While we usually do one-on-one interviews here at DPS, with scheduling conflicts, Director of Professional Rights Robert Lewis Vaughan and playwright Kia Corthron ended up communicating by e-mail. Robert asked several seemingly small questions to get the ball rolling, and he and Kia planned to talk in person later — to finish off the interview. But that wasn’t necessary. Kia answered the questions (or as she put it, “Those weren’t small questions, those were BIG questions!”). Obviously we here at DPS love Kia’s writing, and we decided to just let her tell you all about herself in her own words. We’re sure you’ll fall in love with her too —
I grew up in Cumberland, a factory/mill town in
Western Maryland. The skinny part of Maryland, kiss-
ing Pennsylvania and West Virginia. From my house it
was less than a ten-minute walk to West Virginia. I had
zillions of West Virginia relatives in another town
about a half-hour’s drive away. Very white, very work-
ing class—Boys Don’t Cry. In my high-school graduat-
ing class of about three hundred there were ten blacks,
and we were the only people of color.

I was encouraged since second grade to be a
writer. From my own memory and my mother’s,
it probably all began when my sister, fifteen months
my senior, started first grade, and I had no one to talk
about a half-hour’s drive away. Very white, very work-
ing class—Boys Don’t Cry. In my high-school graduat-
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On the night I was to receive the $2,000 check, I had to ask my roommate if I could borrow money for a subway token to attend the award ceremony.

to, so I started what was referred to by my elders as “talking to myself,” but, in reality, these “dialogues” were dramatizations, various serial stories I’d keep coming back to. The “actors” could be pens or leaves or clothespins — the last I recrreated in the twelve-year-old character of Ness in Digging Eleven. That play is the closest I’ve ever come to autobiography.

It wasn’t until my very last semester at the
University of Maryland that I took a playwriting
class. I had always been flattered as the “class star” in
my senior, started first grade, and I had no one to talk
about a half-hour’s drive away. Very white, very work-
ing class—Boys Don’t Cry. In my high-school graduat-
ing class of about three hundred there were ten blacks,
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writer. From my own memory and my mother’s,
it probably all began when my sister, fifteen months
my senior, started first grade, and I had no one to talk
about a half-hour’s drive away. Very white, very work-
ing class—Boys Don’t Cry. In my high-school graduat-
near Front Street, and the_RESULTS were very sig-
ificant. The play wasn’t produced until years later with
Long Wharf Theatre. They workshopped the shortish
play and asked that I write a “companion piece” to fill
out the evening. I had to use the same cast: three
women and two children. Without the possibility of
male actors, I decided it was time to explore women’s
prisons, a subject I had been interested in for a while.
Within a couple of months, Cage Rhythm was
selected to be published in Sydney Mahone’s Moon
Marked and Touched by Sun: Plays by African-American
Women, the first time I had been published which, of
course, always makes a writer feel like a writer. At a
time when I was broke again, Cage Rhythm won the
New Professional Theatre Playwriting Award. On the
night I was to receive the $2,000 check, I had to ask
my roommate if I could borrow money for a subway
token to attend the award ceremony.

For my Van Lier at MTC I wrote Catnap
 Allegiance. The main character was a young black sol-
dier named Jodie, during and just after the Gulf War,
which had happened a year before I was awarded the
fellowship. At that time I had stopped writing because all of
my time was taken up with political demonstrations and
other actions against the war. A friend of mine from
Columbia, the same friend who had selected Wake Up
Lou Riser for her thesis pro-
duction, was teaching at
Otterbein College in Ohio
near Columbus, and this
Connection eventually led to my
being a visiting artist there,
and the students — very tal-
ented, it turned out — per-
formed the only production
of the play. Ideal casting for many of the roles: The stu-
dents were military age. And one student was the per-
fected consultant: He had been a Gulf War soldier.

