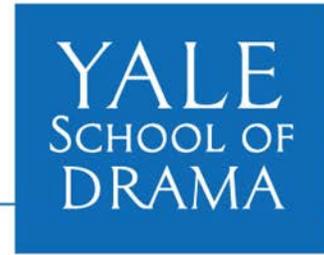


# Theater Management Knowledge Base



*Reprinted with permission. Educational use only. Do not copy or distribute.*

Interview

## KWAME KWEI-ARMAH

*Conducted by Edward A. Martenson with additional questions by Theater Management students  
April 8, 2013*

*Kwame Kwei-Armah OBE, an award-winning British playwright, director, actor, and broadcaster is  
in his second season as CENTERSTAGE's Artistic Director.*

**MARTENSON** You received an award from the National to give you time to think, and that was thought to be remarkable. Shouldn't that be something that theaters just normally do?

**KWEI-ARMAH** Yes, yes but we find ourselves in the world of repertory theater. We find the world of art always having to validate itself, always having to put the matrix of dollars or pounds against its very existence and measuring it in ways that I find art should not be measured. So to have an institution that can afford to say: this space here is purely for R&D; this space is for thinking; this space is to come in and not have the pressures of an opening night, not have the pressures of a deadline, not have the pressures of any expectation whatsoever. It is very rare because it's very expensive. We live in the world where we need results and often those are financial results, can every theater afford to do it? No. Does our internal clock even work that way? I remember the first time I was invited to come into the National Studio—my parents are working class, my father works in a factory, or worked in a factory, he's retired now, my mother was a nurse—and so

I'm very much brought up with the notion of getting to work, putting your card in, and clocking in. And then doing your day's work and then clocking out. I also worked at McDonald's while I was at college, so that's really why I was used to it. So the notion of just having somewhere to think was also alien to my internal mechanism because I was like, "Oh my god I've been given this big break—The National. They're looking at me. Their gaze has fallen onto my shadow and therefore I need to create the most magnificent piece of work." And actually, I really did my best work when I just relaxed. When I just sat, when I just thought. Because, ultimately, that is what we're paid to do in theater and art. We're paid to think. And then to make those thoughts coherent. And then to make those coherent thoughts manifest in the most artistic fashion. So, that's the long way of saying yes, it is natural, but with the way that theater in this country and in Britain is structured, and in our own mechanisms, we have to re-evaluate and re-adjust to the idea of artist as thinker and of the artist needing the space to just simply think.

---

This interview was conducted by Edward A. Martenson and was prepared as the basis for discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of the situation described.

Copyright © 2013 by Edward A. Martenson. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, used in a spreadsheet, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise—without the permission of the Author.

**MARTENSON** What does it say about the state of the play in the field when something crucial like thinking is subject to whether we can afford it? We deal with realities all the time and as you say most theaters can't afford it. They can't afford to pay people.

**KWEI-ARMAH** I think what it says is that art, on the whole, has been reduced in our western culture to the narrow bandwidth of entertainment. And there are only a few examples where we're allowed to step outside of that. Actually, I find in America even more so than in Britain that the playwright is almost consigned to some kind of exotic creature that just speaks about the things that are in our hinterland rather than necessary, intellectual things—the drivers of democracy, the drivers for good governance, the drivers for good communities. So, in many respects, it says that we have been reduced. And that if there is not a matrix by which to measure thought and to measure that play—and by the way the play by itself, the thing that we all love, is often measured incorrectly. It's measured in terms of success and failure, not in terms of its journey, but its destination. It is a sad comment, actually, that we cannot find it in our everyday life to think of the artist as an intellectual, the artist as a thinker, the artist as someone who needs somewhere to think before we can get to the eventual product or project. The good news is that many of our leaders in American theater and in British theater understand this, know this, and are fighting to create spaces within their institutions in order to change that, in order to allow us to have playwrights that endeavor to write the state-of-the-nation play.

**MARTENSON** Is this relegation that you're speaking of a flaw in our culture? Or is there some element of failure of theater to do its job?

