Hello. I’m Bob Bradley. This is THE 101, Introduction to Theater and Drama Arts. My guest today is Paula Kaplan, actor, director, and playwright. She has come to this career after having a well-established career previously and has now decided to return to an early love, the theater, and we’re most happy to have this conversation with her. So welcome.

B: I should say that you have a Ph.D. from Duke.

K: Not one of my favorite places.

B: Not one of your favorite places, but that’s okay. In Psychology. All right. And so when you finished this Ph.D. in Psychology, what did you do with it?

K: I did a post-doc. I moved to Toronto, was writing a book, an academic book, and then I worked at the family court clinic for three years in Toronto while I was having two children, taking care of two stepchildren, not having a minute — you know, certainly no time to go audition for anything and go to rehearsals which I’d done in high school, you know, and really missed it. And then I taught at the University of Toronto for years and years. I taught — I was a professor of applied psychology and I taught in women’s studies.

B: And at this point no association with theater or --

K: Just went every chance I got.

B: An audience member.

K: An audience member. Well, actually once it was going to be the anniversary of the women’s studies program and somebody dug up a play about the first woman at the University of Toronto. And they wanted to do a reading of it and they asked me
to play her, and I thought, “Oh, this is heaven. I’ve missed it so much.” But during the rest of that time, never.

B: And we should certainly say that within the women’s studies you became a nationally known figure from your writing. In fact, my first memory of you is at some point you returned. You were doing a lecture here at SMS, on campus, on — do you remember specifically?

K: Well, it --

B: It was a women’s issue.

K: Yes. It was Women’s History Month and I wrote a bunch of non-fiction books about — various issues about women and psychology and political stuff. And I’d written a book called The Myth of Women’s Masochism, so they asked me to come and give a talk about that. They were doing a lot of stuff about violence against women. And actually it was really interesting.

I should just preface this by saying when my books came out, I did an enormous amount of media stuff, being interviewed. And I remember people would say on phone interviews — one time there was a host on a TV phone-in show. And, you know, somebody phones in and they ask a question. Of course the camera goes to you while they’re asking the question over the phone, and I was very aware that I didn’t want viewers to be bored and just have me sitting there like that, and so I made sure to make it clear that I was listening and sympathizing — you know, whatever.

And after the show the host said something about how — what I was doing and he
said, “Are you aware of what you do?” And also, all those years when I was giving public lectures and teaching, I was very aware that the acting I had done in high school came into it. You know, a lot of people would say in that context, “Oh, you’re acting. That means you’re faking.” And I would always say, “No. What it means is using your whole face and body and voice to convey fully what it is you’re saying.” And so I felt like in a way I was acting all those years.

B: Oh, well, I’ve always said people ask if I act on stage and I say, “Oh, seldom. Almost never. But always in the classroom.”

K: Well, right. It makes you less boring.

B: Oh, yes. Far better.

K: So then after both my kids were grown — I was divorced when they were quite young and when you’re a single parent, you can’t go audition and go to rehearsals all the time and so I was still teaching. And when the second of my two children was off to college, I had an advance to write another non-fiction book and I thought, “I want to go back to the stage. I just don’t want to be in Canada anymore.” And I moved to Providence, Rhode Island. I thought I’d be there for a year, writing a book. So I moved there in August.

B: Why did you choose Providence?

K: Well, there were a number of reasons. I loved New England. My dad’s from there originally and we used to go back there every summer. And also Brown University has a women’s center and they said that I could be a visiting scholar there, which means I get free e-mail and library use and that’s it. I don’t get a desk, I don’t get a
mailbox, but it was good to have the affiliation.

So in August I got there, started writing this book. And then in the fall the president of Brown then, Bertram Gregorian, had a theater weekend and was giving honorary degrees to help [inaudible names]. And Paula Vogel, who had not yet won her Pulitzer Prize for play writing, gave a lecture and she said two things in there. Actually moved me to tears. One was — she said theater is about community. I had just moved back from Canada. I didn't know anyone in Providence, no one in Rhode Island. I was really sort of starting anew. And then the other thing she said was with all the video arcades and “Sesame Street” and so on, we need artists to slow us down. Because if we don’t, we will have collective memory.

And the tears were streaming down my cheeks and I looked around and nobody else was crying. And I thought, “Okay. Something’s going on that I obviously need to think about.” So I went back — I was writing this non-fiction book — and I thought, “I know. I miss theater. So I’ll start with examples of real people who have gone through the kinds of things I’m writing about.” And I did that and I thought, “There.” Then I thought, “Oh-oh. That’s not all I needed to do.”

I saw an ad for a free acting workshop. Never had any acting classes. Did some acting when I was at Greenwood and, ‘course, used to see everything at SMS and loved it. Was raised on Readers Theater and Chamber Theater which I’m amazed lots of theater people outside here don’t know about and should. And so I just decided, “Well, I’m gonna go and take this free workshop and then after I write the
book in about six months, then I’d like to take some acting classes.”

