

**Overview:**

Dear Patrick,

Overall, without a doubt you are on the road to crafting a really interesting work that in a lot of ways feels like an imitate family drama, about a family coming to terms with itself, and simultaneously a critique about the national family, also coming (no-less) to terms with itself. However, I think that you are seeking dramaturgical feedback because you know that you have more to give. And, I would encourage you to go there. This play is ultimately, for my money, about the universal experience and politics of family and belonging, trafficking in the politics of ageism, sexism, race, heteronormativity, and middle-class respectability. It is a beautiful work that I think has a lot of promise and I can see why you didn't want to let it go.

That being said, this is important work and one that I know via your writing (and Roz's) that you are up-to. Below are some dramaturgical thoughts, ideas, and general feedback given with full respect for your craft and the responsibility to gently push you and the work further along the path. At the end of the day I trust your creative instincts, and the fact that you ultimately know how to complete this work, that being said I invite you to whole-heartedly take what is useful and leave the rest.

Best,  
A\*

**Feedback on Your Thoughts:**

*"Broadly speaking, the play was written with a target audience of moderate-to-liberal Blacks and Whites."*

One of my first thoughts is why such a narrow audience? Thematically your work has much broader implications, specifically because we live in such a polarized society that runs across a wide swath of our contemporary culture. Your story is told via very specific bodies, histories, and points-of-view but the humanity is very universal...especially because it revolves around this very common intersection of the politics of acceptance, belonging, and family. This is just food for thought.

*"There was an ongoing push-pull between Roz and me regarding the lead Black character Saleema. Audience feedback from Whites was across-the-board "Saleema is too angry from the start, and we tune her out." Several of our Black audience members felt the same way, but others were closely aligned and actively engaged with her. Roz was opposed to "watering down" Saleema, as am I in the strictest sense of that... So I'd like to hear from you about Saleema's character arc. Is she believable as written on the page? Does she feel "watered down" to you, given that you have no perspective on how she was written prior to the script you hold?"*

These are great questions. For me, the character of Saleema as she appears in this version of the script is a missed opportunity, and to be fair I am feeling this with a few of the characters that I will get into further in my feedback, but to focus on Saleema I don't feel that she has enough complexity or developed enough to be such a primary character. She is clearly the

antagonist (the one who is against the primary action of the play) and because she has very little nuance to her character she just comes off as the villain and a one-note one at that, even if her point-of-view has merit.

She is hurt, which manifests in anger, and she basically stays on that note for the entire play. She doesn't have a strong enough arch, such that she is basically the same at the beginning of the play as she is at the end. Therefore, I can understand your audience's response because you haven't given her any space for the audience to enter into her perspective. Her point-of-view is clear but there isn't any thing else to her, she is essentially a one-trick pony, which feeds into the stereotype of the angry (for no-good-reason and for too long) black woman. Given the conversation that you described between you and Roz about this character, I don't think that is what you were going for however that is the result that is produced and thus the audience response of tuning her out.

She needs much more depth, vulnerability, and complexity so that we, as an audience, can understand and maybe even empathize with her pain and her response. I think that this challenge is particularly important to resolve with this character because black women are often dismissed under these pretenses and this is an opportunity to bring humanity to that stereotype.

I agree with Roz about not wanting to "water her down" and don't think that you need to do that. However, giving the audience space to see why she is so pained by her son making this choice beyond what it does to the "black community" but rather answering what does this mean/do to her personally is more the direction to go into...what fear or insecurity wound does it trigger for her? It is often a rule of thumb that the stronger and faster the response appears the deeper the wound that it is attached to....the old adage "hysterical is historical." I'm not arguing that she is hysterical but rather asking the question: What is her personal historical that causes such a strong reaction?

*"Likewise, I'd like to know how you feel about our White lead character Cynthia and her willingness to draw and then redraw certain lines in the sand with Saleema as Saleema continues to push Cyn's boundaries and buttons. As Saleema was previously written, I believe that Cyn would have asked Saleema to leave long before the play climaxes. Not sure about this now...looking to you."*

I agree with your instinct that Cynthia probably would have thrown her out... especially since she is the same age as Saleema and may not have the same hang ups as a younger woman might have with Saleema's power as a matriarch, since she is one herself. What could be more interesting is what are the politics of flexing ones muscles as a black matriarch versus a white matriarch? Here showing us versus telling us is where the heat is. Throwing Saleema out of the home that was purchased via the money that Shahim received from his black family inheritance (in our contemporary society *black family inheritance* is almost an oxymoron) is more meaningful and useful as a plot and character device. However, since Cynthia keeps placating Saleema, Saleema has nothing to really challenge her in a formidable way...plot-wise this keeps the play and the characters stagnant.