**KWEI-ARMAH** Of course it's both. It's both that our society is very linear and that we have been trained to be linear. We have been trained to live within utility and not within design, not within thought, but within deed. I often describe it as this: the wonderful director Marion McClinton once said to me, "Art is God's Christmas present to herself." Now, depending on what religion you are, excuse that, but there's something beautiful in that. There's often a sense of punishment in being an artist. A

punishment for living, for daring to live on the outskirts of societal rules. People like to negate divas, for example, and I don't. My only rule for a diva—someone who we might perceive to be behaving badly—is asking if they can do it onstage. Are you magnificent onstage? When you go onstage, do you transport me to that place that I am wishing to go to? And if you are, then I can almost excuse everything. Because, and excuse this, this is no slight on accountants, but we expect our artists to have the morality and behavioral patterns of our accountants. And it's a completely different part of your body and a different part of your brain, a different part of your spirit that is being called upon. So that is something society has to deal with, often punishing those who wish to live in the wild, but celebrating the few who break through to the top, the people we have on our DVDs or who we download on a daily basis.

Now, is theater failing to fight its battle? I think that it can fight better. It can articulate itself better. It can make a case for the vitalness of art—not just as something that is superfluous, something that is vacuous, something that can be consumed in an hour or two hours, but actually its case as an instrument of state. Can theater do that? Yes it can. Should theater do it? Yes it should. Are we doing enough? No we're not. I think we sometimes allow ourselves to be beaten into corners. I don't believe in art that should be or can be placed in a narrow little box in the corner for when I finish doing the real work. What we do is far more important than that.

**MARTENSON** Sometimes I wonder if we're too polite.

**KWEI-ARMAH** We are quiet and we're quiet because as a group of artists, we have to become family very quickly. I don't know if this is 100% true in this country, but it is in Britain. A group of actors will walk into a room and we'll speak about stuff that in the straight world would just be unbearable. Within ten minutes you'll be possibly talking about people's sexual exchanges over the last three weeks. If you really want to go deep and personal into the life of a performer, of an actor, ask them how much they made last year because that's actually how we validate ourselves. We validate ourselves in that way because society makes us validate ourselves in numerics rather than in spirit,

rather than contribution. And so often we find ourselves trapped by the left-brainers and, I'd like to come out punching from that and say we need to define ourselves not in that fashion. It doesn't mean that we have to place anybody in the pejorative, but we must not allow ourselves to be placed in the pejorative.

**MARTENSON** You can imagine a future state of the world in which artists are not so relegated? What would it take for us to get there? I mean, money's got to be a part of that, but it can't be all.

**KWEI-ARMAH** Of course. Of course it is, but the Executive Director of the Royal National Theatre in Great Britain, he taught me a wonderful lesson. After being an actor for nine years, money was dirty to me; producers were dirty. They were just there to kind of fleece you and not put enough money into the production to make it, or not sell you enough. And the Executive Director actually showed me that money was clean, that the job of the producer was being an artist, a facilitator, a person that allows the "front of camera" art to happen. If that frame is created properly, real art, good art, art that can manifest itself in any which way it chooses can be created through that. So, of course, the role of finance within that is important. Reward, financial reward, is important. But I think that the outgoing or the last head of General Motors described his industry as not being the motor industry, but the entertainment industry. And I found that terribly interesting. Everybody wants to be in on the arts and entertainment part of life because the leaders of industry are realizing that we're getting to that place where design is the major driver for the industrialized West. Now it's all about design, so I think we're getting there. It doesn't look too far away from my rather wonderful iPhone 5 that allows me to contact everyone in the world and play games and make videos and send tweets while I'm on the train saying, "I'm twenty minutes late. Hurry up." We're living in a world where I can look at a video of Nina Simone on YouTube as I'm coming up and thinking, "How am I going to put that into my next piece of work?" It's all entwined, it's all beautifully entwined.

**MARTENSON** I wonder if we could shift a little bit to the role of Artistic Director versus the life of an artist. We've heard from any number of people who

suggest that the organizational leadership role of an Artistic Director is a black hole for stress and attention and that it's corrosive to the life of an artist, that it freezes out whatever is going on creatively. You've had this job for a year—

**KWEI-ARMAH** Eighteen months—

**MARTENSON** Have you noticed any of that? Are you concerned about it, and, if so, what have you done to make sure that it doesn't happen to you?