Well, I went and I was so enchanted by the workshop and so happy to be back doing theater stuff that I signed up after the workshop. And it was only on the drive home that I thought, “Wait. You weren’t gonna do this for months.” So I went --

**B:** So the workshop was a come-on to get you to sign up for something for pay or --

**K:** Yes, it was. But also I remember on the way there — I remember thinking, “Now, if they ask that people do improv, then I’ll just slip quietly out.” Because I love acting, but I would be terrified to do improv. And so I sat there and this woman gave some lectures — Pat Hagnar — some lecture material and then she got us up doing various exercises. Then she said, “Okay. I need two volunteers.” And I thought, “Well, probably everybody’s gonna have to do something.” I went up and she gave this other woman and me something to do, and I did it and it was great fun.

**B:** And the next thing you were doing an improv?

**K:** Realized that was improv and I thought, “Oh, my god.” So, yes. So I signed up. I went to class three times, did two monologues, and was just so in love with, you know, being back in theater that I went home and I called a cousin of mine, a very distant cousin, who had run a theater school in LA for decades. Her name was Estelle Harmon. And Carol Burnett and Rock Hudson and Sharon Gless studied with her. She was very, very well respected. I had met her once. And I called her and I said — I said, “I just went into theater,” and I said, “I don’t know anything
about taking acting classes and acting school.” I said, “Is there some way you would ever consider taking a distant cousin?” I mean, I didn’t know if you just had to go and sign up, or if you had to audition, or what. She said, “Well, why don’t you send me an audition tape.” And I said, “Oh, okay. I’ll do that.”

Now, I had not yet taken an audition class so I didn’t know what to do. I went over to Brown, had somebody set up the tape, and I put two long monologues -- very long, the ones I’d done in class -- on this tape and sent it to her. And then she wrote back and she said here’s what she thought I did well and here’s what she thought I needed work on, and I thought, “I totally agree that’s what I need to work on.”

So I went to LA and studied full-time for three months and then --

B: With her?

K: Well, she was quite ill then, but with people in her school, yeah, and learned a lot of stuff. Did not like LA. And then I moved back to Toronto for a year and a half to teach again and started auditioning and started being cast. And I actually got my Canadian equity card and --

B: So these were professional auditions that you were going to?

K: In Toronto there are a lot of theaters that are— they’re sort of an echelon between community theater and equity houses.

B: They were probably what in this country we call the non-equity professional
theater companies or whatever?

K: Fairly professional. Some of them pay you a little bit and some of them don’t pay you anything. Actually what happened — it’s a funny story. There’s a woman named Ginger Howard Friedman who wrote this book called Callback, and it was a sequel to Michael Shirtley’s book, Audition, which theater students all love and she worked with him for a long time. Well, she was teaching audition technique in Toronto and I went to take her class. And she was giving me these monologues and some of them were very funny, and people were laughing hysterically when I did them. And I thought, “Gosh, that’s amazing.” Because in LA, one of the things I learned was that I can’t do comedy. I’m not funny. I have no timing, you know. And then I realized, “Now, what’s the difference between the two?” Ginger knows how to choose good material. She knows how to tailor it to the person. So at the end of one of her classes she said to me, “You are auditioning, aren’t you?” and I said no, and she said, “Well, you’re ready.” So that’s what got me started doing it. So I did that for awhile and made a little bit of money.

B: So at that point you did, however, perhaps learn something that, in fact, many actors don’t often learn, and that is choose your material wisely.

K: It makes such a difference.

B: Because some actors — that is that which fits you.

K: Yes.

B: That which is appropriate for you, certainly in that which perhaps sometimes can challenge you?
K: Yes. Yes. So after the year of teaching in Toronto again, I went back to Providence.

B: This was teaching back in women's studies again?

K: Teaching actually in psychology — well, and some women’s studies. But it was just a year long position. I really did want to get back to the States. So I went back to Providence and thought, “Oh, gosh. I don’t have an agent here. I don’t know if anything is even done around Providence or Boston.” Then I found out where to get information about auditions and I went — I auditioned for — it was an educational CD Rom and I got the part. And that sort of started me going, so I started acting around there.

And then the way I got into play writing was I went back to Toronto to the Toronto French Festival. I was sitting there watching this play about Zelda Fitzgerald in The Sanitarium and I remember thinking, “This is a fascinating subject but it’s really a boring play.” And then it hit me. “Oh, it takes place in a mental hospital.” Well, my last book that I had — the one I’d written in Providence was about the psychiatric establishment and some of the awful things they do. And I thought, “You know, I’d love to write a play about that because I think the public needs to know. And also it’s a good story.” And then I remember thinking, “It’ll probably turn out that I can’t write plays because I bet it will be different from writing these non-fiction books.” That’s how naive I was. I thought, “I’ll bet it will be different.” I wasn’t sure.

