



## **ActingUP at The Braid Highlights the Creative Team Behind New Salon Show "True Colors"**

Santa Monica (April 23, 2019) One of the most popular features of salon performances at Jewish Women's Theatre actually takes place after the shows. This is when audiences get a chance to ask questions of the show's authors, actors or production staff members. It is one thing to see a personal story on stage, but it is even more engaging and educational to be able to ask these artists questions about their motivation or methods. To this end, welcome to Acting Up at JWT, a new feature that will give audiences more insight.

JWT's new salon show, *True Colors* is especially suited to premiere Acting Up at JWT. Growing up as a multicultural Jew has posed challenges and opportunities to our authors and one of our producers. We hope you will enjoy meeting Maria Ramos-Chertok, writer of "Both/And" and Eric Greene, co-producer of *True Colors*.

*True Colors* will premiere at The Braid, JWT's performance and art space on May 4 and will travel to the Westside, the San Fernando Valley, the Fairfax District and the South Bay until May 16. Pre-sale tickets are \$45, \$50 at the door and available at: [www.jewishwomenstheatre.org](http://www.jewishwomenstheatre.org). Performances include a dessert buffet plus Q and A with actors, writers and JWT's production staff after the show.

### **Maria, how did you learn about JWT?**

I live in Marin County and my synagogue hosted something from JWT several years ago. I went and just fell in love with way that the stories were presented and the stories themselves. Over the years, I saw three shows at three different venues and all of them were equally as powerful.

### **What did you first write for JWT and how did you hear about how to submit your story?**

I went online and looked into it. I saw the submission notice for *True Colors*, and I thought I also identify as a Jew of Color, so I put my story together and submitted it.

### **What about the theme excited you?**

Growing up, there was not a lot of talk about identity politics. Now, I think people are much more fluid and they talk about intersectionalities and ways that you can be part of both worlds, but really belong to neither. I think there is much more conversation about identity today. But when I was growing up, that wasn't the case. My grandmother was raised under Communism in Russia, so she was not religious, although she very much identified as a Jewish person. I was raised culturally Jewish but with no Jewish training. My mother grew up as an only child. She ran away from home, converted to Catholicism and married my father, a Cuban immigrant. So, when I saw the theme Jews of Color, I thought this was a perfect fit. I had done a lot of work with The SELAH Leadership program, and the Jews of Color cohort so I have a whole network of Jews of Color that I connected with, and feel a part of. My story shows how I found people that I connect with.

### **Your story is called "Both/And." Can you explain that title?**

The title isn't actually mine. In the world of multicultural training, I used to do a lot of work on racial equity training. The first time you ever go to any racial equity training, one of the things they teach you in the first hour is that you're going to want to dichotomize into either good or bad; people are right or they are wrong; or things are true or not true, or people are smart or stupid. Your stretch, or your learning edge in this multicultural work is to cull the both/and. It's a concept that comes from the field of anti-oppression training. So, it's not mine, I never could take credit for

it.

**In addition to your story "Both/And" for JWT, you have also written a Book called *The Butterfly Theory* and you are working on a novel. Can you tell us about them?**

*The Butterfly Theory* came out of a writing and creative arts workshop for women who want to explore what comes next in life. This is a companion book that has 52 weeks of inquiries for transformation. It's mind-body-spirit book. I am also just finishing a novel entitled *Rosie's Blues*. It's the story of a woman who is homeless and despondent because she's lost her two children. And her path crosses with a Bohemian feminist who runs a shelter for battered women. As a result of an intervention, Rosie is sent to do community service at this woman's shelter and it's the story of their friendship and the journey that unfolds.

**And your mother actually ran a shelter for homeless women and children in your home?**

She still does. But when I was growing up in the 70's she opened our family home as a shelter for battered women and their children. She ultimately was the first shelter in the country to get federal funding. And then, she now has seven properties that house over 150 women. She's 77. She's been going strong.

