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A Playwright of Ideas

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One time we were sitting around and Howard was talking to the whole class," Kia Corthron recalls. "Twenty, twenty-one people or so. And he just made this offhand remark, 'and, of course, Kia writes these political plays.' And that's the first time I realized that I'm an anomaly."

The year was 1992. Howard is Howard Stein, a legendary Columbia professor who would retire later that year as chairman of the Oscar Hammerstein II Center for Theatre Studies and supervisor of the Playwriting Program. And Kia Corthron, who would receive her MFA from the School of the Arts that year, is still an anomaly, writing plays that grow not out of stories or characters but out of issues.

Among them are the police brutality play, *Force Continuum*, the girl gangs play, *Breath, Boom,* and the play about abandoned land mines that kill innocent people, *The Venus de Milo Is Armed*. It isn't that her characters are unrounded or her narratives unimportant; her plays all involve black families with fully thought through lives. But in defiance of the generally accepted tenet that a play is an organic entity whose human characters generate its growth, Corthron constructs her work according to a different logic, beginning with a circumstance and building her characters into it. One important result of this is that the people you might expect to be involved in a given issue aren't necessarily the ones she's writing about.

"To some degree, black writers write politically in terms of black issues, but not otherwise, and we aren't expected to," Corthron says. "There's a sense out there that there are some issues pertaining to people of color, and then other issues that are neutral that only white people can write." Not long ago, Corthron says, "Howard Stein told me, 'You always have a new population.' What he meant was that many writers keep writing the same thing, that they start to focus on a smaller and smaller

population. That doesn't happen with me."

A case in point is her play about cloning, infertility, and genetics, *Slide Glide the Slippery Slope*, which began with Corthron's interest in Dolly the cloned sheep and grew into a family drama involving two sisters separated in childhood. One grows up to be a farmer and scientist, the other a despairing mother who has lost a child. That they are black is both theatrically unusual and largely irrelevant—until it emerges that one of their children has sickle cell anemia, a crucial plot point that arose, Corthron says, precisely because the "population" of her play is not limited to the expected.

Slide Glide opened in June at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, one of a myriad of plays that Corthron—who may be the most commissioned playwright in America—has going right now. She has just finished a draft of a new work, tentatively titled "Forbear Star," about black entertainers and McCarthyism, written for the Royal Court Theatre in London. Playwrights Horizons in New York, the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, and the Actors Theater of Louisville are all expecting scripts by Corthron in the semi-near future.

She is a woman with an easy smile and an informal manner that belie her intellectual spine. She looks younger than her age, 42—"I was born the exact same day as Dennis Rodman," she says—and has the high-pitched, girlish voice of a teenager. She grew up in a small town in Maryland ("You could walk to West Virginia") and did her undergraduate work at the University of Maryland. Unmarried, she lives in Harlem, though with her plays running everywhere, she's peripatetic these days.

Asked, as a playwright of ideas, where the ideas for her plays come from, she said newspapers, movies, the Zeitgeist.

"I listen to WBAI and I get a lot of ideas from that," she said. "A lot of writers run out of people to write about. But you never run out of issues."

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