

# Interview with *Fireflies* playwright Donja R. Love

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*Macelle Mahala is the dramaturg for South Coast Repertory's production of Fireflies (Jan. 5-26, 2020). As part of her work on and research for the play, she conducted an extensive interview with the playwright. This is the transcript.*

**MACELLE MAHALA:** Your play really inspired me to delve deeper into the history of the Civil Rights Movement. I read Coretta Scott King's autobiography, which was published just a year after King's assassination and then revised again in the nineteen nineties. It's a very formal book, and was clearly written to be a part of the establishment of King's legacy. Despite this, there are many telling personal details in it about the struggles she faced, how she felt constrained not just by racism but by the gender roles of the time period and the role she was expected to play in her family and in the movement, a role that she mostly accepted but also occasionally chafed against.

One of the things your play does really beautifully is image what that personal, less formal space is like, the space that people in the movement tried to protect and save for themselves. I think that's pretty fascinating.

**DONJA R. LOVE:** I understand exactly what you're getting at. It makes me think so much about, not to be general, but it makes me think about black culture and the black community in terms of, we don't want everybody in our business, we don't want everybody to know what goes on behind closed doors. To be able to have that privacy but also thinking about how important survival is. Needing to be able to preserve your ethnicity and your core or whatever that thing is so it is not used against you, so it's not weaponized for whatever the case may be. I do understand that.

But then also, I do see the beauty of being able to be transparent, right? Of being able to be vulnerable and how powerful and how brave it is to be vulnerable. So, what does that look like? In the play Olivia is brave. How radical, how revolutionary is it for a black woman in the 1960s to be able to formulate these sentences, not just in her mind, but in actual language as well. What is that balance between being formal, being this very public figure, but then also understanding that at the end of the day, I'm a fully realized human being, with wants and needs and desires and how do I navigate between the two?

**MAHALA:** There's such a mix of fact and fiction in this play, there are specific references to real events such as the killing of the four little girls in the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing and the reference to the package the FBI sent to the King home in an attempt to intimidate him and stop the Civil Rights Movement—I was shocked to read the FBI memo that was sent with that packet, it urged Martin Luther King Jr. to commit suicide—it made me think that the truth is stranger and more terrible than any fictional imagination could be. Given that, how did you try to balance the combination of fact and fiction in your play?

**LOVE:** Right. There are fictionalized elements to the play, and then there are actual true events. I was trying to think of what the inciting incident would be, the catalyst that drops us into the world of the play. I thought about the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, and I thought about Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson and Carol Denise McNair, the four little black girls who were senselessly killed because of someone's hatred. I was wondering what does that do to

someone who is about to bring life into this world? What does that do to someone who, going back to being this public figure, who is about to bring life into this world and who is, by the very nature of the work that she does with her husband, constantly confronted and constantly seeing this sort of violence. For me that really was such a strong catalyst.

**MAHALA:** In the script there is a reference to a young boy, “Jimmy,” who is tortured and murdered for supposedly messing with a white woman. Was that character based on a real person or is it an amalgamation or an imagining of many people?

**LOVE:** For that character, naturally, I found myself thinking about Emmett Till. A child who was senselessly killed because of someone's hatred. Because of someone's lies and the lack of agency colored people during that time had over their own existence.

**MAHALA:** That makes me think of the recent defacing of the memorial marker that was put up at the spot where Emmett Till’s body was found. The marker was put up in 2007 and it kept getting defaced. It has had to be replaced four times and it’s now a bulletproof sign so it won’t get shot up and there are security cameras so it won’t be stolen. It just shows so clearly that the hatred still exists and that it’s still happening.

**LOVE:** Unfortunately, it still exists and it still thrives. It shows how deep-rooted hatred is, how deep-rooted white supremacy is, and how there is so much work that needs to be done. I am of the belief that the individual that is experiencing the hatred, the individual that exists within the margins, the individual that is oppressed, it is not our job to do the work. Yes, we can help. But it's not our job to do the work. While writing the play, I was thinking about how tiring that is. How exhausting that work is, and that is reflected in Olivia's psychological state, and in Charles' as well. They are tired, they are absolutely exhausted, because what they're doing is the work to change a system.

**MAHALA:** Yes, your play really shows two characters living in the midst and the aftermath of trauma. It doesn't seem like there's enough of that out in the public sphere, looking at the aftermath of the violence inflicted on black people during the Civil Rights Movement.

**LOVE:** You're a hundred percent right. What does that do? I found myself thinking about that and what that looks like, especially for individuals during this time, where they see individuals being attacked by dogs. They see individuals being sprayed with powerful water hoses that will literally take out hair from your scalp. Like seeing these things constantly on replay so vividly, what does that kind of trauma do? One of the things that I was interested in exploring is what did that look like for Olivia? What do those bombs mean? Are those bombs her actual trauma being replayed? And to the outside world who sees her, they just see this woman who may not be in the best mental health, but how the piece is devised, the reader and the viewer actually experience what she's experiencing.