**KWEI-ARMAH** A very wonderful question and one that bugs and hangs around the mind of every Artistic Director. Artistic Directors are, nine times out of ten, theatrical directors so that they can see their art as the two or three plays that they may direct in the season. I'm slightly different in that I'm a playwright and so I see my art through the plays that I direct, but mainly through the work that I create. And creating work uses a completely different muscle than directing. I've directed three or four plays in the last year and, with three of them being in the last three months. After a performance and when the audience goes, "Thank you, that was wonderful," I always step away because I was the facilitator. The real creator was the playwright. It was in their mind, and as a director I loved bringing that to life. But as a playwright, the time that it takes, the dreaming time, the thinking time, the time when you just walk around your bedroom, or your house, or your studio for two days saying, "I promise I'm going to start now, I promise I'm going to start now." I don't have that luxury anymore. And so I have to find different ways to motivate that part of my art. My big bugbear, in truth, is the linearity of running organizations. I think in management, quite rightly so, one has to strive to remove as much chaos from each day as possible. As an artist, I thrive on a good ratio between chaos and order. If there's too much chaos, well then I can't do the work, then I can't get down to the computer. And if there's not enough chaos, then the driver, the thing that makes me go, "I don't like that" that makes me go, "That's wrong!" The thing that makes me go, "I want to comment on that" doesn't have enough friction. So I think I'm relatively fortunate in that I have had two or three trains running for many years. I was a television actor in a television series, and I was a writer at the same time. So I was able to shoot for eight hours a day, come home sleep,

recharge, and then write. And I think that's kind of what I'm doing now. I have a project to do, I'll do the office and then I'll stop. And then I'll jump in.

**MARTENSON** And so you separate them.

**KWEI-ARMAH** I separate them.

**MARTENSON** What's in between the office time and the writing time?

**KWEI-ARMAH** I sleep. Quite literally I'll just go and I'll sleep. And, of course, I've got to do family time. My family is magnificently understanding, but it's sleeping that does it for me.

**MARTENSON** Do you have a particular writing discipline?

**KWEI-ARMAH** Yeah, I do. I'm a night-writer so, invariably, if I'm starting a project, I'll generally start around 11:00pm. And then I'll write through until about 5:00am and then I'll get up at 8:00am and get the kids to school and all of that. And then, I'll get up properly at about 11:00am and then I'll reread the rubbish that I wrote the night before, and tidy that up. But I call that period my "Typing" time, not my "Writing" time. I'll stop at about 4 in the afternoon, I'll sleep, the kids will come home from school, and I'll do that time until about 9:00pm. Then I'll go back upstairs and then I'll write through until 4:00am.

**MARTENSON** And where was the office time in there?

**KWEI-ARMAH** Well that was before. That was my natural habitat. That was my natural time of it. Now, with the office—now it goes, if I'm writing, I'll go to the office at 10:00am and I'll stay at the office until 6:00pm or 7:00pm and then I'll sleep until 9:00pm. Then I'll write until about 10:00pm to about 4:00am and sleep for three hours.

**MARTENSON** It used to be the ideal in our theaters that Artistic Directors were primarily artists in the studio or at the keyboard and they watched over the programming of an organization as a companion to that. But more and more we're seeing Artistic Directors with a dramaturgical or producing background who don't spend any time

in the studio or at the keyboard. What do you think about that?

**KWEI-ARMAH** I think it's great because I think we need every type of artist and for me the producer is an artist. The managing director is an artist for me. So I think it's great, I don't have a problem with whatever it takes so long as you're dedicated to—and this is a really pat way of saying it—innovation. You know, are you there to just crunch the numbers? That's really boring. Are you there to crunch the numbers in an innovative way that'll allow me to do more innovative things? Then that's pretty great. So I don't have a problem at all. I'll tell you what I do think though, I think that the Artistic Directors of the last century were able to just be artists, to just direct or just do whatever it is that they were going to do and oversee. My sense is that I have to go out and do a lot of time touting for money. Last week alone I maybe did three development meetings. Shaking hands, lunches at the same time as final rehearsals. Run the play from 11:00am to 1:00pm, then dash to a lunch until 2:30pm run the play again at 3:00pm and then I dashed to an evening meal to try and solicit some more money. My sense is that if I'm asking for money than I have to understand how the money's being spent. So my art is also about how the building's structured. My art is also about how the money is spent. My art is about how marketing is conceived and executed. My art is in there as well. So as much as I'm berating myself often for placing my art second, by being an Artistic Director, I have actually found many different ways by which to perceive that I'm serving the artist in me.

**MARTENSON** Some of the people that are called "the dramaturgical or producer-types" that have become Artistic Directors don't perceive that they need a manager/director. If they're spending full time on the organizational leadership, they think they can do without that role and just have a general manager.