**That part of your life is fascinating, but let's return for a bit to the story that will be part of *True Colors*. I don't want to spoil it for our audience, but can you give us one anecdote about growing up between two worlds that isn't in your story?**

My father did not speak to us in Spanish because my mother's a Jewish-European American and he didn't want us to have an accent because he immigrated from Cuba to America before the revolution and for him, English is a second language. He also had dark skin, brown skin and experienced a great deal of discrimination as a brown-skinned man with an accent. He didn't want his children to have an accent so he didn't speak to us in Spanish. However, his community (my parents got divorced when I was nine), his entire community was Spanish-speaking. He got remarried. His second wife was Columbian and she didn't speak any English. And many of his relatives from Cuba were ultimately brought over by him and I would be sitting with my family members and not understand what they were saying. So, they were my family, but I couldn't talk to them when I was younger. But over time, I learned Spanish. Now I'm fluent and my two boys are. But it was really hard. I have a lot of friends who also are Latino. So, I felt that I was part of them, but not really because I can't speak your language. And I'm not the first person who experienced that. It's common for the first-generation to lose the language so I felt that I was part of their world but not really.

**Where did you learn Spanish?**

It was a combination of things. I was around it. My father's second wife spoke only Spanish. My first boyfriend's mother was Colombian and she didn't speak English. Also, in my school, they started teaching English in third grade. And so, I started then, but by twelfth grade, I was conversational. Then I went to law school and was \$60,000 in debt. I worked at a private law firm for a year, but I hated it. I made enough money to almost pay off my student debt, but I went to live in Spain for a year to decompress and teach English. And that's when I really perfected it. But I was not more comfortable in Spain than in America. A lot of people were still living under dictator Franco's shadow. So, a lot of folks, particularly those who were older, were mistrustful of foreigners. I lived in a province in the north and I was an anomaly. I was in my 30's and not married and so I didn't quite fit into that culture either. There was a lot of drinking and smoking and I don't drink or smoke. So coming from a state that was different in many ways, I felt like an outsider.

**Let's talk about religion. Your mother ran away from home and converted to Catholicism. Did she raise you as a Catholic?**

When I was young, I was brought to church, but I always felt like an outsider. When they would say Jesus Christ died for your sins, I remember thinking "I really don't have any sins." And I wondered why this person had to die for my sins. I really didn't want him to do that. I'm sure you know that in Catholic churches there is always a statue of Jesus Christ

on a cross bleeding from the stigmata. I found it really traumatic. Why is this bloody man here? I never got around that whole thing. Then in the 60s and 70's, the world changed so I never made communion and I escaped portions of it, but most of my friends were going to confirmation and communion. I did feel like an "other," but I didn't know why.

### **How did Judaism come into your life?**

When I applied to UC Berkeley from Hackensack, New Jersey, I got into a dorm that was filled with Jewish girls from the San Fernando Valley. It was called Davidson Hall. It was called Star of David dorm. They explained to me that if your mother is Jewish, you're Jewish. And they took me in. You'll have to come to JWT to hear the whole story. But it was the start of my Jewish education. There was the start of a whole journey that took off from there.

### **Tell me about your family.**

I had my first child at 40 and my second at 42. I had sort of given up on finding the right man when a friend of mine, who had just broken up with his girlfriend, invited me to come with him to the Russian River for an event called "Jews and Canoes." I told him I don't canoe and I had given up on dating, but he begged me to come along because I wanted to meet somebody. He dragged me to the event. And he actually met somebody that he married a year later. At his wedding, he had a singles table and I sat at that table and that's where I met my husband. And we got married a year and a half later. Now my sons are 14 and 16. And they speak Spanish and are men of the world.

### **Our co-producer Eric Greene provides additional insight into what it is like to be a Jew of Color in the following Q and A:**

#### **How did you hear about JWT?**

I went to a performance a few years ago. A friend of mine had a piece in a show about Sephardic Jews. I went to hear that and met Ronda Spinak (JWT's artistic director) and shared with her that I do work with Jews of Color in LA. She expressed her interest in having more racial diversity in the programming. So that's how it all began.

#### **Did you keep in touch?**

I do informal organizing with Jews of Color. I and a few others put together social events for Jews of Color to give them an opportunity to get to know each other, to build community. One of the people that I work with made a connection with JWT, as they were doing a storytelling show about Jews of Color in Los Angeles. I ended up performing in that piece because my girlfriend who wrote it had to work. So, I performed that night as an Iranian-American woman. After that, Ronda kept in touch with me and once JWT embarked upon *True Colors*, I told her I would join with her.