*"One other question: Someone I respect said "Nothing happens in the second act." That baffled me because in my mind the second act is full of unravelings and discoveries. Maybe not. I'll look to you for your thoughts*

*on that.”*

I read the play before I read your thoughts above and I was thinking the same thing that your friend remarked as I starting reading the second act. Yes, the second act has *reveals* but no real *plot* movement or *action*. Your protagonist, who I am guessing is Cynthia, is too passive overall. I am not clear why she would still be trying to bring the two families together to plan the announcement party after how explosive the first family meetings were. She could just invite them and hope that they show up. Plus she owns her own business that has the exact skills that she needs to plan an amazing party. This is a weak plot device to bring all of this character together. I think you may want to reimagine your second act. Cynthia needs to stand *for* something *not just against* something. She can at first be reluctant; an initially fearful protagonist can increase dramatic tension as her resolve (and backbone) becomes stronger. But the protagonist must ultimately make a clear choice to act; her course cannot be chosen for her. Right now this doesn't happen for her until the very end. For my money, I would make this part of the last scene of the first act with a potential decision for Cynthia around the baby. If not the second act is just another series of scenes of people sitting around hashing the same basic arguments from act one. For me this is usually a sign that the premise is strong but the action is weak.... all that means to strengthen the action.

### **Questions, Ideas, & Spaces of Potential:**

- Your play is “approaching 2020”. Is there significance around this choice? If so, I don't know what that is at the moment or have any markers of any time period at this point in the play. Is Trump still president? Any specific current events? More unarmed black shootings? What are the contextual and environmental clues and pressures that situate your story, these characters, and the way that they talk about race, sex, gender, age, identity, etc...For example: how we talk about trans politics in 2018 is different from even 2010? How is 2020 different from 2018?
- One of my first questions for the play is what is this play about in a larger sense. I understand that it is a take on Romeo and Juliet plot-wise: two lovers whose families don't exactly approve of their relationship but what are you using it to say about the human condition...who we are as a culture around the politics of difference? That is what I am missing some clarity around.
- After that, what I am missing is an overarching point-of-view (pov). Your characters have pavs as individuals but what is the pov of the play...the overall arch that says something more than the characters. If this isn't clear then your individual character pavs will struggle to add up to something larger for the audience to chew on as they leave the theatre.
- You have crafted a really strong rhythmic flow in your dialogue that creates a robust sense of familiarity and flow between your characters.
- All of the scenes for the most part are multi-character scenes, except for Shahim and Cynthia and a small one between Harold and Cynthia and Saleema and Shahim, you

- may want to think about breaking up that pattern and maybe adding a scene between Saleema and Cynthia, woman to woman.
- Also breaking up the spaces where the scenes take place could be useful as well, not everything needs to happen to the living room. Setting all of the scenes in the same place gives your audience the feeling of repetition and without difference.
  - I love the opening moments of Act 1/Sc 1 it sets up so much about these characters and beautifully plays with our expectations around age, race, gender, sex, and sexuality. It sets a tone for other smart surprises that we might be in store for. There is nice parity between Shahim and Cynthia with lines like (pg5) Shahim: “Right. OK, it’s time for you to do something around here...” This banter is fun and reveals a lot about the nature of their relationship. I am already rooting for them by pg3.
  - Pg 7: White people singing Bessie is another interesting reveal about this family. What complexity does it add overall around their perceived vs actual familiarity with black people and black culture? Here is a moment to set up some things around where they think they are as progressive white liberals and where they actually are? Great opportunity to lay a foundation for these characters!
  - Your opening scene is really strong and sets up a good sense of characters, motivations, and family dynamics.
  - Act 1/Sc 2 is also a strong set up scene. The audience has a very clear sense of the two families and the challenge ahead of Cynthia and Shahim. The device of repetition with difference works beautifully and very successfully here. Now we need to go somewhere plot-wise rather than treading the same or similar ground. The dynamic of the play doesn’t really go anywhere after A1/S2. This is an example of how the premise is really strong (what you have set up in the opening two scenes) but the plot needs more action to drive the initial action of the play (Shahim and Cynthia getting married).
  - In Act 1/Sc3 Harold announces that he may be leaving Saleema but this doesn’t provide any fuel for the initial action of the play, it is just more information that already confirms what we already suspect about Harold and Saleema’s relationship. This is why I might think about brining in a scene where Cynthia finds out that she is pregnant here (maybe she is at the doctor’s office or in her bathroom, etc...) and throw that into the mix because it would definitely put pressure on the driving plot that you have set up in your premise. You need more dramatic action and this would definitely provide that for the characters and the story at larger. Does Shahim want to have a child? Does he want this with an older woman and the questions that that raises? Where is Cynthia at with having a child? Maybe there is another scene between Shahim and Cynthia about this that another character overhears? There are many ways to move forward to jumpstart the action, you just have to take a risk and not be precious about leaving ideas behind and moving into uncharted territory. Reading your writing I know you have it in you.