**KWEI-ARMAH** Absolutely.

**MARTENSON** Can you imagine doing what you do without Steven Richard, your Managing Director?

**KWEI-ARMAH** CENTERSTAGE is relatively interesting in my estimation in that within most

artistic institutions, the superstar is an Artistic Director. It's very hard to find actually that directing superstar at CENTERSTAGE. Artistically. The Artistic Director has always just come in and gone. Peter Culman was the star. A Managing Director was the star of the organization, the star of its history. A magnificent Managing Director who was able to facilitate making CENTERSTAGE into what it is and also being able to go out and support his Artistic Directors and let them feel comfortable in choosing the art that they chose. So, I understand that most buildings that I've come into contact with—we call organizations buildings in the UK so forgive me for that—people's gaze goes straight to the Managing Director. As an Artistic Director it's really frustrating because your job is vision and then you might articulate a vision and people look towards the Managing Director and say, "Is that all right? Can he do that?" I just sit there and they go, "Is that all right?" And so I certainly understand when Artistic Directors say, "I want to restructure the organization" and actually have a General Manager who can look after that kind of stuff. But if I'm responsible for vision, if I'm responsible for being the face, if I'm the articulator of it for the public, then on the inside, let the gaze come to me. So I understand that. Now for me, I happen to like the idea of having a Managing Director, of having a partner that is my equal. Someone I can trust so that I can say I'm actually not interested in development today. I don't really want to know what the development goals is, you just tell me when you need me to come out and do the talking—how we spend the money I want to know, but I don't need necessarily to concentrate on that. I like having a Managing Director that I can come to and say, "So, what subscriber numbers are we aiming for next year?" And that Managing Director can sit and say to me, "I think this is where we need to go," and then I can go, "Okay then we need to do these kinds of plays," and then we can have that debate. I like having a partner. Running solo is not always a beautiful thing. So for me, I understand the Artistic Directors that want to be boss and alone, but I like having a partner.

**MARTENSON** Yes. Well, that's comforting for this group to hear. *[Laughter.]* If we could turn now at least briefly to the subject of diversity. Do you experience race in America any differently than you experience race in the UK?

**KWEI-ARMAH** A lot differently. It's—God, how long have I got? Throughout my career I've been coming back and forth to America quite a lot. And—let me caveat this by saying that it's always difficult to find the way into race here—but America and race has always been the way we receive it via the media, the way we receive it via the structure of American society i.e. you can have a black President and black Congress people. I'd always found America to be thirty years ahead of Britain. And that was my experience. Always. We have a very small black middle class because this generation of diasporic Africans is relatively new to Britain, sixty years. We've been there hundreds of years, but this size, this number is relatively new. A lot of my education has been through the lens of the African American academic. I landed here to live and found actually that in some aspects, infrastructurally, America is thirty years ahead of Great Britain, but in many other respects, diversity being one of them, not thirty years ahead. No, we were far more equal and, in some respects, having maybe done some homework that America hasn't done. I've found America to be slightly more tribal than I perceived it was. The Italian community lives in one place and the Chinese community lives in the other and the African American poor live in one place and the White poor live in another, and we don't have it quite like that in Britain. And that's taken a little bit of getting used to. And also, I would say, honestly, that being black and British is a very interesting thing here—and interesting is such a bad word, I know—but White America has a fascination with all things European and British, but yet has a feeling of superiority to its African American counterparts. So I often represent something, which is a strange dichotomy of people staring at my mouth not knowing whether to feel inferior or superior as I speak. People stare at my mouth for a very long time, and I'm speaking and I'm trying to catch their eye a little as they're computing quite how to react to me and who I am. And from the moment I got my vestiture from the Queen it became *mad* because it was like, "You're almost a knight? You're black and you're British?" It kind of went a little crazy. So it's been a really interesting ride: race in America for me in these last two years has taught me many, many lessons.

**MARTENSON** The sensation that you just described, you don't have that in Britain?

**KWEI-ARMAH** I don't have that at all in Britain because the accent is clear. You know, it's a home accent so they won't have that. Whereas here it's quite apparent. The reaction is quite apparent. Now, having said that, that is not in any way to talk about *racism*, but about notions of race and notions of place and notions of class and notions of the European diasporic family having to readjust to home, to the new realities of home and the new realities of Europe in that it looks like me. It is about an intellectual and a historical readjustment to what home is and now who America is.

**MARTENSON** You're running the main theater institution in a city with a large African American population. How do you think about diversity issues in your construction of programs?

**KWEI-ARMAH** Well I'm very fortunate that I inherited a wonderful diverse attitude from my board because Irene Lewis, the outgoing Artistic Director, had worked for ten years to diversify that audience. So we have upwards of 15% of our patrons, and maybe 22% including single-ticket depending on the show, are African Americans that come to our theater. That's wonderful for me because I inherited that two plays of every season can be dedicated to the African American experience as diverse as we want that to be. As always, money helps. Our top five biggest shows in its history were all by African Americans. In fact this year, I'm very proud to say, *Mountaintop* is now the third-largest gross in CENTERSTAGE's fifty-year history. So, actually there is both an economic and a cultural reason to have a diverse program, a diverse program of plays.