Second Stage had gotten funding to commission
“Intergenerational” plays — they called it something like that. The idea was to create pieces for a multigenera-
tional audience — to bring young people into the theatre,
along with their parents. Under one of these commis-
sions I wrote Digging Eleven, which takes place in a
small working-class town, not unlike Cumberland
(though I really kept it fiction in my mind), with a lit-
tle girl who had clothespins talk to each other and with
a grandmother who was given many of the stories of
my own grandmother. In one of her stories — He
came from the South and no shit from no white man did he
take, “Nigger nigger” they called but he not a stumble
not a eye twitch. ‘Til one of ’em “Nigger nigger” and
shoved him, that’s the one wound up with the buckshot in

his hide, he came from the South and went back down
South. For good. That was husband number one. They
were three. They got the shotgun. I seen it settin’ in the
sheriff’s office. They look to me for clues, but he weren’t noth-
in’ more in my life but a memory, not a birthday card, not
a rumor. Sheriff wait his seven years. I wait mine.

Not long before I wrote that play I learned from
my mother that Mom Mom (who died when I was in
high school) had had a husband before Pop Pop. Gram in the play had three husbands. Mom Mom only had two. The rest is true.

Besides a lot of workers’ issues stuff, I was think-
ing about homophobia in the black community at that
time. Though I wasn’t being deliberate about it in any
way, I guess because when I come from if you’re not
slinging fast food or a department store cashier it’s pret-
ty much the mines or the mill or the factories, I was
kind of surprised that what impressed many people was
the idea that I had gay men doing heavy work in a
plant. The play wasn’t produced until years later with
Michael Wilson’s inaugural season at Hartford Stage.

I had been a part of an African-American play-
wrights unit at Playwrights Horizons, and Tim
Sanford, the literary manager, asked us to write one
acts, four of which he produced in the upstairs
space. My piece was Life by Appxiation. I had been
wanting to write a play for a while with Crazy Horse
and Nat Turner in it. At the time of Tim’s offer, I had
been thinking a lot about the death penalty. So I
wrote a play that takes place today in which Crazy
Horse and Nat Turner are sitting on death row. It was
too big to be in an evening with three other plays so
Crazy Horse and some other stuff got cut. (He later
was reinstated when I redeveloped the piece for
Crossroads Theatre Company’s Genesis Festival.)

The main character is Jojo, a man who committed an ugly,
vilgent crime thirty years ago. He is very different per-

son than he was then, and his death appointment is
imminent. The writing of the play really took off
when I brought in fifteen-year-old Katie, his tough,
bossy, basketball-playing murder victim.

I call myself a political writer. I don’t consider
my stuff agit-prop — I try not to preach to the audi-
ence — but whether an audience member agrees with me or not, I have failed if they don’t know where I’m
coming from. If, with Life by Appxiation, they could
leave the theatre and not know I’m against the death
penalty, I’ve erred inexcusably. I don’t think that was
a problem; I think I helped audience members feel for
this human being that the media had trained them to
hate. And if at least one person left the theatre feeling
or thinking a little differently than when she or he had
come into the theatre, then I’ve been successful.

For years I have listened to left-progressive
WBAL-FM. Dr. Peter Breggin, a radically anti-drug

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PAMELA'S ODYSSEY

Pamela Gien, author and erstwhile performer of the long-running Off-Broadway success *The Syringa Tree*, talked with Director of Publications Michael Fellmeth about South Africa, writing her first play and winning the Obie Award.

**FELLMETH.** Where in South Africa were you brought up, Pamela?

**GIEN.** I was born in Emmarentia, Johannesburg, and was raised in Ferndale, a suburb of Johannesburg. I'm what we call a Joey's girl!

**FELLMETH.** And why?

**GIEN.** I left in 1983. The reasons were complex. I was like many young people there, curious about the world, wanting to live and work in America, but I also had complicated feelings about the place — anger, denial, frustration. In retrospect, I think I was deeply fearful about what was happening there, and ashamed, without really being able to articulate that. I would avoid speaking about it, if I could, and just wanted to get away from it. My father had often said to me never to consider making that place my home — that what was being done there was evil, and since it didn't seem possible that things would change, I suppose I felt from a young age that I would leave.