B: Some small difference there.
K: Some small. So I thought, “Well, I bet I’ll learn a lot by trying.” And, frankly, because my kids were both gone, it was the first time in decades I got a chance to do something just for fun — you know, just because I wanted to learn. So my daughter — God bless her — for my birthday gave me a book on play writing and I read it, and then I wrote the first part of a play. And I showed it to her and she was so sweet. She was trying to be supportive and she said, “Well, Mom” — she was about 20 — she said, “It’s good.” And I said, “Well, what? What do I need to do?” And she said, “Well, but you’re telling — you’re telling it.” And I said, “Yeah?” And she said, “Well, in theater you’re supposed to show it.” And I said, “Oh, yes. Of course. Now how do I do that?” And I remember she just looked at me — you know, “That stuff — everything you have to do.”

So, see, having taught and written nine non-fiction books where you want to be as clear as you can, make your case, logical arguments, I had to get rid of all of that. And then I remember my father who — my parents always took me to everything that they could find — and my father said -- when he read my first script he said, “Well, it’s interesting. But isn’t there supposed to be some mystery in a play?” And I thought, “Well, mystery. I’m not sure what he means.” And then I came to understand. It took me a long time to understand that nobody wants to watch if they know everything that’s going on. There has to be something to keep them in their seats because they want to see what’s gonna happen and they don’t know it.

So that was a really important piece of learning.

B: So did you take any play writing classes? Have you ever taken any play
writing classes?

K: No.

B: Okay. That’s all right.

K: But I’ve given lectures about how to write plays. But only because people asked me to do it and I always say to them, “I’ve never taken a play writing class.” And they say, “Well, just talk about, you know, what you know and how you write plays, and then how you make them better when they’re not.”

B: Okay. And that’s what we’re doing today. So go ahead.

K: Now we have an imposter yet again. Well, so I wrote this script and I remember I was aware.

B: Now, this is the script that was about --

K: About the psychiatric establishment. Actually, Jane Bright who was at Greenwood three years ahead of me and she’s now in advertising, and she said to me, “Oh, it’s about is anybody normal and who gets to decide.” And I said, “Oh, now I see why you’re in advertising. Yes, that’s perfect.” It was called “Call Me Crazy.” And I remember writing these very serious scenes for a therapist in a case conference room and I did want people to learn something from it as well.

You know, some people say, “Well, it’s not theater because there’s information in there and your political perspective is clear.” And at first I thought, “Oh, God. See, I knew I couldn’t write plays. I’m so ashamed.” And then I started thinking, “Wait a minute. There are lots of playwrights who teach you something while they entertain you and to have a very clear political perspective.” And so I wrote this
serious stuff and I knew that it was too dense and too unrelievedly serious. It was
gonna have to be sort of the core, but I was gonna have to do something else.
So I finished it. I had lunch with Ginger Howard Friedman and we sat there in the
restaurant and we read it aloud. And every once in a while I said, “I know it needs
some --”

B: I hope the rest of the patrons enjoyed this.

K: Oh, they had a ball. But you’ve got to understand, this was Toronto. Very British
influence, you know. Let me tell you, very reserved. When you smile at somebody
on the street there, they look at you like why are you doing this to me. So it was
really very strange to be doing this in Toronto.
But she’s a New Yorker, you know. And as we read through it, I said, “I know it
needs some sort of lightening, somehow some comedy,” and then we just came up
with ideas. We’d say, “Oh, a quiz show. What’s my diagnosis?” Very sophomoric
kinds of ideas that we had. Once was a vaudeville scene. But I had this sense that
there were a lot of people who, if they go to a play about this subject, they would
think, “Well, who am I to know? I can’t judge. I don’t know what to do with this
information I’m hearing. I don’t know how to care about the characters because
what is this they’re talking about.” And I just had this gut feeling: If you can get
people to laugh first, then they know. They understand it. And then when the
serious stuff happens, they’re there with you. And that was what happened
actually. People did get involved and sort of relaxed because of the comedic stuff.

B: Have you ever seen or read the play by George C. Wolf, “The Colored
Museum”?

K: No. I’ve heard of it.

B: When you were talking — because this, of course, is to some extent almost exactly the same tactic that he uses there although he sets it up as if you were walking through a museum. And then you come to an exhibit and some of them are very serious, some of them are very funny, and of course the earlier ones are the funny ones. There’s a very funny takeoff on Aunt Jemima there and other things. This is, of course, to some extent the approach that he uses in that particular play.

K: I should read that.

B: Yeah, you ought to look at it some time. There used to be — well, there is a television — there was a television showing of it. There was a tape made of it. I don’t know that I’ve seen it available or not, but you might want to look at it sometime.

K: I would love to.

B: So you finished your play and what did you do?

K: Well, this is — you know, the story of how I got more and more into theater and into play writing, it’s just one chance thing after another. Because I had finished the play and frankly I didn’t know if it was a play ‘cause I didn’t know — I still can’t define what is a play. And also I have learned that one of the advantages of starting play writing when you’re about 48 or 49 — which is what it was five or six years ago — is that you realize that when somebody says, “This is what makes a
play,” that’s their opinion. And other people will say, “Well, no.”