**MARTENSON** When you think about your sources of money for CENTERSTAGE, does the donor pool look like the audience?

**KWEI-ARMAH** Well, I would say this: We're looked after very generously by American standards, and not looking at corporations, which have been kind to us but are shrinking. Our personal donor pool is Baltimore old money. I'm really pleased to say that there are a good few African American donors who are contributing a great deal to our theater's well-being. We had to raise \$150,000 for a project and we went to an African American venture capitalist and said, "Would you help us?" And he put the

money up. So the issue is: do we have to keep going to the same people? And I think that's the problem with most arts organizations in Baltimore and probably across America. When the town is the size and the economic size that we are, the donor pool invariably gets donor fatigue. Because you're going back to the same people. Over and over and over again, year in and year out. That's problematical.

**MARTENSON** It can be unpleasant to talk about it, but I think that it makes logical sense that with institutions of any sort that are in cities where the money's old that old money probably means white money.

**KWEI-ARMAH** Yes, yes.

**MARTENSON** It must be the case in Philadelphia, in New York, Boston, in other old money cities, that the audience development task and the fundraising development task are different from a diversity point of view, but it sounds like you've made substantial inroads.

**KWEI-ARMAH** What people in Baltimore have discovered, I think, is that we're 65% African American and they want to go and sit in an audience that is diverse, not just by race, but by age. You know, I'm at the grand age of forty-six. I want to go places where the people are slightly younger than me. So that I can feel slightly hip and I can boast to my kids, "Yeah, I was at this really trendy bar." But I think that diversity is the key to unlocking the potential of Baltimore and of Maryland. One doesn't have to say, "I'm going to put on European diasporic classics for you because I know that's what you want," and then we'll have the play during black history month just to keep them happy. We can go and say this is us being a good citizen, this, is what being an active civic partner is about. Reflecting our environment and reflecting the needs of our environment and finding the balance between reflecting your community and its needs. And this is what the community cries for. It comes to the theater, it comes to "the high arts" because it wants to reflect on itself and it wants to elevate itself. So in reflecting that in our programming and therefore reflecting that in our fundraising, they marry themselves. I mean sometimes we get the odd

letter from the patron who says, "There are too many black shows here, so I'm gonna go to Everyman." That's going to happen. That's just the nature of life in the west. But I don't perceive that as a major problem. And I hope to not make it as simple as that. I think it's a combination of invitation and of acceptance of invitation. There's not a theater in America that doesn't want a diverse audience in there. And so we want a diverse audience in there and so we send out the signals invariably to come. But sometimes—and this has to do with race and class—it's intimidating to walk into a new establishment. To walk into a new place, somewhere that historically you have perceived as unwelcoming, that it is socio-economically not your habitat, it's a really big thing to cross over that threshold. Our job in theater is to reach out our hand time and time again and say, "Come. Look at this program we have. Look at this post-show discussion. Look at this pre-show talk. Look at this piece of marketing. Come. Come. Come." That is race, age. Race and age. Just keep reaching. But it is also incumbent upon the community to not just think about going to the nightclub or going to the movies when they think about entertainment. We have to shout loud all of the time, but the communities also have to listen. They have to listen; we have to be persuasive; they have to want to be persuaded. And I think what's happened in Baltimore is that when we articulate ourselves clearly, when we reach out our hand and that invitation, we're saying this is about you specifically but universally about everyone too. If we get the art right, they listen, they come, and they return. The major thing is to make sure that they come not just for the shows that offer cultural specificity into universality, but those that offer another cultural avenue in. We've had to work at that and I think we are winning that battle. Part of the reason I took the job at CENTERSTAGE was that I came to see a Pinter and in that five-hundred seater, there was maybe one hundred people who were African American. That wouldn't happen in Britain. It just wouldn't be the case, and Pinter is British. It wouldn't be the case. And when I saw that, I thought, "This is somewhere I can work. This is somewhere where I can grow. This is somewhere where I can still care and attract and talk to all the interlocking communities of Baltimore and Maryland."

**MARTENSON** You said that there's not a theater in America that doesn't want to have a diverse

audience and I would certainly like to believe that of the theater people, but I've observed some boards that like the idea in the abstract but when it comes down to the changes in programming, the changes in staffing that would be required to make it reality that it's a little tougher.

