

The wrong kind of people: Kurt Maxey (KM) interviews Robey playwright, George Corbin (GC)



Jordan Smith, Ken Sagoes, Bob Rumnock, Lynda Berg, and Swiszina - the actors who did a terrific job bringing alive the characters in my new play "The Wrong Kind of People." Also pictured are director Sammie Wayne (kneeling, far left) and Ben Guillory, Producing Artistic Director of The Robey Theatre Company. I'm standing in the back row (far right).

KM: I enjoyed The Robey Theatre Company's recent staged reading of your rousing play, "The Wrong Kind of People." I would like to get your insight into the development of your play. But first let's chat about your development as a writer. Did you ever have an interest in writing when you were a child or adolescent?

GC: Nada! None! I just met the writing requirements of school and college writing courses. I don't remember sensing the drive to create through writing. My bad handwriting, according to Mrs. Robinson, my fifth-grade teacher, would not have helped. Those were the days before computers and laptops.

KM: When did you find yourself becoming dedicated to playwriting? Was it an easy or difficult transition? What did you do to start your journey?

GC: My playwriting journey started after I retired in 2004. I thought it might be fun to write a play even though I lacked the knowledge and skills. I had a story in my head which I titled "Nu Men." By the way I found that coming up with a title first helped me focus on the central theme. Then I followed up with a play called "Thunderclouds." The easy part was coming up with new stories and the supporting dialogue. The more challenging aspect was learning how to support the arc of my new play and creating the subtle changes needed to portray the evolution of my

main characters. I got really serious about my playwriting after I became a dedicated member of The Robey Theatre Company's playwrights workshop.

KM: What is "The Wrong Kind of People" about?

GC: It's about a young African-American law school graduate attempting to study for the Bar Exam in 1942 Los Angeles in the "Colored Room" of an exclusive hotel on Wilshire Blvd. Theo, the main character, who is very bright but a little naïve, gains in one night the "real world education" he needs for a successful career as a "black attorney." This "education" results from his interactions with various "denizens" of the night who use his hotel room window as a back entrance to the Guardian Hotel. A "penthouse girl," an illegal poker game organizer, and a drunken Superior Court judge who hopes to catch his wife with her lover in one of the hotel rooms, enter via the window. An ambitious black bellman called "Fixit" coordinates this activity with the reluctant assistance of Theo who finds out that life is not all "black or white" and that courage is required when newfound friends are in need.



KM: What motivated you to write this play?

GC: I became interested in exploring how racial covenants – which restricted where African-American and Asians, among others, could own, lease, or occupy property in Los Angeles – impacted these groups and why this divisive racial policy was generally accepted by whites in Los Angeles. Eighty percent of homes in 1940 Los Angeles had a racial covenant and it wasn't until 1947 that the Supreme Court ruled that such covenants violated the Constitution. I thought a play about a young black attorney debating a white judge on this issue might be interesting.

KM: What was one of the major challenges you faced in writing this play?

GC: It was all about creating the appropriate “pace.” My play is somewhat zany and comedic. This necessitated lots of accelerated action and supporting dialogue. Getting this “right” for “Wrong” was definitely my major challenge. One way I did this was by combining what otherwise would have been several separate scenes into one. I think it works.

KM: What’s one of your favorite passages from your play?

GC: That’s an easy one. “Killed by a crustacean!” My character, the very drunk and “over the top” Judge Purdy, makes this pronouncement at the height of the play and captures, at least in my eyes, the comedic and zany aspects of “The Wrong Kind of People.” The recent reading at Robey reinforced my assessment.

KM: The Hungarian playwright and critical thinker Lajos Egri refers to the “unity of opposites.” I kind of got that feeling when I attended the fabulous reading of “The Wrong Kind of People.” It reminded me of a mix of Damon Runyan, Frank Capra, and Preston Sturges. It was zany, over the top, and straight funny. Please elaborate. Please make sure our readers know about the sub-text!

GC: Thank you Kurt. Coming from you that was high praise indeed. I originally had planned to create a serious play about the “Racial Covenant” and its impact on LA minorities in the early forties. To put it succinctly, my characters “took over,” especially Judge Purdy and Fixit who transformed it into more of a comedy. They in essence “wrote” my play – made it easy for me. As far as subtext is concerned, hopefully the audience picked up the underlying theme of African-Americans striving to reach their dreams in creative ways in spite of the discrimination and bigoted attitudes of that era, some of which have not changed unfortunately. Also, I attempted to impart a sense of common humanity which connects us all. Hey, that sounded pretty good!