There’s a 10-minute play I wrote and somebody was going to do it, and said to me, “You know, I just love this play — although of course it’s not a play. It’s a scene.” And I thought, “Oh, what does that mean?” And then somebody else who’s a real theater professional whom I respect read it and I said, “You know, this other guy says it’s not a play; it’s a scene.” And she said, “Oh, for God’s sake. Of course it’s a play.”

So it was very good to — I think if I had been 18, I would’ve just quit play writing when I heard, “No, that’s not a real play.”

B: I guess maybe I should ask you in an Aristotelian sense: did it have a beginning, a middle, and an end?

K: Well, yes, it did.

B: Then it’s a play. It must be. Aristotle says.

K: And the characters changed, you know. There was an arc and all of that stuff. But anyway, I’d written this play “Call Me Crazy.” Didn’t even know if it was a play, didn’t know if it was any good. And I was in a play, performing in a play in Providence, and I ran into this theater office to use the phone. Happen to sit at one empty desk rather than another. And while I’m making the phone call I see this notice about the Lewis national play writing contest for women. Now, you have to understand I’m a risk taker, but I always take the risks if possible with nothing at stake. It was the first thing I’d written. I didn’t know if it was a play. Why did I even bother sending this off? I have no idea. But I sent it off in March.
In August I was in a play in Provincetown and I get a phone call. “You won second place in this contest.” I was completely floored. And simultaneously I had — I always have to pretend I’m my mother or my grandmother when I want to do something that takes a lot of chutzpah because I really am shy and, you know, it’s really hard for me to say, “Would you like to see a play of mine?” It’s really hard for me to do it. But if I sort of get in character as my mom, you know, then I can do it. So I had said to this woman who had started a really good community theater in Westport, Mass. — I said, “Do you ever do new plays?” She said, “Why?” And I said, “Well, I wrote this thing and would you want to have a look at it?” Then she called me, not even knowing it had won an award, and she said, “We want to do your play and everybody on the board wants to be in it.” I was delighted.

B: Everybody sees themselves.

K: “Let’s do this one ‘cause there’s a part for me in it.” And it was very brave of them because certainly nobody knew me as a playwright. And then she called me a week or so later and said, “And we’d like you to direct.” I said, “Well, I don’t direct. I don’t know anything about directing.” She said, “Oh, we really want you to direct. It’s your play.” I said, “Well, a lot of people would say, for that very reason, I’m the last person who should direct.” And then she told me the truth. She said, “We don’t have any money to hire a director. So if you don’t direct it, it won’t be done.” She said, “Paula, you’ve been an actor and a teacher. That makes a director.” Well, partly true but, as you know, that’s not the whole story. So I said, “Well, I’ll do it if I can call in real directors to consult, you know, periodically and look at what’s
going on.” Well, the people I had arranged to have come in and consult, one of them got sick, one of ‘em was out of town, so I ended up doing it myself. And we got a wonderful review and people really--

B: Now, this was in--

K: This was in Westport, Massachusetts. Not Westport, Connecticut. And Paul Woodward and Joanne Newman were not in this play. But that went really well. And then I started—what had happened when I wrote books started happening with the plays. All of a sudden I would think, “Oooh, that would make a good play. I’d like to try writing that as a play.” And so I started having more and more ideas. And then the other thing that had happened and it was just by chance was that piece of paper with the notice about the contest— it was from a publication that every playwright should know about. It’s called Insight for Playwrights. You can get it as e-mail now or as hard copy. What somebody has done is to every month they will send you lists of theaters that will look at new plays, contests, writers’ retreats, and so I started subscribing to it and, when I had time, sending out my plays to just every place that looked like they might be interested in that sort of thing.

And I got a call from this off off Broadway company in New York, Stage Theater, and I sent them a longish one-act and “Call Me Crazy.” And they said, “Well, we love both your plays and we’d like to do them.” They were doing one new play after another after another. So they produced it. The woman who had been directing me in the play I was in when I saw the notice was now in New York and she
directed “Call Me Crazy.” And it was well received. It got one review and it was wonderful — an off off Broadway review.

And they did the long one-act which was about some people I knew when I was at Greenwood, so Greenwood alums came and saw it and that was a lot of fun. When people see your stuff and they seem to like it, then it really helps you a lot in going on and writing the next thing. So I wrote a couple more full-length plays and then I wrote this 10-minute play which ended up being one of the winners of the Samuel French short plays competition last summer so it’s about to be published by them. I’ve had a monologue published in the Best Women’s Monologues, too. And people have really just been so responsive that it’s been great. It’s still terrifying, absolutely terrifying, when you go to see one of your plays being done. And I certainly don’t direct all my stuff anymore. Except for those moments of terror, it’s been wonderful.

B: You said that you get an idea and at that point you feel you want to turn this into a play. Where does the idea come — what’s the source? Where do you start?

