms of their sickness just seems to be glorified and glorified in narrative after narrative. I need them to see a bigger picture, a brighter picture. I need them to be able to aim higher.

And the image at the moment that American sends out, that it is leading the world in being an anti-intellectual time. It's not the America that I know.

As a French writer once said, "If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people together to collect wood, don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the sea."

The narratives of August Wilson, James Baldwin, Arthur Miller, Amiri Baraka, Alex Haley, David Hare, George C. Wolfe, to name but a few, have pointed me towards the ocean.

How can we be of service *to* and *through* our art form, is the big question for me right now. How do we construct that sound seafaring vessel, that will raise the questions to our society that will improve it and make it fulfill its potential? I believe that we have all

KWAME KWEI-ARMAH

the skill sets in our theatrical community to be at the center of all that happens around us. For it is our skills that help society and culture define itself.

Finally, my mother always used to say to me that there are three kinds of people in the world:

Those that MAKE things happen...
Those that WATCH things happen...
Those that SAY, "What happened?"

The remarkable thing about the performing arts—but, in particular, theatre—is that we are trained to be all three at the same time.

Ladies and gentlemen, let's fight the power.

Thank you.

[Cheering & clapping.]

Q&A Session

Q: I read an article that you wrote about the *Statement of Regret* in which you discuss the unity—or lack thereof—in the black community. My question is, have you found that your plays have led to conversations that lead towards reconciliation of those issues, not only with the black community and the white community, but also for black people in terms of how to deal with the past and how to deal with the present?

A: I would say that, first and foremost, as I've said, my plays are due to be—I formed them to be a catalyst for the debate. And really, if I've formed them correctly, then the debate is correct. Imbued in it is the politics of, as I've said, Malcolm X and Marcus Garvey, which is of self-determination but also is of cleaning your house as well as challenging the super-structure. And in many respects I adore the discussions that happened post-*Statement of Regret* and post-*Elmina's Kitchen*. I adore the—I don't know and I wouldn't make the grand claim that it has created a healing. But what it certainly has done, particularly with *Statement of Regret*, is created a debate around the issues of reparations for slavery, which I wanted to speak about, about the division in the black community and about identity, in terms rooting itself—all the communities rooting itself back to Africa, but also sharing a national identity. So I would say, the debate certainly happened fast and furiously. Sometimes I was shouted at and other times I was kissed, but I was very pleased with the debate. That was a sign of success for me.

Q: First, on behalf of everyone here, thank you so much for such an articulate and intelligent speech on how we can expand the theatre community to give us a

better image here in the United States, which I highly agree with. There are 28 of us here who are National Theatre Conservatory Summer Intensive students and we're living in, kind of this lovely warm womb of community right now. My question to you is, as a young community, and as the next generation of theatre, how can we start making the process of bending the status quo, so that we can change our image and theatre in the future?

A: I mean, I think that's probably the question of every generation of playwrights. I think I once read that the role of a playwright is to kill those who have gone before you. [Laughter] I try to not do that, but certainly to recognize them. I mean, I think—it's really interesting. In London I'm mentoring a young writer who has been tremendously successful. And the reason I chose him is that I sat at a table with him, once, when I was doing a kind of talk. And he said, "I hate you and I hate everything you write." And I was like, "Why?" And he said, "You are the thing I need to climb above." And I loved him instantly. I was like, let's have this debate, brother, let's have it. We now are tremendously close. As I said, I'm mentoring him. And basically, what he once said is he didn't like that a lot of my work comes from an Afro-centric perspective. I broke it down to him that I was being culture-specific to be universal, he found that and now we have a great dialogue about the kind of work that we need to do. So I think often it is to find the fault lines in the generation that has gone before you. And I don't mean to find the fault lines in order to disrespect them. We stand on great shoulders and we must always respect the shoulders that we've stood on. But I think we must find the fault lines and find the themes of *our* generation, the themes that say, *I want this kind of change and you are standing in the way of that change*. And actually hone our skill, so that even those who we attack say, "I may not like what you've said, but I quite like the way you've said it."

Q: In an era of increasing gas prices, plane fares, difficulty even obtaining a passport, how can we as artists, who are working in very specific communities, locally, connect internationally?

A: My answer to that is: I don't know, that's the job of the administrators, to find the ways through that, around that and over that and it has been done before and it can be done again. My job as an artist is to make sure that I am creating the art that can be exported. It is now up to the people whose responsibility it is to look after that work, to find those mechanisms.

Q: Thank you, for the great speech and for everything. Along those same sort of lines, what do you see American artists need to do both artistically to further this conversation? What do you see as the building, the stumbling block that's in our way? And also, because you had mentioned it in your speech—organizationally as theatres—I mean this is a group of theatre leaders, what can we be doing to further this conversation, further this work?

A: I think, without trying to be negative, I think that if there is one stereotype we have about America is that it is quite isolationist. And I quite understand it, because, you know, you're a continent. Everything that you need is here. You want to go skiing? You want sun? It's here. You know, it's like—it's really—I often find when people disrespect America for that, I also kind of think, you're not actually thinking about it. But I do think that one has to aggressively and actively seek out these relationships. You know, read and find out who's writing what and what theatres are producing what in Britain. At the moment we have an absolute resurgence in new writing. It's really interesting; again, I was on the TV in Britain talking about our creative industries in Britain now bring in as much as our financial sector. I mean, that's *huge*. That's huge and all of a sudden, as soon as we started talking about that, we had philanthropists talking to us. You know, we talk about international partnerships. I went to South Africa last year, simply to discover who the South African playwrights were and write about it in one of our broadsheet newspapers. It's about trying to have an international vision, I think, and we do have it. I mentioned New Dramatists, I mentioned CENTERSTAGE, who asked me to be an associate. Of course you have international vision. But I think it's also international vision, not just in England—but what's happening in Germany, what's happening in Africa, what's happening in Thailand, what's happening—it's about how we look outside. And if I could finally say, the really interesting thing for me, when I set up this festival, I went to Nick Hytner, the brilliant artistic director at the Royal National Theatre, who is in fact a role model to me, and I said, "What artists should I invite? What American artist should I invite in order to have a play dialogue with?" And he said, "Why are you looking to America? Let's look at France. What French playwright is happening?" So I went in and started to investigate who's happening in France and who's happening in Spain. It's just about us opening our eyes, I think, and thinking not only just about serving our local audience, but serving an international audience.