



## ANOTHER STORY: WOMEN'S INVITATIONAL PLAYWRIGHTS OFFER UNCOMMON TWISTS ON SHARED EXPERIENCE

“What female playwrights bring to the table is a perspective different from what is assumed, from the default perspective we are used to seeing,” says Martyna Majok.

As the winning playwrights in the Ashland New Plays Festival's Women's Invitational, Majok, Jiehae Park and Lauren Yee will present their beautifully written, sometimes quirky but always powerful perspectives in staged readings of their plays, March 25 through March 27.

Majok's play, *Cost of Living*, is a tale of four people whose lives intersect in unexpected ways, and what emerges from those intersections. Like many of her plays, it focuses on working class people, immigrants and the struggles of those whose lives are outside the mainstream. They are stories drawn largely from Majok's own experience of immigrating to this country with her mother from Poland.

“People have expectations about what those stories are supposed to be,” she says. “I think women writing about those things create a different story, a different idea of who people are, without telling the same story over and over again.”

Majok didn't see her first live stage performance until she was 17. It was *Cabaret*, and she was hooked. Her talent and determination led her to earn an undergraduate degree in English at the University of Chicago and a master's in playwriting at Yale. She has written eight plays that have been presented around the country. *Cost of Living* will have its world premiere this summer at the Williamstown Theatre Festival.

She is excited about her first visit to Ashland, which her Oregon-born husband has assured her is a “magical place,” and she is eager to participate in an event that promises to make stories written by women better known to theatergoers.

“Now that we’ve been having conversations about women in theater and writing, I’m excited to meet all these people, and to see the play presented. I am really looking forward to the conversations we will have about playwriting, and women in playwriting in particular,” she says.

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Jiehae Park also brings an outsider’s perspective to her story-telling. Her play, *Hannah and the Dread Gazebo*, tells the story of a Korean-American family coming to grips with a grandmother’s suicide and the wish she passes on to her granddaughter as a final gift. It is the story of the immigrant experience, to be sure, and how that experience alienates a family from its roots in an ancient and mysterious culture.

“I write a lot about the cost of "success" - often immigrant stories,” Park says. “What from our past and old worlds do we give up in order to move more fluidly and comfortably in new worlds we aspire to? What's on the other end of that aspiration?”

Park came to this country from Korea when she was very young, and like many who share that experience, describes characters torn between the two worlds. In *Hannah*, she captures a sense of rejection of and alientation from that former place, mixed with longing to be part of and understand the timeless and mysterious facets of one’s native culture.

Although she loves the collaboration of live theater, Park did not plan on being a playwright until a few years ago. She wanted to be an actress, majoring in theater at Amherst, then receiving an MFA from the University of California at San Diego.

“When I started writing for real, it probably came from trying to make sense of questions I was grappling with in my life. I started writing to try to understand something that felt very important to me, but that I couldn't quite articulate.”

*Hannah* took a long time to write, unfolding a little each day, Park says. “I wish I were one of those folks for whom writing was sheer bliss. But anything that feels important to me is a struggle to write about. It has to cost something.”

Park doesn’t like to identify specific ideas she wants her audiences to take away from her work. In the case of *Hannah and the Dread Gazebo*, she says, “I'd be happy if people felt like they understood something afterwards--even if they couldn't quite articulate what it was and were still grappling with the understanding afterwards.”

That expanded understanding is one reason she is thrilled to be part of the Women's Invitational.

"There are - and have been for a long time - a lot of original, interesting, brilliant women writing plays. So in that sense they haven't been 'missing' from storytelling. The thing missing, the gap that needs to be closed, is less about the absence of the stories and more about audiences not getting to hear and see all these stories that are already out there, but not being produced."

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*King of the Yees* is, in playwright Lauren Yee's words, "A father-daughter story, a joy ride thru Chinese culture in America in the 21st century, and the story you try to tell about who your family was and what your parents were like."

As a Chinese American who grew up in San Francisco, Yee says the play is "fairly autobiographical." While it certainly explores the contrast between old and new, inherited and acquired cultures, she says it is first and foremost the story of a family, and of the relationship between parents and children.

"I'm especially interested in what stories we get and what we don't get as children," Yee says, "and what stories we need to make up for ourselves."

That love of getting and making up stories has been with her since early childhood. It took the form of playwriting by the time she reached high school, when she wrote a play for a competition. "I entered a playwriting contest and my play was chosen," she says. It cemented her life's direction.

"That feeling of working with actors was amazing - I'll never forget it," she says. "As a writer you spend so much time by yourself. Being able to work with and build something with other people was remarkable."

Yee has continued her journey as a playwright with astonishing success. Her first full-length play, *Ching Chong Chinaman*, was written as her senior thesis at Yale, where she majored in theater and English; the play has been produced in theaters around the country. She went on to earn an MFA in playwriting from the University of California at San Diego and has written seven more plays, all of them produced to widespread acclaim. Her stories range from the downright whimsical to the drop-dead serious - and always with a twist. "Each play is its own little planet, with its own sense of gravity, its

own sense of time and language,” Yee says. “But all of my plays live in a place somewhere between funny and sad.”

She is delighted to be part of the Women’s Invitational, and is honored to be sharing the stage with women whose work she truly admires. “I am huge fan of the work of the other playwrights, and I’m incredibly excited to see them staged.”

She also looks forward to seeing how the actors of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival will portray the characters in *King of the Yees*.

“I love actors’ ability to take text and make it their own, to bring their own point of view to it. I never have an idea of how a production should look, and I’m excited when a director comes up with something very different from what I’ve imagined.”