**MAHALA:** Absolutely. I also wanted to talk a little bit about this idea of “the woman behind the man.” In Coretta Scott King’s autobiography she writes about being upset that she wasn't invited to march alongside of Dr. King during the March on Washington. She writes something to the effect that the wives went through everything that the husbands went through but they didn't get to be in the front of the march with them. There wasn't even a chair for her on the platform until somebody got her a

chair, as an afterthought. So, I think your play does a nice job of showing these revered figures, rightly so revered, but also the sexism and the homophobia that were part of the time period.

**LOVE:** I find myself just getting incredibly livid at this idea that a woman has to be behind a man. When I think about black history, when I think about all of the times that the needle was moved in a progressive direction, I find myself always thinking that it was because of a black woman. I think about during the time of enslavement, Harriet Tubman, all of the work that she was able to do. I think about the Civil Rights Movement and I think about Rosa Parks and all of the work that she was able to do, and her being one of the catalysts for the Civil Rights Movement to exist. In the here and the now, thinking about the Black Lives Matter movement and thinking about it being created by three black women, two of which are queer. Black women are always at the helm of progression, always at the helm of the needle moving forward and in the right direction. But still there's always this erasure. I was really interested in exploring that. So, I found myself thinking, what was it like back in the 60s? What was it like to be this black woman, who is quite literally writing the words that are healing a nation? You are writing the words but your husband is the face of the movement and the one that is getting all the credit. To know, just because of who you are, because you are a woman, that you don't have that sort of power, you don't have that sort of agency. I found myself really interested in exploring that. What does that look like? What are the ways in which Olivia can be able to grow into the fullness of herself, to be able to become self-actualized? Not just through her writing these sermons and speeches for her husband. When we get to the end of the play, we are quite literally able to see her step into and own her voice.

**MAHALA:** I understand that *Fireflies* is part of a trilogy focused on queer love in black history. What a wonderful idea. What intrigued you about writing a play set in the Civil Rights era? How did you choose that era as one of the three historical periods to focus on?

**LOVE:** I started writing the first play in the trilogy, *Sugar in Our Wounds*, in January 2016. It was inspired by Tarell Alvin McCraney's play *Marcus; or the Secret of Sweet*. There was a section in that where one of the characters, Shaunta, is probing the protagonist Marcus, to figure out his sexuality. And one of the things she mentions to him is hearing of what the masters would do to their enslaved men if they were ever found out of being homosexual. And that blew my mind because before that time, I never imagined the type of love that I have existing. I just kept thinking about, wow, queer love during the time of enslavement. So, in January 2016, I sat down and I started writing *Sugar in Our Wounds*. Fast forward to May of 2016, my husband and I were walking to the grocery store. He reads every single draft of every play I write, God bless him. I remember I stopped dead in my tracks and I said, "oh, I think this play is a part of a trilogy that explores queer love during pivotal moments in black history."

I started to think and the Civil Rights Movement started to really make itself pronounced. So that's how the trilogy came to be. I didn't set out to write a trilogy, it just found its way to me. Knowing that I wanted to write a piece about the Civil Rights Movement, it actually took me, oh, almost a year to land on [creating the characters of] Olivia and Charles.

**MAHALA:** Did you do any research into queer individuals involved in the Civil

Rights Movement before writing this play? I mean, we know about some people from that time period like Bayard Rustin and Lorraine Hansberry, but of course, I'm sure there were many others that we don't know about. What kind of research did you do and which people's stories interested you?

**LOVE:** With *Fireflies*, I went against my normal writing process. Normally, I'll write just to get everything out, and then I'll do research or interviews. This time, I was so excited to have a conversation with my grand mom and my great-grand mom, because they are black women who existed during the time that the play was set. So, I sat down with my Mom-Mom and my Nana individually and just listened to them share what their journeys were like existing and living during the time the play is set. When I sat down to write *Fireflies*, I couldn't hear what Olivia or Charles were trying to say because I wanted to remember what Mom-Mom said and remember what Nana said. I wanted to make sure I honored them, that I got it right for them. It got to a point where I said, "Donja, you love Mom-Mom, you love Nana but you got to stop thinking about them right now. You have to listen to Olivia, you have to listen to Charles."