### **So, you're a writer and an actor, and you also have a job at UCLA and you do Jews of Color as a sideline. You're a very busy man!**

I'm a writer and civil rights activist primarily. I used to be an actor, but I'm not a professional actor currently. My main work is a civil rights activist. I work in the Communications Department at UCLA. I'm Associate Communications Director for Diversity Issues. I used to be the LA director of the Progressive Jewish Alliance and was a senior policy advisor at the ACLU for several years.

#### **What is your background?**

On my father's side, African-American and Native American—not Jewish. And on my mother's side Russian and Polish-Jewish. I was adopted. And my mom is the daughter of Romanian Jewish immigrants.

#### **Were you raised Jewish?**

Yes, and I should also point out that my mom was the first single person in the State of California to do that. She was a single mother.

**How did you get interested in getting involved with Jews of Color?**

I always craved the community of others. Growing up I had basically two or three friends who were Jews of Color, but not very many. Then, when I went to college I had an African-American Jewish history professor and it was always comforting that I could pass him in late September or October and say, "Happy New Year" to him as a Black man. And he knew what I meant and would say "Happy New Year" to me, too. And that was very meaningful because we're kind of isolated. We're spread out all over the place. It's very rare that there's a congregation. There is just a craving for community that I had and that others had. Over the past 15 years, online and in person, there have been more and more avenues of connection for Jews of Color to communicate with each other.

**That is one of the themes of True Colors. There are many Jews of Color who need community or who never felt completely accepted by anybody. How did you feel growing up? Is that a fair description?**

I was aware that there was diversity in the Jewish community. I was aware that there were European Jews, and there were Iranian Jews, and there were Black Jews and Jews who looked like me. I was forever being told that I did not look Jewish. I'll go speak at a synagogue wearing a yarmulke and someone will come up and ask, "Are you Jewish?" It's really absurd. And almost every Jew of Color has a version of that story. So, finding community with those people who are African-American or Latino or Asian is a natural, obvious thing for a person of color who is Jewish. For whom it's not an oddity.

**One thing that struck me about our stories and with what you just said is that I don't sense any resentment about not being welcomed. Why didn't you resent it?**

I think there are certainly misgivings. And I think there is certainly frustration. The reason you don't hear a lot of resentment is that the ones who resent are the ones who leave the community. The thing that a lot of people need to understand is that because the Jewish community is not fully cognizant of its own diversity, and because it's not fully embracing of its own diversity, there are people who just up and left the Jewish community. It's just too frustrating. It's just too difficult. It's just too alienating. And they leave. And they can. We're losing as a result of that. So, the ones who are still involved in the Jewish community, in some way, are the ones have been willing to put their frustrations in the context of the many ways they are fed and nourished by Judaism. But for some people, it's just too difficult. It's just too stressful. And they opt to take themselves out of the community because they don't want to deal with the racial biases there. It's a serious problem.

**What do you think of the show? Do you think the stories are good representations of Jews of Color?**

I think they show a variety of ways that people of color in the community have expressed themselves, have connected with their Jewish identity, have connected with other parts of their ethnic heritage. And it's important to get those stories out, to recognize that those are not oddities, they are part of the Jewish community, to recognize that not every Jew looks like Woody Allen.

**What makes the Woody Allen Jews (the Ashkenazi Jews) so unwelcoming?**

I think inherently people are suspicious of things that are different. They are made uncomfortable by difference. And I think that the Jewish community has forgotten its ethnic diversity; it's forgotten its own history. The Talmud was written in Iraq and ancient Israel. None of the people who were writing the Talmud looked like Jerry Seinfeld. These would have been brown-skinned Jews. And the community has forgotten its own diversity and I think that that is very unfortunate and very much to our detriment. And there are a lot of people who have equated Jews with looking a certain way and that is very much to the detriment of the community.

**Growing up as an Ashkenazi Jew, I thought Jews can come from Russia or Europe. No one ever taught us anything else. Do you think our Hebrew schools and religious instruction should teach more about the complexity of Jewish heritage?**

The variety of that heritage. That we are a mixed multitude. That we are an international people and that our roots are in the Middle East, in ancient Israel, and that they extend back farther than Germany and Russia.

**After they see the show, what would you like members of the *True Colors* audience to leave with?**

I would like the Jews of Color to know that there are versions of their experience that others have shared and they can feel a little less alone. And I would like the Ashkenazi Jews who come to have a greater understanding of the diversity and beauty and complexity of the Jewish community. To understand that Jews of Color are part of the community and that they can take their rightful place in the community alongside everyone else.

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