**FELLMETH.** How did you end up in Boston as an actor at American Repertory Theatre?

**GIEN.** I first came to live in New York. I was offered some wonderful work, but I had a work permit that did not allow me to accept any Equity work. I had a three-year wait for a Green Card and then wrote to Robert Brustein who had offered me roles in productions by Andrei Serban and Susan Stong, which I'd had to turn down. To my astonishment, he wrote back and asked me to come up to Cambridge to audition. I did, and he asked me to join the company. It was a miraculous day, and to this day I think one of the great gifts of my life. I got to work as a principal company member with some of the finest artists in the world, people who had previously only existed to me in books! Andrei Serban, David Mamet, Christopher Walken and on and on. I'm enormously grateful to have had that opportunity, and I stayed there for just over five years, loving it.

**FELLMETH.** What inspired you to try your hand at playwriting?

**GIEN.** I'd had to turn down. To my astonishment, he wrote me a three-year process, rehearsing, refining, cutting, cutting and cutting some more. I also had the privilege of working with a superb dramaturg, Mame Hunt, at ACT Seattle, where we staged the premiere of the play. Obviously the play is deeply personal, but how much is rooted in your actual experience?

**GIEN.** It's been a hard question to answer. I started out writing about my actual life for the exercise, but as I wrote, I began to love the freedom of combining those events with the poetry of language and imagery. I would say it's not more than semi-autobiographical, based on two true incidents, one being the attack at Clova, which I tell almost exactly as I remember it being told to me at the age of ten. Also, there was a child born at our house, illegally, and hidden for a while, and I've used names of people I loved and knew there, and some family names combined with some fictitious names, really to honor those I remember. But there are large portions of it that are purely fiction, characters who were combinations of people I knew and loved and who inspired me. Salamina is a combination of women who cared for me. The parents are inspired by my own parents but are not actually them. So it's all interwoven. I read with interest about how Wendy Wasserstein has used names of people in her family and circumstances from her life. I was glad to read that, because I felt funny about it at first and then comforted reading about her process. And Athol Fugard. I loved to read about what he was trying to fictionalize from his actual life. It's fun, and a mystery, I suppose. And, of course, carried in the story are many of my deepest feelings about the place, and leaving it and returning to it. Those are all real to me. It's filled with wishes. Some might come true.

**FELLMETH.** What have your experiences been with the various productions of the play?

**GIEN.** The first production was at ACT in Seattle. Julie Harris saw a workshop performance of it and told Gordon Edelstein about it. We were enormously grateful for the chance he gave us. Matt Salinger had asked during the early workshop days in Larry's studio if he could take this piece to New York, and after Seattle, after what seemed like an interminable wait for a theatre to come available, we brought it to Playhouse 91. It's been a fascinating journey all around, particularly since I've been the performer and the writer. Wearing both hats simultaneously has been thrilling and made more so by the dedication, vision and skill of Larry Moss, the director. The experience, from the moment I unsuspiciously brought the exercise to class, has exceeded my wildest expectations. It has been enormously exciting but also rigorous. It has invited me to be the best of myself, as an artist and a human being. And I'm still learning.

**FELLMETH.** Has your family seen the play?

**GIEN.** Yes, some of them have. My parents saw it first. They had read it, and I was very anxious about their response. But they have been enormously supportive, and I'm profoundly grateful to them.

**FELLMETH.** What was their reaction?

**GIEN.** They wept a lot when they saw it. And laughed a lot. It's difficult for my family, because it's so deeply rooted in our lives, but much of it is fictional. I'm grateful for their love of the play. It has meant everything to me. I dedicated the play to them. Was it difficult for you to see another actor take over the role in New York after you'd been so completely invested in it for so long?