**KWEI-ARMAH** I don't think there's a board in America that if one third of their audience suddenly became African American tomorrow or Latino or of color tomorrow would have a problem with diversity because at the end of the day it would allow the institution to be financially robust. And then that board would just be old-school and prejudiced and the good white people would run them off. (*Laughter.*) But also so would everybody that would look at the books and go what are you talking about? This doesn't make sense. So I don't know if I believe that. I believe that there are some boards in the country who say we cannot diversify because we don't have that audience here in a certain geographical place. If my geography of America was better, I would quote somewhere, but I have to challenge the attitude that we don't have a black audience at all so therefore doing a diversity initiative doesn't count.

**MARTENSON** That's an argument that used to be made in Minneapolis.

**KWEI-ARMAH** Yeah. Yeah, I challenge that. I challenge that if Alyssa [a Yale student] were to work at CENTERSTAGE, she's not just working at CENTERSTAGE because she's a very bright African American, she's actually working because she's very bright. And that she's African American is just a plus. When people say, "Well we don't have a black audience here, why do I need to diversify my development?" I say it's because that person of color that you're bringing in is value plus. They might be able to find a clue to something that those who are thinking within the box may not. The reason why you might ask a woman to come into this is because they've had to negotiate living with men all of their lives and trying to work out okay what mood he's in, how to defend him, how to not call out that sexism and still get promotion? They've had to negotiate so that extra thought, that extra processing power creates someone of great value. So I would always argue with anyone who sees diversity as some kind of hand-out that diversity is

actually power plus to your organization. Because I guarantee I, as a man of color, I have to know how white society works. I have to because you are the power. I have to follow your whims. Every whim. I have to know what you like and what you don't like. If I wear my hair like this what it says. If I wear my clothes like this what it says. If I speak like this what it says and what frightens you and what does not. What makes you happy about me and what does not. I have to know all of these things as I walk into the door. And *then* I still have to do my day's job and my day's work. These things give me an edge. It's to our advantage. It is not to our detriment.

**MARTENSON** Given all of that, how do you react to this self-examination that's going on in LORT about the fact that the proportion of managers that are of color is essentially zero.

**KWEI-ARMAH** I think it's a debate that it should have with itself. Just like football had with itself. Just like any national institution should have: Are we reflective of our nation? And if you are not, then there's something wrong. Theater itself is, in my opinion, a national institution. It is one of the great institutions; it is one of the pillars of the high arts. And so when I look at anything that contributes as much to society as theater does I call that a national player. Now of course it is in the hands of individual boards as to whether they diversify or whether they think about diversity in a way that is not about just the hand-out. You know, the argument I hear often, in Britain and here, is that there are no black people who want to study the business side of running a theater. Tremendously proud to come into this room and see the diversity of race and gender that's in this room. Magnificent. I'll be using that at least in the next ten speeches I give. (*Laughter.*)

**MARTENSON** Please do.

**KWEI-ARMAH** I will be. I can guarantee that. I'm on the board of TCG. You'll be hearing this. You'll be seeing your names quoted. And so I think that part of the challenge, and TCG did this at Fall Forum, was to get many of the major board presidents in to say, "What are you doing? What are we doing?" And one of the big things, one of the big steps forward was that people understood that old, tired excuses for a lack of diversity sound like the old, tired excuses in the 1970s for the lack of women, like the

old, tired excuses for when women didn't have the vote. And I can go back and I can go back and I can go back. And actually I think we're starting to realize that these things take work. It's not going to change overnight. You're not just going to go and find a hundred young people of color who want to be theater managers when for sixty years they have not been invited into the environment, into the party. It's just not going to happen. So what you do is you look outside of the box and figure out how to bring people in for marketing who have been marketing cigarettes. How do I bring them into this? How do I not just go to the symposiums where everybody's a theater major, but look in other areas? It's one area that I think that in Britain that we may have just investigated just a little bit more than we have here in the states. My first degree is in Classical African Civilization. I have no right to be an Artistic Director. But the bug got me and I jumped in and then I was invited in by a man who took me by the hand and said, "Come. Drink from this pool." And it could be done. We can find them. And I know it can sound really pie in the sky but I know it in my own life, I've seen it. I've started an Artistic Directing chair at CENTERSTAGE. It's an internship for a person of color from Baltimore. And I intend that to be year-in and year-out while I'm there. And the reason I've intended to do that is quite simply because the opportunity for someone of color to see someone of color at the head of a major LORT theater is few and far between, and so it's incumbent upon me to say let's create this environment. Let's create this mode of study. Now, when I leave, will the next Artistic Director think that is valid? I would hope so. I would hope that we might get more and more people who might now have been theater majors to come into the world and find it of interest and want to dedicate their life to this wonderful but not always well-paying gig that we call theater.