K: Well, every play I’ve written has started somewhere different. The first one I described. The second play was the one about Greenwood. And what happened was I got angry. Because there’s this distinguished alum award that Greenwood gives and I nominated somebody from our class, Margaret Mitchell, who has done more than maybe any other Greenwood graduate for other people. She worked with people with AIDS before movie stars were saying you should do that. She
was involved in helping after the Rodney King riots, the fires in L.A. and all sorts of things. I nominated her. She’s never been chosen and I think that’s because she doesn’t have any money. You know, they want to give an award like that to somebody who’s famous or who’s gonna give them money.

And so I was so upset that I wrote this play in which she wins the award. You know, I just — I felt so powerless. I thought, “Well, I’ll make it happen on stage.” And then I wrote and told the committee — I said, “There’s a play in which she wins.” I said, “It would make great publicity, you know, if you made the play come true.” And they still haven’t done it.

And also I wanted that play — it took place at a reunion and I thought, “Well, we graduated in 1965,” so we were sort of on the cusp of the women’s movement. So it’s about Margaret and a good friend of mine from that class, Rosemary Rich, and then another character who’s sort of based on me. And so it’s also about women of that generation and how they did different things with their lives, very different things. And yet each of them has a moment that they talk about, a heart-pounding moment, you know, when they were terrified but they did something anyway. So that’s what that one’s about.

B: Is this a full-length or --

K: It’s about a 40-minute play.

B: Is this the long one-act?

K: It’s a long one-act, yeah. Yeah. And that was done in New York. And the next play I wrote was straight out of my own life, almost verbatim. Something happened
to me—there was somebody I’d known for 17 years and our relationship had gone through all these various permutations, and ended in a very upsetting way. And one of the things that I was very hit hard by was I realized, “My God. I thought I knew this person so well and then they did something so totally unexpected and terrifying. Boy, you know, if I didn’t know this person very well, how do you know if you really know someone ever?” And I just felt that was a really interesting question.

And so I wrote this play that people say is very filmmake because it takes place over 17 years and I felt it was important to show how the relationship took various forms over that whole span. Which meant it’s in something like 42 scenes with—you know, with no changes of set. Just people walk from one spot to another and that sort of thing.

So I wrote that one and then that was done by that same company in New York. And I’ll tell you one experience I had as a playwright. It happens all the time. Somebody will say, “I hear you had a play done” and I say yes. And they say, “Well, what’s next with it?” And I just have to say, “There is no next.” If you’re a playwright, it’s just like being an actor. You’ll be lucky if any of your play is ever done anywhere again. It’s not like once it’s done in Westport, Massachusetts, then everybody’s dying to do it, you know. So you just have to keep sending it out and keep talking to people. But that one was done by that same company.

And then I wrote another full-length play. My kids had said to me, “Why do you keep writing plays that require so many people?” And I said, “You know, you’re
right.” Theaters are wanting to produce plays with fewer people because it’s cheaper. So I sort of took that as a challenge. My kids have been very supportive and so they don’t say these things in negative ways. But they — you know, “I wonder why, Mom?”

So I thought okay. I’m gonna write a play and it’s only gonna have four people in it.

And what happened was that --

B: Did you deliberately choose the number four or --

K: Well, sort of. I mean, I thought it should be — at first I thought it should be three or four, but I didn’t know what it was gonna be. And --

B: But you set this as a kind of parameter that you were gonna work with?

K: Right. I wanted — I thought this is a challenge that I’ll learn something -- from having that sort of structure, you know. Sort of like saying I’m gonna write a sonnet. At the same time, I had been thinking about three different stories actually. One was about — it was based on a 30-second story somebody told 15 years before and I couldn’t get it out of my mind. Obviously, it had all sorts of resonance for me. I kept thinking, “I’d love to put that on stage somehow.”

The second story was about my father who as a white, Jewish captain who fought in the Battle of the Bulge, was captain of an all black battery before they integrated the armed forces. And it was the first black battery that was sent into combat. And he has the most fascinating stories to tell and I never wanted to hear his stories about the war because it was too painful to think of my father in a war. I only realized when I started writing about --
B: This would be World War II?

K: World War II, right. And only when I started writing the play did I realize I just—one day I just burst into tears. Because there’s a videotape of him telling these stories and somebody else made it, and I never really watched it all the way through. I thought, “Well, if I’m gonna write about this, I should watch it.” And he told this story about being a forward observer. Now, he tells these things in a very matter-of-fact way and he’s not trying to be a hero. He describes what a forward observer does. In World War II they go right up front where the shooting is and then they report back to the heavy artillery where they need to fire. And this image of my daddy being out there right at the front, then I realized that’s why I didn’t want to think about that all these years. I don’t want to think of him as being that vulnerable. It’s too scary.

And the third story that I had been just thinking about was a man named Tom McDonald whom I’d met in Springfield. He had been a career Marine and he flew a helicopter in Vietnam and dropped Agent Orange. When he finished his career in the military, he became a massage therapist. He was the gentlest, kindest person you’d ever want to meet. He knew that I was an anti-war protestor during the Vietnam war, I knew he’d been a helicopter pilot, and we just never talked about it but he was a dear person.