**GIEN.** Yes, to begin with. In fact, I kept thinking Matt Salinger, my producer, wouldn't insist on it, as I was just so anxious about it. I had worked on this piece for close to five years. I couldn't imagine someone else performing, and Matt kept assuring me that they were seeing excellent people at auditions and that I had nothing to fear. I suppose it felt to me like leaving my baby on a doorstep, but I had done over three hundred performances and couldn't continue. Matt kept saying that the play should be done by as many different actors as possible, in as many different venues, and that it was important for me as a playwright to allow someone else to perform it. And now I'm so glad I agreed. Kate has brought tremendous skill and courage to the performance and astonished me by taking over after only five weeks of rehearsal. I'd had four years to work on it! She's a joy, and the extraordinarily sweet person she is made it easier to pass the torch to her. I'm so grateful for her beautiful work in the play. And also for the gift of knowing that it works beautifully without me. Audiences love this play. There's hardly a dry eye in the house by the end. What is it in *The Syringa Tree* that has the power to move us so deeply?

Continued on page 8
THE STATE of WOMEN PLAYWRIGHTS

by Julia Miles

Women’s Project & Productions has been producing the work of women playwrights and celebrating women theatre artists since 1978. During these twenty-four seasons, women in theatre have altered the landscape of American drama, entered the dramatic canon and irrevocably changed its nature. We’re proud, but not satisfied.

We have made progress artistically as well as statistically. Based on a survey of American Theatre’s October 2000 Season Preview issue, 390 of 1,900 productions nationwide were written by a woman playwright, or 20.5 percent. This is a marked improvement since WPP’s beginning, when a survey of playwrights yielded only seven percent, which included such inspiring writers as Maria Irene Fornés and Wendy Wasserstein. Since then, numerous talented American women theatre artists — such as Eve Ensler, Beth Henley, Emily Mann, Marsha Norman, Suzan-Lori Parks, Anna Deavere Smith and Paula Vogel — have become well known, acclaimed and established. And many more are seen with increasing frequency on stages around the country, including Kia Corthron, Margaret Edson, Rebecca Gilman, Julie Jensen, Heather McDonald, Lynn Nottage, Regina Taylor, Naomi Wallace and Cheryl L. West, to name only a few. This progress comes thanks to their talent and to producers who share an awareness that women’s voices need to be heard.

We still have far to go. Even today, nearly eighty percent of the plays seen on stages in the United States are written by men. And the actual number of women writers produced is lower than the percentages would imply; of the 390 productions mentioned previously, fifty-two were regional productions of two plays (Wit by Margaret Edson and ‘Art’ by Yasmina Reza). Women are still fighting to forge writing and directing careers on a par with their male colleagues and to become part of the nation’s theatre leadership in order to help bring balance to our rich, diverse chorus of theatre voices.

The theatre world is full of amazing women artists who speak eloquently and passionately to audiences on every topic. As Women’s Project & Productions approaches our twenty-fifth anniversary, we are happy to continue developing and producing talented, inspiring female artists. We hope that you, too, will explore their work. Investigate the plays of Jo Carson, Pearl Cleage, Kia Corthron, Julie Jensen, Wendy MacLeod, Emily Mann, Lavonne Mueller, Sybille Pearson, Joan Vail Thorne, Kathleen Tolan, Diana Son, to name a few of our playwrights published by Dramatists Play Service. Relish and enjoy the discovery of new voices and the opening of fresh perspectives on our world.

Julia Miles is Founder and Artistic Director of Women’s Project & Productions

2001 BESTSELLING ACTING EDITIONS BY WOMEN

1. THE DIARY OF ANNE FRANK
   by Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett, newly adapted by Wendy Kesselman
   6. ‘ART’ by Yasmina Reza, translated by Christopher Hampton
   7. THE CHILDREN’S HOUR
   by Lillian Hellman
2. CRIMES OF THE HEART
   by Beth Henley
   8. THE VAGINA MONOLOGUES
   by Eve Ensler
3. HARVEY
   by Mary Chase
   9. THE HEIDI CHRONICLES
   by Wendy Wasserstein
4. WIT
   by Margaret Edson
   10. THE LITTLE FOXES
   by Lillian Hellman
5. HOW I LEARNED TO DRIVE
   by Paula Vogel

