“Writing is like holding the hand of God”

The Signature Lecture Series: Suzan-Lori Parks

Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Suzan-Lori Parks was the featured speaker of the April 2010 installment of the College of Arts and Letters Signature Lecture Series. Parks appeared at MSU shortly after production of her Pulitzer Prize-finalist play “In the Blood” by MSU’s Theatre Department March 23-28.
Master of Fine Arts in Acting graduate student Brandon Piper and Bachelor of Fine Arts in Acting student Alex West perform a scene from Suzan-Lori Park’s “Topdog/Underdog” in the Pasant Theatre prior to Park’s Celebrity Lecture. Piper and West graduated in May 2010.
“It’s kind of like dating. Some people you get married to and you wake up one morning and you’re 90 years old and still married to them. And other people, they’re a little bit different, you know? Oh, that’s sweet. We just had a summer romance. But, it’s all great. It’s all great.”

On whether what she writes is autobiographical, Parks brought up the old quote that “all writing is autobiographical,” and said that what she says is that this all happened to me, but not in this way and not in this order. So, by the time you get to the play, it’s all scrambled.

“My favorite writer – the man – is Shakespeare,” Parks told the students. “What I admire about him is not only was he a great writer, but he wrote about kings and stuff, queens and stuff, but he wasn’t a king. He wasn’t Lear, or King John, or Richard the II or III. And he wasn’t Henry VIII. He wasn’t all of the kings that he wrote about, right?

“He wasn’t writing about just himself; he was writing about the world and he somehow managed to write – he was very present in every character – but never as the voice of the writer. He’s not there standing on a soapbox, and all the rest of the characters are supporting that message. I don’t feel that in his plays. He is everywhere and anywhere. So completely present that he is actually absent, which I admire tremendously. Was he writing about his family? I don’t think so.”

Parks added that her character, Hester, in her play “In the Blood,” wasn’t like her, but because of the way she writes, she could feel her, really let her in and give her a voice. Just as she lets in the guys in “Top Dog/Underdog” and gives them a voice. That’s another way, she says, to be a powerful writer.

Asked about the experience of winning her Pulitzer Prize and what if anything is different, Parks says half jokingly that things are now framed as BP – Before Pulitzer, and AP – After Pulitzer.

“It’s a great thing, but after it, I wrote a play a day and performed it all over the world with people who were high-level professionals and some who were in high school. And we didn’t make any money, but it was fun.”
“To me, writing is like holding the hand of God. That’s why I had the Sutra 1, 2 and 3 tattooed on my left arm…”

As for her plays, Ms. Parks said that they require architecture to sustain structure. In explaining, she went on to say that each of her plays is like going into a mine shaft, so it really needs strong bracing.

“That’s what I’ve just recently realized about ‘In the Blood,’ Parks said. ‘The architecture of ‘In the Blood’ is there so we can go into the dark place. The structure of ‘Top Dog/Underdog’ is like that. It borrows from history – hanging on history like a coat on a hanger – so that we can sustain that flight into a very dark place. And come out of it with knowledge, but unscathed.

“We can ‘make it out of the mine.’ We can travel in there, mine the gold that’s there for everybody – a different kind of gold – and you can come out of it alive.”

ABOUT SUZAN-LORI PARKS
In 2007, Parks’ project 365Days/365Plays was produced in more than 700 theaters worldwide, creating one of the largest grassroots collaborations in theater history. Her plays include “Topdog/Underdog,” “In the Blood,” “The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World,” “Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom” (1990 OBIE Award for Best New American Play), and “The America Play.”

Parks’ first feature-length screenplay was “Girl 6,” written for Spike Lee. She’s also written screenplays for Brad Pitt and Denzel Washington, and adapted Zora Neale Hurston’s novel “Their Eyes Were Watching God,” which starred Halle Barry and premiered on ABC’s “Oprah Winfrey Presents.”

Her well-reviewed first novel, “Getting Mother’s Body” (Random House, 2003), set in the west Texas of her youth, follows the scrappy Beede family as they embark on a riotous road trip in hopes of recovering a fortune in jewels – rumored to be buried with a long-dead relative. Parks also authored “Ray Charles Live!,” a musical based on the life of Ray Charles, and directed the Broadway revival of August Wilson’s “Fences” in 2009.

Suzan-Lori Parks is the first recipient of the master writer chair at the Public Theater, a three-year residency in which she is also a visiting arts professor in dramatic writing at New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts. Parks has also taught at California Institute of the Arts and Yale School of Drama.

Suzan-Lori Park answers MSU Theatre students’ questions on stage between the Auditorium and Fairchild Theatres the morning after her Celebrity Lecture.