

Playwright Diana Son: “any kind of categorization is a ghetto”

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The Seattle theatre continues to be a welcoming place for Diana Son’s critically-acclaimed play “Stop Kiss.” Seven years after being produced at the Seattle Repertory Theatre, “Stop Kiss” is now being presented by the Seattle Public Theater, in residence at the Bathhouse Theatre on Green Lake. “Stop Kiss” explores the way in which a single kiss can irrevocably change two lives. Son states that she had the title “Stop Kiss” in mind for a long time before the current play was completed in 1998. “I have always been interested in how life can suddenly change irrevocably. Friedrich Durrenmatt talks about the ‘worst possible turn of events,’” Son says. “I think all of my plays have in one way or another had a pivotal event that changes life forever for the characters.”

Son has been alternately praised and criticized for being a heterosexual who has written a play about two women who are attacked for exchanging a kiss in public. Some critics have objected to the play’s emphasis on violence as a reaction to gay sexuality, especially because Son herself is not a lesbian. But Son found the opposite reaction in the television business: she says that a television development executive who had read and loved “Stop Kiss” then asked her agent if Son could write about experiences outside her own. Son reports that her agent replied, “Stop Kiss IS outside her experience! She’s not gay!” Son concludes, “I got the job.”

“Stop Kiss” is not the first play Son has written that explores issues of gender. “I have bumped into constrictions based on gender my whole life and I find it maddening,” Son says. “Why you would want to narrow what a person [including yourself] is capable of based on gender is ridiculous to me.”

Son links her interest in writing about gender issues to her family life. “My mom was one of six daughters — my grandparents kept having kids because they wanted a son. After the sixth girl, they adopted a nephew. I was thinking about that when I wrote ‘BOY.’” Now, Son says, “ironically, I find myself the mother of three sons! And through

them I see how early and how pervasive the assumptions are. Just try to buy newborn clothes that are not blue or pink. What's wrong with green, orange, yellow?"

Despite the controversy over her sexual orientation, and her ongoing interest in gender issues, Son reports that she hasn't faced any obstacles due to being Asian-American. "More than anything, writers are judged by the style of their work," Son says. "Are they 'soft,' or 'edgy?' Are they better suited for a procedural show or a character-driven show? If you ask me, any kind of categorization is a ghetto."

Although Son would prefer to focus on playwriting, for many years, she has devoted her talents to television writing. "I write for TV. for the money, full stop," Son says. "It's impossible to have a career as a playwright alone. Either you have to teach, or write for film or TV. Because I have a family, I prefer the steadiness of a TV job. I don't have to constantly hustle for work or pay too much attention to what's the current zeitgeist in Hollywood. I write my scripts, get paid every week, and am home in time to cook dinner every night."

Son has sought to make the necessity of earning a living by writing for television complement her playwriting. "I think in general I'm perceived as being a writer who writes strong characters, which is one of the reasons why I took the job on 'Law & Order: Criminal Intent,' which is clearly a procedural," she says. "I wanted to strengthen my plot-writing skills and have TV writing samples that complement my plays." Yet despite her ongoing work in television, Son asserts that she also loves teaching. But because she is currently raising newborn twins, she says teaching is "far too draining for someone who also wants to write their own plays and raise a family. My work for TV is far less time-consuming than teaching." Son's future career dreams remain focused on nurturing dramatic writing for the stage. "Some day, when my kids are in college or something, I would love to teach again, maybe even run a playwriting program." Following the initial production of "Stop Kiss" at the Joseph Papp Public Theater in New York City, Son's play was optioned as a screenplay by producer/director Robert Greenwald. Son is less enthusiastic about the film option these days, deeming the screenplay that she wrote for Greenwald to be "so-so." Greenwald's option has since expired, and Son is not pursuing any new film options for that play, preferring

instead to focus her screen efforts on television writing. "Right now, I don't have any eagerness to rewrite the screenplay" of "Stop Kiss," Son concludes, "I think it was a great play and I'm happy with it in that form."

Stop Kiss runs through April 8 at Seattle Public Theater, 7312 W. Greenlake Dr. N., Seattle.