Julia Miles is Founder and Artistic Director of Women’s Project & Productions
psychotherapist, was a speaker one day and mentioned “The Violence Initiative,” a program so named by its critics. The reference was to an alleged contemporary federal strategy to “treat” youth violence with psychotropic drugs, all stemming from theories that violence may have cerebral-genetic origins. Dr. Breggin, who resides in the D.C. area, addressed a huge audience in Harlem — enraged at the implications of Breggin’s findings, grateful he was bringing them to light. At that lecture I also learned a new word: Ritalin, the common brand name for the drug prescribed for children to combat hyperactivity, an alleged disease. I read several of Breggin’s books at that time, specifying abuses against society by psychiatry, and, under the auspices of my commission with the Goodman Theatre, wrote Seeking the Genesis, addressing both The Violence Initiative and Ritalin. By this time I had had several commissioned pieces that had gone unproduced so when the Goodman opted to produce the play in their studio space, suddenly, unexpectedly, my faith was reinstated in the commissioning process.

Nonetheless, the summer before that fall production, I felt this odd sense of freedom writing a play commissioned to no one but myself during my month-long stay at Hedgebrook, a retreat for women writers, on Whidbey Island, north of Seattle. Beautiful. Six gorgeous two-story cottages, each for one of six writers in residency at any one time. During my four weeks, I’d communed with novelists, a poet, short story writers, an essayist and two women — one was sixty-six — who were writing their own contributions and introductions to their anthology of Buddhist women writing about their bodies. I was the only playwright. It was amazing to be in the presence of other smart, talented writers, who would approach my writing from a perspective not steeped in theatre savvy. Living in a cottage in the Pacific Northwest woods, walking distance to a beach of Puget Sound, I was in an ideal setting emotionally and physically to address environmental justice in Splash Hatch. (I’d have a similar experience years later at a retreat in Lake Placid courtesy of my New Dramatists membership — starring out at the breathtaking Adirondacks while scribbling about corporate culpability in cancer for the ten-minute Goodman Theatre/Regina Taylor commissioned Safe Box.) I researched and wrote Splash Hatch, beginning to end, in the four weeks on Whidbey Island. On my penultimate day, a resident masseur gave me my first massage. She asked how my writing was going.

“I finished the play! But no title yet.”

“Well. Maybe you should ask the massage for a title.”

Very New Age. Sure, what the heck? I did, and a third of the way into the massage it came to me — to that date, my strongest title.

With no initial commission attachment, it quickly became my most-produced play. The following summer it premiered on the mainstage of New York Stage and Film (directed by Derek Anson Jones); over that same fall/winter it was co-produced by Center Stage and Yale Rep (directed by Marion McClinton); and a year later it was one of three pieces in a festival of American plays at London’s Donmar Warehouse — a particular surprise:

By that point I had commissioned with the Royal Court and assumed my London debut would be there.

A year after the Donmar I was back in London at the Royal Court for the premiere of Breath, Boom, about girl gangs in the Bronx. I think for most people, particularly women, there’s a fascination — the idea of females taking things into their own hands. But the more I researched (mostly books and articles, though some stuff came from my experiences teaching playwriting in prison, primarily a week-long intensive at Rosewood, the high school for girls on Riker’s Island), the more I realized that the violence either inflicted by or against the girls was so overwhelming, there was no room for even the vaguest hero worship.

It spans fourteen years: The main character, Prix, is sixteen at the top and thirty at the end. No other play of mine covers more than a year in the life of the characters. This wasn’t the original plan. What goes around comes around seemed to be the natural destiny for Prix. The top of the play she kicks the crap out of her gang “sister” Comet. I thought of having Comet come back and do the same to Prix, but it felt forced. Meanwhile I had already written in that eighteen-year-old Comet has a two-year-old daughter, Jupiter. What would happen when Jupiter grew up? That informed the span of the play.

In a meeting regarding my Atlantic Theatre Company commission with artistic director Neil Pepe and then-literary manager Toni Amicarella, I expressed my interest in addressing police brutality. By the time Force Continuum was in production at the Atlantic, I referred to the piece as “a play about the relationship between the black community and the NYPD.” Brutality was a part of it, excessive force a major issue, but it had become more than both of these. I wanted not to just state the problems but to really try to find solutions. I talked with cops, of course, past and present, as well as lawyers. I gained a new friend: playwright Andrew Case who had served on the Civilian Complaint Review Board and generously provided a wealth of information (without betraying any confidential info). Particularly useful in my efforts was a white female police officer who was trained twenty years ago by black housing cops.