Well, to shorten the story, he ended up dying from Agent Orange exposure and it was horrible. And the government denied that that was what it was until they finally admitted it. And I was so disturbed by that I wanted to write about that. Well,
suddenly I thought, “All these people actually belong in the same play because it’s a play about how good wars and bad wars affect people differently.” And the fact that it’s considered a good war or a bad war has an impact. Your gender, your race has an impact on how wars affect you.

So I put these two women from the 15-second or 30-second story I had heard all those years before — I put them into the same play. And so it’s about these people in a family and then this black woman who wasn’t part of the family, and it all became the same play. Now, I have to tell you I wrote it about a year and a half before last September 11th. It had its first reading in Providence on September 7th and then it had another reading on October 28th. And people were crying and saying, “This is about what’s happening now.” Because it’s about war, it’s about what does it mean to be a good American. Can you be a good American if you don’t agree with what your government is doing? And so it’s had a lot of resonance for people, even though it was about different wars.

B: Did you bring all these characters into the same time period or did you keep them separated or --

K: No. I brought them into the same period. So it’s the father, his son who is the Vietnam war hero character, his daughter who’s the anti-war protestor. So this is a son and a daughter who — they adore each other. They have not only very different political views, but they are very different in terms of personalities. Val is not me totally, but she’s pretty expective and so on, and the Tom character is very, very reserved. And so that made for some interesting dynamics. And, of course,
the father wants both of them to get along and doesn’t want to have any conflict. And then I made the daughter a nurse who’s husband was a Japanese American who was born in the internment camps, and he was in Vietnam and he had just died. And she’s come to visit her father and brother, and goes as a volunteer to work with this black woman who is paralyzed from the neck down because she was in Vietnam and was hit by a grenade. And so what happens is the — you see the scenes between Val and June. And as their friendship develops, they’re politically on the same wavelength.

B: **Now, Val and June are --**

K: Val is the daughter and June is the black woman who was injured in Vietnam. And so Val is there as her caretaker part of the time, but June is very spirited. And as their friendship develops — you know, they each have secrets that come out and they sort of empower each other to talk, to open up. And then the problem is that then you see Val go back over to be with her father and her brother, and she’s sort of been opened up in this way. And she feels sort of raw and she’s trying not to show this to her father and her brother, and then it finally comes out.

And each of those characters — somebody said, “Each of the people in this play wants more life somehow and each of them is isolated in some major way.” And the play is about how people try to break down the isolation. Some people want to break it down, others don’t. They feel more comfortable. And then somebody suggested that I put another character in the play and so — the character is actually based very much on my mom. And in the play, the mother has died. I
apologized to my mom for that. But she’s watching. It’s sort of like an “Our Town” kind of thing.

B: So she’s out of body and watching?

K: Yes. She’s out of body and watching. And she only speaks about four or five times in the play and one is to --

B: That’s not your mother.

K: That’s not my mother. And the first time it’s to establish what kind of person she is. Because in the play, she has more life than any of the other characters and she has died. And she’s just this fully developed person and she says what she thinks, she’s funny and she’s interested in everything. And then as she watches what happens, when she learns that her son is dying of Agent Orange and she sees her son and daughter fighting — so, I mean, you just see her go through this anguish of having to see this.

And then at the very end — of course, nobody sees her, nobody hears her through the whole play. But at the very end of the play, the son has died and she has brought out a tablecloth. She’s up in heaven, you know, and has this — she sets the table and she puts a vase and a flower, and she says to the audience, “I always like things to look nice, don’t you?” And then at the very end when her son has died, then she takes the tablecloth and she starts to put it away. And the husband who’s still alive, her husband, comes over and takes the other end of the tablecloth and they start folding it like a flag, and then he leans over and kisses her.

Now, the kiss was something — it wasn’t my idea, but it was so beautiful. Bob
Colona, who’s father was Jerry Colona — so people of our generation remember. He went on tour with Bob Hope and he was a very funny comedian. Well, Bob Colona is — he was with Trinity Rep -- which, of course, is one of the best regional theaters in the country — when it started and he directed the reading of the play. And he played the father and it was his idea to have that one kiss. It’s so beautiful. And so I left that in. So I don’t write all of my plays myself, as you can see. I let people bring stuff to the play.

B: **No playwright ever does. The playwright has to leave room for the actor to finish it, yeah. If you wrote everything that there is, there’s nothing left.**

K: Well, that’s right. And, you know — am I talking too much?

B: **No, no, no. That’s what you’re supposed to do. You’re supposed to talk. Go right ahead.**

K: I want to give you a chance to ask things.