KM: Three-fourths of a century has elapsed since the time of your play. To what extent do you feel that “The Wrong Kind of People” have become “the right kind of people”?

GC: That’s a very interesting question. Hmm. Well, there are certainly lot’s more African-American “Johnnie Cochrans” – successful high-profile attorneys. Just check CNN and MSMBC on any given day. As for black entrepreneurs, we still don’t have the number of “Fixit’s,” the black bellman character who wants to start his own taxi company, needed to help close our

wealth gap, in spite of Oprah. Unfortunately, the “oldest profession” still exists. Although the “Me Too” movement, in addition to the attention being paid to human trafficking, should help a bit. Gambling is now everywhere and legal in most cases. You can turn on your TV and watch professional poker players. Everything’s above board. When it comes to those on the bench indulging in questionable behavior just read the *Los Angeles Times*. Human nature – the fuel of plays – never changes.

KM: Do you read and attend many plays? I once went through a period when I would deliberately go to plays that received bad reviews. A learning process if you will. Maybe I’m a masochist. Have you ever done that?

GC: My wife Lien and I are avid theatre patrons. We attend on average two plays a month, sometimes more. We see all of the Taper productions as well as small theatre offerings both in LA and Ventura County. The Rubicon and the Conejo Players in Ventura and the smorgasbord of ninety-nine seat theaters such as The Fountain. I try to avoid pain, so I have not deliberately attended plays that received bad reviews. On the other hand, I have attended plays that received great reviews, but I found them disappointing. So, any “learning” I received was inadvertent.

KM: You are a prolific writer of short plays; how many have you written? Was it a way to learn your craft before taking on the full-length play? (By the way, I really like your full-length plays.) How many have you had produced? What did they deal with?

GC: I’ve written about fifteen short plays. As I mentioned previously, I “wrote” two full-length plays, “Nu Men” and “Thunderclouds” before I knew what I was doing. Later, after getting involved with the Robey Playwrights Lab I found it extremely helpful in honing my skills resulting in several of my short plays being performed at the NAACP’s Ten-Minute Play Festival, also a couple at The Towne Street and of course here at the Robey.

KM: Name a few of your favorite playwrights and plays and the reasons why you selected them.

GC: I checked my “bathroom library” and came up with the following. Let’s start with a few of my favorite plays first. “Intimate Apparel” by Lynn Nottage, “Radio Golf” by you know who (August Wilson), “A Raisin in the Sun,” “True West” by Sam Shepard, “A Doll’s House” by Henrik Ibsen, “The Glass Menagerie,” “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof” – anything by Tennessee Williams.

KM: How has the Robey’s playwrights lab affected your writing?

GC: I don’t think you would be here interviewing me had it not been for the Robey workshop and the great facilitators such as Aaron Henne and Dylan Southard. Also, the supporting and motivating workshop environment has played a major role in helping me keep up my writing, and that’s the bottom line. Keep typing until you finish your play!

KM: When you start a play, what are the first elements you think of?

GC: Story! I attempt to write a synopsis of a story I have in my head which is potentially interesting and unique. This story must have a beginning, midpoint, and end. Then comes the development of my characters and their motivations. It doesn't work for me if I can't state clearly how the characters evolve – change.

KM: I've heard you say you like to write about obscure Afro-American events. I once saw a short play of yours about an African-American soldier fighting in the Philippines circa 1900. Did you know about the war there, or was it something you came across in reading?

GC: “Insurrectos” is the name of my short play about the Philippine-American War in which thousands of black troops participated. A few “switched sides” and became “Insurrectos” fighting against their own country. The play addresses their motivation - were they the true patriots? My mother's caregiver Venus, who became a beloved member of our family, was from the Philippines. She sparked my interest in exploring the history of her country. I was aware of the war which occurred after the end of the Spanish-American War, but not this interesting aspect of the role African-American soldiers played.

KM: I know you were born and raised in Bermuda. I would love to see a few Bermuda plays (hint, hint).

GC: My “Bermuda play” is called “The Blue Marble.”

KM: What's the future look like for playwright George Corbin?

GC: My immediate focus is on “The Wrong Kind of People” - raising the funds needed to get it produced. If you have a few thousand for my “collection plate” I would be very grateful.



Kurt Maxey's play, *"Pity the Proud Ones,"* was produced in 2011 by the Robey Theatre Company. His short play *"The Agreement"* opened Robey's first play festival in 2015. Kurt has also been a member of Robey's Playwrights Lab and *History Detectives*.