

## **Kelundra Smith Artist Statement**

I am a playwright who uplifts the voices of people in the contemporary South by connecting our experiences to important historical events. I am the daughter of Black southern parents who are the children of Black southern parents who were the children of Black southern parents. The geography and culture of the South form my being and inform my work. It looks like pine needles blowing in the breeze; smells like earth after the rain; sounds like jazz and gospel in equal measure; and tastes like collard greens with turkey necks. This is my American experience.

I came to playwriting after a decade as a theater critic covering shows in the Southeast and on Broadway because of who and what I didn't see onstage. The plurality of Black people in America have long resided in the Southeast, and I see my plays as restorative narratives. Most of my plays are works of historical fiction that celebrate the lives of people who were unafraid to abandon the familiar, start over, and risk losing everything in the name of self-determination. Since these topics can be difficult to navigate, I infuse humor, magical realism, and lyrical movement into most of my plays.

The Reconstruction Trilogy is a long-term project, which consists of three plays about the trials and triumphs of Black Georgians after the Civil War. With "The Wash," "The Vote," and "The Knot," I highlight the areas that emancipated Black people focused on in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: socioeconomic mobility, popular sovereignty, and the family. Moving into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, "Monarchs" is a drama about a family moving from Mississippi to Chicago for a chance at a better life during the Great Migration and the Great Depression. Finally, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, "Other Paths to God," which is a whodunit about nurses at a crossroads in the careers and spiritual lives during a harrowing pandemic.

Since my background is in theater criticism and journalism, inspiration for me usually comes from reading articles, essays, and narrative nonfiction as well as interviewing subject matter experts. Elizabeth Gilbert wrote in her book "Big Magic" that ideas are invitations. I know that an idea is a play when an idea that won't let me stay home, so to speak. From there, in the words of "Grey's Anatomy" creator Shonda Rhimes, character drives story. If I can make the audience care about someone, then they'll care about what happens to them. Then, from there, I usually work on dialogue and plot, usually writing the first draft without any stage directions and then adding action in subsequent drafts. On any project, I cultivate creativity, curiosity, care, and connection.

Imagining a vibrant future for Black people and other people of color is central to my work, because our best days are before us. Our ancestors mopped floors for free and marched across them for freedom. I am challenging people who experience my work to question the stories they tell in their families and social groups as well as the stories they have been told about America. I believe that the past is the best teacher we have, and that the liberation blueprint lives there and inside of each of us.