A couple of years ago I went to a few shows in the Human Rights Film Festival at Lincoln Center. That year ten filmmakers from around the world were commissioned to make shorts — like three minutes or less — focusing on the issue of land mines. I began to think how Americans, myself included, are not insensitive regarding the topic; we just rarely have to think about, despite some American corporate responsibility for the fact that a human being (vast majority civilians and many of these children) steps on a mine every twenty-two minutes. Which began the writing of The Venus de Milo is Armed — replacing Splash Hatch as my best title. (I think it’s provocative but Pharmacy Online just listed Venus de Milo with a group of many as “goofiest” titles of the year!) I decided to challenge myself to write the entire first act in one scene — new for me. It was hard, keeping the action alive was one thing but what I hadn’t anticipated was that, in the course of an act, my plays usually span days or weeks — with Breath, Boom, of course. Years. Now I had to keep the audience interested for an hour of Real Time in the life of the characters. I had an idea that the second act would be the opposite: many short scenes. But in the end Act One informed the subsequent structure: Act Two, Scene 1 — ninety percent of the second act, took place in the same room as Act One (actually Act One moved back and forth between two adjoining rooms; Act Two, Scene 1 in just one of these rooms); and the short Act Two, Scene 2 is outside. I made use of music for the first time. A character has a Ph.D. in musicology, specializing in spirituals. And, also new, I focused on a black bourgeois family, very different from my working-class upbringing.

The basic story: Landmines are mysteriously arriving from a concentration camp and an unexpected out of her gang “sister” Comet. I thought of having Comet come back and do the same to Prix, but it felt forced. Meanwhile I had already written in that eighteen-year-old Comet has a two-year-old daughter, Jupiter. What would happen when Jupiter grew up? That informed the span of the play.

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The basic story: Landmines are mysteriously arriving all over the U.S. I decided that the only way for Americans to understand the horror of landmines was to bring them home. On September 10th, Alabama confirmed its plans to produce the play next season. I wondered if the events that occurred twenty-

Continued on page 8

FORCE CONTINUUM by Kia Corthron
Tensions among black and white police officers and the neighborhoods they serve form the backdrop of this discomfitting look at life in the inner city.

THE GARDENS OF FRAU HESS
by Milton Frederick Marcus
When Rudolph Hess’ wife requests a gardener, Isaac arrives from a concentration camp and an unexpected relationship develops.

HEAVEN AND HELL (ON EARTH);
A DIVINE COMEDY
short plays from Actors Theatre of Louisville
A marvelous collection of short plays in which virtue, salvation and damnation are explored with amusing revelations and surprising insights.

HIGH DIVE by Leslie Ayvazian
An American woman about to turn fifty stands on the high dive of a pool in Greece and considers her life.

HOUSE ARREST: A SEARCH
FOR AMERICAN CHARACTER
IN AND AROUND THE WHITE HOUSE,
PAST AND PRESENT
by Anna Deavere Smith
A compelling assortment of letters, speeches and interviews that give a vivid look at the American experience and politics from the time of Jefferson to the Clinton presidency.

HOWIE THE ROOKIE by Mark O’Rowe
A white-knuckle ride through a nightmare Dublin, where enemies and allies are interchangeable and where the most brutal events take on a mythic significance.

JAR THE FLOOR by Cheryl West
A quartet of black women spanning four generations makes up this hilarious and heartwarming dramatic comedy.

THE LAST OF THE THORNTONS
by Horton Foote
A nursing home in Harrison, Texas, provides the setting for this rich meditation on the lives of its residents.

LOBBY HERO by Kenneth Lonergan
When a luckless young security guard is drawn into a local murder investigation, loyalties are strained to the breaking point.

