

# The Asian Reporter

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**MY TURN**

■ **Dmae Roberts**



## Here On This Bridge: The -Ism Project

Having grown up in Oregon since the age of 10, it's not shocking to befriend someone and later hear them say something racist, sexist, anti-gay, anti-immigrant, or anti-Semitic. When I hear it, I feel a twinge of surprise mixed with a sense of sadness and disappointment in them. In Oregon, I've engaged in more cultural education conversations than I'd like. When interacting with people in person or on social media, frequently it occurs daily.

More recently, I saw a Facebook post by my hairdresser of nearly 20 years who expressed far-right views about the media being biased and untrustworthy and finding comfort in one-sided documentaries that debased the former president and promoted the current one. The post and comments by her friends left a queasy feeling in my stomach.

Seeing her post was somewhat unexpected because my hairdresser is a 40-something white vegan woman with so many tattoos on her arms and legs you can barely see any skin. At first glance, one might think she's a hard rocker.

My first thought about her post was that I needed to find a new hairdresser. Then I reconsidered. Why would someone like her turn to such divisive views? This is the same woman I've talked to about health, diet, relationships, and pop culture for decades. During this time, has she been moving to the far right?

Instead, I decided that at my next appointment in about a month I would at least give her the benefit of the doubt and hear her out.

After the 2016 election, I, like many Americans, have seen and felt the greatest divide of our country that I've ever experienced. People seem to have stopped participating in civil conversations and instead resort to shouting, name-calling, and outright acts of hate and violence. As a result of this animosity, I've been thinking about a project that would use artistic expression to get people to meet and actually talk to each other.

I had two inspirations. The first was my travels around Oregon as part of the "Conversation Project," a series presented by Oregon Humanities. My topics, mixed-race and interracial identity, were a catalyst for communities of color in Oregon to come together and converse with white community members about the difficult topic of race.

During the project I found people in small towns struggling with a rise in bullying and blatant acts of hate, including name-calling and displays of the confederate flag. But I also discovered white allies

in these communities, who, after being shocked to hear about the experiences of their neighbors, resolved to be more supportive and protective.

The second inspiration was the August Wilson Red Door Project's presentation of New Black Fest's *Hands Up: 7 Playwrights, 7 Testaments*, a milestone theatre piece produced locally by artistic director Kevin Jones. The collection of monologues from national playwrights detailed and demonstrated the racial profiling of African Americans by law enforcement. It was performed throughout the Pacific Northwest before 12,000 people. After witnessing the testaments of Black men and women, the dialogue that followed simply changed minds and lives. Their newest project is their original play *Cop Out: Beyond Black, White & Blue*, which presents the perspectives of law enforcement. I urge folks to watch it.

I thought to myself, what can I do with these two inspirations to create a work that could travel around Oregon to build bridges between divided communities? That's when *Here On This Bridge: The -Ism Project* was born.

Through my nonprofit, MediaRites, and its Theatre Diaspora program, the goals of the production were conceived: 1. To produce an original theatrical work that would eventually travel throughout Oregon; 2. To address the divide as well as the backlash against people of color, women, immigrants, refugees, and LGBTQI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, and intersex) people, which have become more visible and frequent since the 2016 presidential election; 3. To address the intersections of race with sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia; 4. To create community dialogues we value as well as the professional work we hope to create; 5. To provide continued opportunities for theatre artists of color with workshops and trainings as well as to perform in the new work.

The first step was a national call to playwrights for monologues. Through the process, six pieces were selected — five from Oregon writers and one created by a nationally recognized Iraqi-American writer, Heather Raffo. The six stories are very different: A Black tradeswoman negotiates the complicated terrain of diversity training; an Iraqi refugee woman reacts to news of shootings and child safety; a gay young man honors his Lao refugee mother's strength and details the painful moments of coming out to her; a Latina recalls the harrowing story of her mother escaping hardship and violence coming to America by crossing the Rio Grande; a Black middle-class woman experiences racial

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