B: **Don’t worry. They hear lots of me.**

K: All right. Well, this is just something else that I learned that I feel is really important, and that is that when they asked me to direct the first time, one of the things I was scared about was I was afraid I was gonna be sort of like I’d been with my kids. You know, when you’re a single mother, you have to make sure that everything happens just right and you’re the mother so you’re supposed to know what’s right all the time. I was sure that when I started directing my play that if an actor did something I would say, “No, no, no. That’s not how I pictured it when I wrote it.” I thought, “It’s gonna be awful.”
Well, I got there and when we did the read-through — in fact, in call-backs — people were doing very different things with what I had written and I just kept thinking, “That is so interesting.” And then I loved the fact that they could take those very words and just do very different things. I liked learning how rich words could be if the right people bring their own experience and their own ideas to them. And in “Call Me Crazy,” the guy who played the head psychiatrist — he added a line one night in rehearsal. It just wasn’t there. He just made it up. And I had chills up my spine. It was so brilliant. And I said, “Keep that.” And I said, “Had you memorized it wrong?” He said, “No, it just felt like it fit there.” And I said, “Boy, are you right. It certainly does.”

B: And you wrote it down and put it in the play?

K: I said, “May I have your permission?” But having been an academic all these years, what’s been really hard for me is, you know, when somebody contributes something to a paper you’re writing. I make ‘em a co-author or I thank them. Well, you don’t do that with plays. There’s no way to put ‘em in the acknowledgments. Another thing I want to mention about what helped me learn about writing plays — two things, actually. One was that Rebecca Patterson, the director who did “Call Me Crazy” in New York — and she has an MFA in directing from UCLA. She’s a brilliant director. When she said, yes, she would direct “Call Me Crazy” in New York she said, “Now, I want you to send me a script with no stage directions in it.” Well, it was the first thing I ever wrote. It had millions of stage directions in it. And I said --
B: You and George Bernard Shaw.

K: Yes. Yeah, it was almost a novel, you know. And I said, “No stage directions?” I was really scared. I thought my play will fall apart without all these stage directions. And she said, “Well, you can use ‘enters’ and ‘exits’ and that’s all.” So I sat down at my computer, heart pounding. And as I went through, a whole bunch of times when I took out the stage directions and then I’d look at it, I’d realize, “Oh, it didn’t need that stage direction. It’s in the words.” And if it’s not in the words, then either I need to change the words so it is or if it’s in the right place or whatever in the play, sometimes it doesn’t tell everything but I want to leave it. I want to leave some room for the actors to expand it and do different things with it. And if it’s not gonna change the whole — you know, where the play goes after that, then I just found that fascinating.

One of the things it did was to give me sort of more confidence in my writing. I thought, “Whoo. I didn’t know there was that much in the dialogue.” And the second thing was that when there wasn’t much in the dialogue, then I had to think about how to fix that. And the third thing was it just made me realize that you should use stage directions very sparingly. It was sort of embarrassing actually when I went through and I was taking them out. You know, I would say things like, “Dr. Mudge says sternly,” you know — and he was saying, “No. Harmony, how can you do such a thing?” Why do you need “sternly”? It’s sort of demeaning to the actors to think that if they looked at that piece of dialogue, they weren’t gonna know? Of course that’s “sternly.”
So that was important. Another thing that was really important to me was being put on a selection committee for a new plays festival. And I thought, “Well, you know, I’ve never done this before.” And it turned out that — when I read plays, it turns out that I can really visualize how they’re going to stage and if they’ll work as a staged reading or as a play. And so I had rank ordered the plays that were submitted and the other people on the committee had seniority, and so they went along with some of my suggestions and not others. And when the festival was done, I noticed that the audience reacted to the plays in order of my rank order. The Off Off Broadway Review came to review it and they said exactly the same thing. And I thought, “Wow. I guess I’m a good judge of this.” I was glad to learn that.

So then I became literary manager on a volunteer basis for one of the theaters in Providence and read a ton of scripts. And the thing that did — and I want anybody who’s ever considering writing a play to know this. If you could read the stuff that gets submitted, you — I don’t care how bad a writer you think you are, you will see how much worse stuff there is out there. And so it made me feel — you know, usually when I would send out copies of my plays, I would feel like I don’t really have the right to be doing this, to be asking somebody to take their time to read my script. And then I read this stuff that comes in and I thought, “Oh, yes I do. I am not a brilliant playwright, but, you know, it’s better than a bunch of the stuff that’s out there.”

B: Now, what is the title of the last play?
K: The last play is called “Shades.”

B: “Shades.” All right. Now, this is the one that has the sort of four different stories?

K: Yes.

B: At what point did you realize that the four stories were all going to fit into this play somehow? How did you arrive at that?

K: Boy, that’s an interesting question. I had heard people say, “Well, the way I write is the characters just talk to me,” and I always thought that was kind of pretentious. Although it isn’t really because that’s some people’s experience of it. But that wasn’t the way I did it, you know, and so I thought, “Well, that’s not what happens.” But it does to some people.

What happened with me was I just — those characters started staying with me, you know. I’d be on a bus and I’d think about one of these characters, and I would start to understand more about who they are. Not the plot, not at all, but about who they were, just more and more attributes of their characters and maybe information about their history. Then I started thinking about how the father and son were --

B: At this point they were all still separate characters?