**STUDENT** I'm really interested in you as a playwright coming into an institution. What is the role of the individual artist in the institution? Does the institution simply provide a place for artists to speak with audiences? Or does the institution have its own artistic voice? Is that yours or its own?

**KWEI-ARMAH** I think the best possible organization would be a conduit for a conversation with the audience. You framed it beautifully. It's very interesting coming from being a playwright.

One of the wonderful things that I've learned as a playwright is that nearly every decision I do as an Artistic Director comes out of being a playwright. I make decisions in drafts. I'll go, "Here's this idea," and throw it at the wall. Okay good, now let's refine it and allow myself the space to not have to make a decision that's binding and linear, but one that actually works. I run my artistic meeting in the way that I write. I don't like writing treatments. I like starting, getting the characters on the page, having them talk to each other, and just circle. I like circular dramaturgy and so I try to run the organization in a way that is much looser than it might normally be. And the reason why I want it to be much looser is because when the inspiration comes, I need us to be able to be able to shoot off like a colony of bees and go woosh and be able to deal with that. That's hellish for production, but it's about untraining art production from being like a factory—get the show in, get the show out, get the show in. Art is about bang, here it is. Let's try this, let's go off in that direction. So I find that being a playwright is a great administrative tool because it allows me to not just think in a linear fashion. It allows me to understand that I have to have structure, but also that sometimes having my Act Two turning point on page thirty-three rather than twenty-nine actually serves the production. Does that make any sense?

**STUDENT** Yeah, it does. Do you think the organization still has some overarching artistic voice that ties overall programming together or is it really simply an individual show that's important?

**KWEI-ARMAH** No, no, I think one of the things we've achieved, particularly over the last eighteen to twenty months, is theater that supports the institutional vision. For instance, the theme for this year was "Welcome to the Conversation." We have two plays in conversation with each other in rep at the moment; we've had two plays where they've literally been on the same set that's just the set reversed; we've had two brothers play alternate parts. Conversation was right at the core. We've created a new media wall where we're conversing with the world via the Internet and via our website, so the whole institution is actually geared toward serving that institutional vision. It's my job to articulate that vision.

**STUDENT** What's the homework that you said that Britain's done better than the United States as far as diversity?

**KWEI-ARMAH** I think that, and this is about size, we find ourselves on the whole to be less tribal geographically. The communities are not really broken up into black and white. The communities are made up of all kinds of ethnicities. There is socio-economic difference. There's poor black and poor white and there's wealthy British and wealthy foreign, and it means that our children have grown up having much greater integration at a much younger age and more able to discuss diversity—we had the diversity debate that's happening in America now in about the 1980s. It began in the 1980s then got rough and tumble through the 90s. Once Tony Blair got in in 1997, it became the main agenda of the government to make Britain look like the twenty-first century. And that's not been achieved, but it's been attacked from government down in a very verbose fashion. And so I would say that what we've done in diversity is around socialization. It's not competition, but I find our socialization slightly ahead. I find it's been investigated slightly more there than it has here.

**STUDENT** From what I know or have heard is that people of African descent in Britain are still not at the same level. Is the disparity larger here than it is in Britain?

**KWEI-ARMAH** That's a very interesting question. Socio-economically, we are way behind. We have a very small black middle class. Here you have centuries of historic black colleges, infrastructure that takes you from black school teachers to black mayors and presidents. The percentage of black wealth here is far greater than it is in Britain, but I would say that for all of the African American population's wealth in comparison to that of other diasporic African communities, that where it finds itself in the pecking order of American society remains in the same place as we find ourselves in Britain. I find that African America is defined by its underclass and that is a problem. Black equals underclass and that's the problem with the black middle class. They're not shouting loud enough and saying we should not be defined only by that, but by a holistic—and that's an argument that we find ourselves in Britain having very clearly. We will not

be defined by the commerce of hip-hop, the commerce of the celebration or the globalization of thug culture. And, let me just be clear, I'm a hip-hop man. I grew up on Public Enemy—old, old, old school. But of the modern, most popular and of thug culture. So, that's really why I feel that what integration has done, or social integration or greater social integration has done, has broken down some of the perceptions of each community or of the black communities in Britain and in America.