- When Harold (pg43) says, “You’re partners—real partners.” This observation hasn’t been earned yet. We need to see him seeing that in a more overt way.
- Act II starts with a big reveal in the sister’s relationship. This feels out of left field, it doesn’t directly push your primary action forward, and functions like a tool to talk about identity politics that hasn’t been fully earned plot-wise. If you have something with this high of dramatic impact with very little grounding it can feel, for your audience, a little soap opera-ish. What I mean by that is high drama with thin grounding. I have to suspend my belief to go with this out of no-where plot. My question is: What are you trying to get out of this move? I go back to the question about what is this play trying to say and then use your primary plot to do (not say) that. This relationship feels like a detour and takes up almost 10 pages of dialogue that feels a bit didactic, on the nose, and doesn’t reveal anything new about your characters overall.
- When JayJay and Josh start showing their racism via their remarks I am not sure why only Saleema is the only black character in the room to really respond to these outrageous statements. Harold’s lack of response makes him feel very one-note and I actually don’t believe that Harold, Harry, and Shalim would be so silent. Here the script is missing out on opportunities to craft a spectrum of black identity and perspective that could be nuanced, revealing, and something not often seen on the stage when it comes to blackness. Harry is so good at talking about sexuality but has nothing to say about race...I don’t buy it. You have more in you to craft with this family overall. The white family is much clearer in their intra-white diversity. Also, here is an opportunity to take some of the burden of representation off of Saleema as a raced character and spread the wealth across this family with a more intersectional critique of the circumstances and the context in which they find themselves. This is a space where the Millers could learn something (if they are willing to) from the Ward’s.
- Why does Harold always throw Saleema under the bus as if he is not also walking through this world in black skin with black children, in a world that is very hostile to black people? There is such a large lack of solidarity between them...he almost reads in the way that I would traditionally expect a white male character to function. Is this intentional? What is your thinking behind this? In Act 2, she often reads like a scapegoat that allows the other black characters to get closer to the white characters. Is this intentional?
- As I am wading through Act2/Sc1 I am getting lost because the clarity of your thesis is vague. You are bringing up lots of important povs but I don’t know where we are going with them.
- Harold gets some backbone on pg71. This is great character development but this needs to come earlier in his development. If not his arch is pretty flat for most of the play.

- Cynthia's comments on pg74: "Black women are harder to love than White women..." needs some troubling from the other character. It feels like you are further villainizing Saleema and double downing on stereotypes that could be better addressed if we understood more of why Saleema is so angry in a more deeply explored way. It feels like a cheap shot and then the white woman asks the black man to consign with her????? Ouch...that is low. The whole conversation between pg. 73-76 needs further unpacking and a little more savvy around the intersectional politics of race, sex, and gender. I love that you are willing to go there...now you really need to dig deeper and go THERE. ☺
- The structure of the play is off balanced: Act 1: Sc1 (20pgs), Sc2 (20pgs), Sc3 (8pgs). Act2: Sc1 (30pgs), Sc 2(3pgs). These are rough estimates but you get the picture. Try breaking up some of the scenes and maybe adding some smaller 8-10pg scenes where more diversity of action can occur. Also make a list for yourself about what action happens in each scene, not what is revealed, but what action happens to move the story further. This might give you a clearer picture of where you are at plot-wise and comparing it to your thesis where you want to go.
- The incident about the police and Harold comes very late and has such a passive response from the other black characters except Saleema that I almost don't fully believe in what you are suggesting has happened. I think that it could really be something if it happens earlier and then has an effect on the characters that changes them. This is the other issue that the characters don't really change from the beginning to the end to the play this could be an event that spurs that especially if it comes earlier.
- Overall, I think that this play has legs and brings up some really interesting and needed conversation that we don't see tackled in the theatre with such courage and bravery but it needs a plot and some major character development. The premise is fantastic which means you have a story you just need to dig deeper to flesh it out. After reading your writing I know you have it in you. Keep going!!! This work needs to be done.