K: Well, but the two women were always in the same story. But I didn’t know really almost anything about the two real women that this 30-second story was about and so I had to feel, you know, who did they need to be, what did they need to be like, what did they need to care about, what kind of dynamic was between them, how that might change as they got to know each other better.
And then fairly quickly I started to think, “Well, you know, maybe the World War II hero and the Vietnam hero would go in the same play.” And that was sort of helped along because my mom and my dad had taken on this guy. They had called him their surrogate son. And so I think that sort of also made me think, “Oh, it would be interesting to have him as the real son.”

And so then I started thinking about what would happen with them. Well, it would be too simplistic if they’re both war heroes, you know, and they’re both men. And so then I thought, “Well, what if the daughter — what if there’s a sister? What if these two women come into the same play?” And that happened — you know, it was just like “Ohhh, they’re in the same play.” It was one of those kinds of moments.

Insofar as I can put this into words, I think it was just as I felt I got to know more about these characters and I felt less like I was putting things there and more like, “Well, given that this character has this and this and this and this attributes, this is what they would do.” If they had these four, then, oh, obviously they would have this fifth one, too. So the structure of each character sort of started to come to me.

But then as I got to know each one of them better and sort of developed them more, and I had to sort of say to myself, “Take your time. Don’t worry about the stories yet. Just take your time and just let the characters develop, ‘cause you’ve never done this before.” And I think it was when — it was sort of like when each of them was developed enough, then I realized they go in the same play.

B: **At what point — or maybe are you aware of the structure of the play itself?**
Where does that enter into your creativity?

K: Well, it’s been different for every play. And not because I decided to do that. My son’s a creative writer and he never does the same thing twice. He decides he’s going to do it differently each time. I don’t do that. Well, in “Call Me Crazy” I described what I did. I wrote the serious part first and then I just knew nobody could sit through that. The story about Greenwood? It kind of told itself because it was just my fantasy that, oh, she wins the prize.

And the structure of “Love’s Hollow,” which was the one about the 17-year relationship, it was there because it was a real story. I decided to do it in short scenes because I wanted to— okay. This is the first they meet and now here it’s a year later, and so on.

B: Do you find yourself writing basically in a linear fashion or --


B: That is one follows the other?

K: Yes. I have until recently. Actually, let me just answer your previous question and then I’ll speak to that. And then with “Shades,” the idea about the structure— when I decided they should all go in the same play, then I don’t know why I thought about this. I think it was because I knew some people think that plays should have a very clear structure and you should plan it out ahead of time. And I remember thinking — I wrote down, “There needs to be a scene — a couple of scenes with the two women, two or three, and it needs to go back and forth. And you need to see what happens in the family, what happens with Val and June and vice-versa,
and then there needs to be a scene, you know, between parents of characters. Different scenes between parents of characters or the three family members.” And I wrote it down and it came out very neatly to nine scenes. And then I wrote those pretty much in chronological order, but I was having so much trouble. I wasn’t feeling well. I said to a friend, “You know, sometimes I just feel so tired I can write one page a day.” And she said to me — she’s an actor — she said to me, “But Paula, just think. If you wrote a page every day, in two or three months you’ll be finished.” And I thought, “She’s right.”

So then I just sort of scaled back on my standards — you know, which is dangerous to have standards — but I scaled back and I started writing one or two. If I had a three page day I thought, “Wow!” And then when I got to the scene that was based on the 30-second story, it just came pouring out and I wrote just almost the whole scene in one sitting.

Now, the way I wrote the 10-minute play — my daughter was in law school. She called me one night and she said, “I just heard a speaker. He was on Death Row in Georgia. I have to tell you the story he told me.” And she told me the story and I wept. I was haunted by this story. I tried to find the man, couldn’t find him, and literally, after months, since I couldn’t get it out of my head, I thought, “Okay. You keep getting distracted by this story. Just sit down at the computer and don’t get up until it’s in there.”

And I did it and out came this 10-minute play, almost verbatim as it still is. And then that play — that’s been done all over the country. I think because it has to do with
the death penalty and mental retardation, so people are interested. And it’s just a very touching human story.

Now, the next play I want to write I am writing in fragments all over the place and it may turn out that there is no character who’s in more than one scene. I call it my prison play. I’m still working on it. But I want a play that has a lot of stuff happening having to do with prison, from all sorts of facets and perspectives. And so I’ve written one scene that’s very realistic. I’ve written another one that’ll go somewhere and it’s grotesque and absurd and bizarre. And I don’t know how that one’s gonna turn out, but I’m writing that one totally differently than the other.

B: So these days do you consider yourself primarily a playwright? I mean, that’s where your focus is, your concentration?

K: Well, play writing and acting. I love to direct. I’ve directed a number of times. But the thing that gives me just the most sheer joy is the play writing and the acting. I just time to sit down and write some more.

B: Time and energies always, yes. Well, thank you very much. It’s been a fascinating conversation and I think that certainly many people will be encouraged by your example. At whatever point in time if you feel this is what you want to do, then just take off and go do it.

K: Yes, absolutely.

B: Thank you very much. Thank you.