**MARTENSON** Does racism in Britain have a different quality than racism in the United States?

**KWEI-ARMAH** Oh, fundamentally. Fundamentally. I always put in the caveat that I've been here for twenty months, so, you know, take that as you will. My northern and my southern American friends always say the quality of racism in the South and the quality of racism in the North is very, very different. And for me the quality of racism in Britain and the quality of racism in the North and in the South is very different. America is a very direct culture. Whereas in Britain it's much more under the carpet, it's much more connotational, it's much more just slightly hidden in a verb and slightly hidden in a tone. When one talks about race during an election time here, it's very clear when references are being made to the black community. It's very, very clear. I find racists very clear here. Let me frame it like this: I got picked up once in San Francisco by a limousine. It was about 2:00 in the morning and it was the owner of the limousine firm. He couldn't get any of his workers to come out at that time, so he came. He was a fairly affluent man and when he met me, he heard me speak and I actually have it here on my phone if anybody doesn't believe me, and he said, "Where you from?" I said "I'm from London, originally the Caribbean and Ghana." He said, "Ah. Ah. Yeah, you're different. I could tell you were different." And I went, "Different? How do you mean?" And he said, "Ah, well you're different from, from, from *our* blacks." And I said, "And how is that? And would you mind, sir if I recorded it?" (*Laughter.*) And I did! And he went, "Yeah, of course. I mean I'm just saying what I would normally say. You know, the thing about you blacks from across the seas, it's that you've managed to learn, you've managed to be matriculated in the fine European education. And you've managed to merge that with your natural

jungle instincts." (*Laughter.*) He said, "And the thing about *our* blacks is that they haven't got the education. So they just have the jungle instinct." So he thought he was giving me a compliment. I was like, "Can you just say that again?" (*Laughter.*) I actually really enjoyed, not the backward compliment, not the placing of the African American into the jungle, but I enjoyed that he would say it.

**STUDENT** First I just want to thank you again for coming. Thank you for coming to the states, thank you for coming to Baltimore, and thanks for putting your work here. But my question is: Why come to the states? Why choose to come here and why choose to come here now?

**KWEI-ARMAH** It's relatively fascinating to me is that many of my acting friends left Britain to come to America. They came to the city of gold. I was very fortunate in that I have a good, good career in Britain, and it's a testament to how far we're behind because there are just very few of me in Britain. So many were surprised in Britain when I said that I was going to come. It was actually one of the two most moving days I've had in my life when I announced on Radio 4 that I was coming to America. I just got an outpouring of grief that really knocked me out. Some people'd be crying and other people'd be like, "And why are you going? You're leaving and you're one of the few that they allow through and why would *you* leave? Why would you leave us?" And it was really hard, it was really painful. Anyway, I find myself in my life hating complaining. I hate it. I began my life as a musician, as a singer. And I became a musician because I hated waiting for people to write songs for me. I hated complaining, "Why won't they write songs?" So I taught myself to play instruments and I became a producer. I became a writer when as an actor I was fed up with waiting for people to write plays that told the stories that I wanted. Not stories for me to be in, but the stories that I felt should be told. I was just like, if not me, who? So I became a writer. I became a director when I got fed up with seeing directors doing my plays and me going, "No" and having to tell them what to do and having to explain the culture and having to go and say, "Where are the black directors?" CENTERSTAGE actually came to me at a moment when I found myself complaining about many plays that were

being staged in Britain. And I've been offered buildings before and I've gone, "No, that's just not on my checklist." But at that moment, Kwame became the gatekeeper. I got offered a marvelous festival called the World Festival of Black Arts and Culture in Senegal, which was like fifty-two countries, five thousand artists, and over a month long festival, and they just asked me to be the Artistic Director. As soon as that landed, CENTERSTAGE then offered and I went, "Well maybe I'm being told to stop complaining and go and learn." That's kind of why I said yes. Because it felt like a wonderful learning experience at that exact moment in time. It felt like I could work on all of my different art forms all in one place rather than travelling eight or nine months of the year. It just hit at the right time for me. And history will tell whether I listened to the right voice, but that's really why I wanted to do it and I've not regretted that yet. I'm learning at a speed that is just astronomical. I feel I've put muscle on my brain and it's made me a better artist. It's made me a better writer by knowing season planning. After sitting through season planning, I was amazed that any new plays ever get produced in America. Because of the pressure, the economic pressure of getting that title, getting that star, getting that one that they know, getting that Shakespeare. The pressure, which I think you were alluding to very at the very beginning, the pressure of filling those slots so that you can appeal to the people who look at you and hear, "Yeah, I will bequeath my \$500,000 to you." The pressures are immense and I've learned a great deal.