NEBRASKA by Keith Reddin
The Cold War is over, but for the men and women stationed at an air force base outside of Omaha, the tensions of existence seem to increase each day.

NO NIGGERS, NO JEWS, NO DOGS
by John Henry Redwood
North Carolina in 1949 is the setting of this provocative play, which exposes racism and hate crimes of the day in the light of 2001 and beyond.

OTHER PEOPLE by Christopher Shinn
A cool and witty portrait of troubled East Village friends.

OUTSTANDING MEN’S MONOLOGUES 2001-2002
and OUTSTANDING WOMEN’S MONOLOGUES 2001-2002
edited by Craig Pospisil
Drawn exclusively from Dramatists Play Service publications over the last two seasons, each collection features over fifty monologues for auditions and class work.

THE PLAY ABOUT THE BABY
by Edward Albee
Concerns a young couple who have just had a baby and the strange turn of events that transpire when they are visited by an older man and woman.
The Wit Educational Initiative

by Craig Pospisil

Margaret Edson's Wit is more than a Pulitzer Prize-winning story of one woman's fight with ovarian cancer. It's more than a hit play or an HBO movie with a stellar cast. Wit has become a medical miracle.

For over a year and a half performances of Wit have been the centerpiece of a teaching program for doctors and other health-care workers. In February 2000 Carl Lorenz, a doctor who works at the Department of Veteran's Affairs, came out of Los Angeles' Geffen Playhouse production of Wit deeply affected by what he had just seen. It occurred to him that the play could be used as a tool in training doctors to care for gravely or terminally ill patients. It could be used to get doctors to look up from their charts and into the faces of the people who were suffering.

And so, with Margaret Edson's cooperation, the "Wit Educational Initiative" was born. Dr. Lorenz, along with Ken Rosenfeld and Jillisa Steckart, other doctors at the Department of Veteran's Affairs, founded the Initiative and developed its program. The idea was to use productions of Wit as a springboard for getting health-care workers to talk about the issues and review their own actions in similar circumstances to those of the play. Using lists of upcoming productions of Wit, provided by Dramatists Play Service, the staff at the Initiative set up two-day conferences with health-care workers at hospitals in connection with productions of the play in their area. Actors from local productions would be invited to perform the play for the conference attendees so they could experience this affecting drama.

On the first day there would be a pre-performance lecture, dealing with doctor/patient relations, as a primer. During the second day, conference attendees would watch the readings of Edson's play and afterwards split into small discussion groups. The staff of the Initiative created a handbook to guide the discussions, asking the groups to consider such questions as: How does Vivian remind you of any of your patients? Or how does her personality change her experience? And how are doctors portrayed in the play? The groups also addressed topics from doctors' use of medical and technical language with patients to asking doctors if they thought their patients died lonely. A week after the conference, the attendees gather again for a talk-back session with actual cancer survivors, care givers and current cancer patients, taking doctors out of a fictitious setting and transferring the experience into reality.

Dr. Jillisa Steckart feels the Initiative has been an enormous success, based on the responses received from evaluations from the attendees. The survey asked such questions as: How would you rate the play overall? with 97 percent answering "excellent or very good"; and, how accurately does the play portray the emotions of these situations? with about 90 percent replying "excellent or very good." As a teaching tool, the response to Wit has been phenomenal. When asked how viewing the play compared to a lecture on the subject, 87 percent replied "very or somewhat more useful." When asked how it compared to articles on the subject, 88 percent said "very or somewhat more useful." In fact, as many as 69 percent of respondents felt that seeing the play was "very or somewhat more useful" than bedside rounds at hospitals.

Unfortunately, funding for the Initiative ended on November 30, 2001, but Steckart and the others are trying to extend the life of the program by seeking new sources of funding and even taking salary cuts.

But even if the Initiative does come to an end, they plan to make their handbook and other materials available to any group that wants to replicate the program on their own for free. HBO is also helping by providing the Initiative with 450 videotape copies of the film version for use at meetings if a stage production is not available. Furthermore, the Initiative is hoping to install their handbook and video copies of the film at teaching hospitals and other medical training facilities for continued use with medical students around the country.

