

thINKingDANCE

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You're a Guest Here Too

by nikolai mckenzie ben rema

In a Zoom reading, Cinder Kuss pours life experience as an interracial Jew growing up in a family much like a hostile workplace or holding cell into his intensely gripping, terrifying horror play, *Melt*.

The play's central character is Bruce, the patriarchal Abraham figure, collapsing under the pressures built generations before him. *Melt* focuses on Bruce's relationship with his mixed-race kids trying to assert their agency and be true to themselves in spite of him, and his Korean wife who has simply had it with him. These relationships evolve within the context of their synagogue, a community reckoning with the potential of more liberal practices. *Melt* is an appropriate title for a story that starts out placidly enough then quickly turns into a roiling pressure cooker. Hissing with the intense vitriol of Zionism rooted in racism, seething familial contempt, inter- and intra-tribe violence, and a mother animorphed into a tiger, eating the remains of her slain young, this choke hold of a play left me reeling from the speed of the action and the intensity of the charged words used by the actors, their performances surpassing the confines of the Zoom screen.

I sat down to watch with a bowl of my ancestors' food: Jamaican curry chicken with callaloo, syncing up with the scene where Tal (nonbinary, college-age activist and elder child of Bruce) is thrilled at finally learning and mastering the secrets of galbi, a traditional Korean dish, from their mother. Along with many other moments in the play, I saw myself in Tal at this moment. This one resonates as I know the pride I feel when I cook curry chicken successfully to my mother's masterful standards.

Following my viewing, Cinder and I discussed at length our respective ethnic makeups that color our view of the world. I talked with Cinder frankly, cogently about where this intense work came from, what provided the heat for *Melt*. Turns out we all have that pilot light of grief that's always on, fueling our darkest nightmares.

nikolai mckenzie ben rema: How do you and Tal link up, are they anchored in you somehow?

Cinder Kuss: Absolutely, I see Tal as me at a time when I felt the need to dissociate from my father and what he represented. He was already a bit of an island as a person. We moved around a lot and were put into some pretty absurd situations because of him. Although it was hard to write this play, it was medicine. My father, whom Bruce is based on, was a man who was almost a stranger to himself, claiming to be a liberal Democrat in public but who watched Fox News regularly and blindly accepted Zionism. Like Bruce, he kept secrets and made choices out of a necessity to assert his patriarchal role, to tick that box. My father lived in Korea for five years but never attempted to learn the Korean language; my parents didn't prepare us for growing up interracial in a religious context and that's where we find Tal and Bruce and the family at the beginning of the play.

NMBR: There's a gnarly line that sticks to my rib even now; it's spoken by Bruce to Tal, saying, "...you're a guest here too." That set off all kinds of bells for me, as if to say: "I may have sired you but you will never be pure in my eyes, never be truly a part of the tribe, wholly unequal and at my mercy." This line is the father operating as the human embodiment of an occupying oppressor and it came from somewhere so vulnerable, could you go there for a second?

CK: For sure, for a lot of us mixed-race folks it isn't always some beautiful fusion of identities, there's always going to be this overhanging othering that goes on in the religious setting, especially the Orthodox community. They had their own way of subtly and not so subtly letting us know that we were the other. The hyper-evangelical Korean community was more concerned about our Jewishness than anything else and, of course, they too had an agenda. A guest everywhere, really is an appropriate moniker for myself, my siblings, and the young, mixed-race characters in the play. This feeling of being an outsider in both tribes is why I have to write roles for me, people like me who all carry some slightly different shade of this third culture kid feeling.

NMBR: Palestine is a major ingredient in this boiling cauldron of a play, as the same lines that we see drawn on social media, mainstream media, and in our own families show up in *Melt*. Over here we are, of course, still somewhat removed from the events because they are "over there," but the violence there starts much closer to everyone, right? Starts in the minds of individuals who then turn into oppressors?

CK: Yes, extremism is planted early in American Jews, and it spreads, it causes people to do so much harm. Some of the most militant Zionists are here, right here in America, and so the all-engulfing ideology of "justifiably" wiping out swathes of people to make space for the "settler" isn't just "over there." It's here too, against the backdrop of historical racism being justified as a means to an end. But again that's the medicine of writing this play: I now no longer feel guilty for rejecting a Jewish and white identity. That's the power of creating, it can burn through and melt the accumulated gunk that's not meant to stand and stick with you permanently.

Melt by Cinder Kuss, directed by Carl(os) Roa, COME TO PAPA festival, June 12, 2021

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