Steckart says the program has opened eyes, and changes to the health-care system are forthcoming. More and more hospitals are creating Palliative Care units. These are units dedicated to the alleviation of suffering, as opposed to the traditional curative only approach to doctoring, where fixing the problem is far and away the major concern, with less regard to quality of life. "The life stories that come out of this have been really fulfilling," said Steckart.

Art, it seems, may now cure the body as well as the soul.
Dramatists Play Service licenses hundreds of professional productions each year. For your convenience, here's a schedule of some of them. You can access an even more comprehensive list of professional and select nonprofit productions by visiting www.dramatists.com and viewing PAGE TO STAGE.

ALABAMA

ARIZONA


ARKANSAS

CALIFORNIA


SISTER MARY IGNATIUS EXPLAINS IT ALL FOR YOU by Christopher Durang. Denver. May.


COLORADO


CONNECTICUT

WASHINGTON, D.C.


FLORIDA
BERTHA by Harold Pinter. Sarabay Arts Center. Sarasota July.


KENTUCKY


MAINE


MARYLAND


 MASSACHUSETTS

MASS APPEAL by Bill C. Davis. Cape Playhouse. Dennis. July.


MINNESOTA


MISSOURI


NEBRASKA


NEW JERSEY


NEW YORK


NORTH CAROLINA
BABY WITH THE BATHWATER by Christopher Durang. Triad Stage. Greensboro March.


SWEET BY 'N BY by Frank Higgins. Temple Theatre Company. Sanford. April.


OHIO

OHIO

OREGON


PENNSYLVANIA


TEXAS


UTAH

Vermont


Virginia


Washington

Wisconsin


Canada


Kia Corrathon Continued

For me, it’s that I really wrote it from my heart, purely, vulnerably, and I wept and wept as I wrote. And laughed a lot too, of course. I think little Elizabeth invites us back to that forgotten but cherished very young place in all of us. She knows no judgment. She’s simply a witness, and the audiences get to make their own judgments. It’s not a piece that hammers you over the head with a political message. It’s a human story, the story of two children, their destinies decided by the color of their skin. It’s a story about hope and promise and terrible loss. It’s a story about deep friendship and family, about abundance and deprivation, and about the idea that good and evil live in your heart and not in the color of your skin. The audience comes to love the blissful joy of the child and to mourn deeply the loss of innocence. And finding the courage to go on is moving. The price Salamina has to pay, her devastating loss, and her strength at the end. She’s a miraculous character, filled with grace, filled with love.

The Obie Award must’ve been thrilling. Did it take you by surprise? Profoundly so. I never expected anything like that. I was thrilled for many reasons. It was given for performance and for the play. Winning Best Play was the best moment of all, because it was for all of us, for Larry Moss, Matt Salinger and me. I really felt it was for all our efforts, my long journey from South Africa, my journey as an artist and our long odyssey to New York. New York was my first home in America, and to be given that honor, something I’d read about so many times when I lived there, was very emotional. Lots of people came up and said how special this Obie is and that they don’t give it every year, and as a new writer, I must say, I felt blessed beyond belief. Above all, it’s wonderful in the sense that it means the story will continue to go out into the world, a story about tolerance, courage and love, and the bravery of those children in South Africa. That’s the best of it all.

I understand the play has been optioned for film. What has that been like for you? Very exciting. We want to make as much of it as possible in South Africa and that will be an extraordinary journey and homecoming. I want to keep the integrity of the piece as much as possible in the translation to another medium, and I’m enormously grateful for all the help I’ve had along the way. I have to be the luckiest fish alive!

Will we be seeing more of Pamela Gien the playwright? I have another film I’ve written, called The Lily Field, in the works now, and I’ve also been commissioned to write The Syringa Tree as a novel for Random House, so I’ll be busy for a while doing those. But I’d be honored to have another play in my life. Writing has come to me as a profound and surprising gift. I look forward to seeing where it leads me and grateful for every step along the way. So perhaps another play. It would be my joy!