Out of the three plays in the trilogy, it was the most challenging play to write because of having in mind my grand mom and my great-grand mom. I had to navigate through that to get the play out and after I finished the first draft of it, I left it alone for a while. I would go back to my conversation with my grand mom and my great-grand mom and then I started to think a lot about individuals like Bayard Rustin, being a queer man and a part of the civil rights movement, a queer man who was one of the main organizers with the March on Washington. I started to think about, of course, Dr. King and Coretta Scott King and what their mission was like, doing research on them, and reading a lot about their story. I read *The Death of a King*, Tavis Smiley's book, and I found myself incredibly interested in what it means to be such a public figure but yet still have a personal life. How can you navigate between the two? Is it even possible to navigate between the two, to be such a public figure but yet still have a modicum of a personal life? All of those things went into my research process.

About a month ago, an excerpt from the play was read at a conference here in New York and two black queer women came up to me afterwards. They thanked me, not just for the excerpt, they thanked me for the whole play, because they saw it when it ran at Atlantic. These two black queer women are actively engaged and they're both pastors. They said to me, and I find myself getting emotional just thinking about it, they said to me, "we never saw ourselves reflected in such a way. Not just in terms of our sexuality, but in terms of our spirituality as well." That the two can co-exist and that the two do not have to be disconnected from each other. That there can be harmony. So, I found myself thinking about that as well.

**MAHALA:** That's beautiful. It brings up another question I had about religion and how your play shows how religion can be used in both positive and negative ways. Some Christians use their religion as an excuse and an opportunity to discriminate against and seek to control the autonomy of both women and members of the LGBTQIA community. I wonder how you wanted to portray religion and broach that topic?

**LOVE:** Truly, truly. Actually, what came to mind and what always comes to mind, are three words—God is love. And so, anything that has love in it, God is there. If that is two cis gendered, heterosexual individuals loving each other, God is there. If that's two cis gendered queer individuals loving each other, God is there. If it's a cis gender and a trans person loving each other, God is there. Wherever

there is love, there is God. What is so frustrating, what is so heartbreaking in terms of religion, specifically in terms of the church, is that there is this lack of understanding with what I have just said. Where God is weaponized in a way to have individuals that go against a certain doctrine be made to feel like they are not worthy of God's love, when that is the furthest thing from the truth.

I think about when I first shared my truth with my family, specifically my father, he actually empowered me in a way that at the time I didn't realize. He handed me a Bible with a passage that was already opened. To this day I don't remember what the passage was but I remember how I felt. He told me to read the passage. I read the passage and he asked, "do you know why I had you read that?" I told him "no," but in my head, because of all the conditioning that I have experienced in the church, I was thinking, "oh, this is him telling me I'm going to go to hell for being who I am," all of these things. But no. He said, "I told you to read this because there will be a lot of people who will use this thing (this thing being the Bible) against you. And I want you to be so equipped in this thing, that you can use it and say, this passage lets me know why it's okay to be me. This passage lets me know why I am the fullest version of what God wants me to be." So, I just think about, what does it look like to be a fully realized sexual being in one's queerness and to also be a fully realized being in your faith, in your love of God as well? And that the two can exist, and that the two go hand in hand. I thought that was incredibly important and incredibly necessary to show.

In terms of the play, I wanted to show these two people as sexual individuals who are not afraid of being sexual individuals as a preacher and as a first lady of a church. What does that look like for two highly religious people to be sexual beings as well? For example, the way Charles talks to Olivia shows these desires, which are very natural, very human. I was also really interested in showing the sexuality of spiritual, and particularly religious folks, religious folks that hold such high stature in the church.

**MAHALA:** Yes, that's a part of life, right?

**LOVE:** One hundred percent.

**MAHALA:** It's wonderful that you show the full dimensionality of these characters and that you use all the tools of playwriting to do so. For example, I loved reading your stage directions, they are both entertaining and informative. Directions like "she is cheeeking that jacket/ And just know/ She ain't afraid to look crazy," made me laugh and think that your script is a great piece of literature as well as a blueprint for a powerful theatrical experience. Of course, the audience will not read the stage directions, but the actors and director will and they will embody them.

**LOVE:** Thank you so much. Tennessee Williams once said that stage directions are love letters to the audience. Williams was one of my favorite writers. I never forgot that and I think about how every single word that you put on the page is incredibly important. Every single word that you put on the page has so much power. Every single word should have so much love embedded into it, and yes, you're right, the audience will not hear the stage directions but I if I do my job as a writer they'll be able to feel the stage directions. If I do my job as a writer, they'll be able to feel the love that I'm giving them, within the stage directions. So, for me, one of my favorite parts of the writing process is writing the stage directions, thinking, how can I talk about this moment in a way that doesn't trap the collaborators but in a way that liberates them to be able to have fun, to be able to explore, to be able to

ask themselves, how can we play with this moment? What does this moment mean? What does this moment look like? So, whenever I think about stage directions, I find myself thinking about how I can write a love letter to the audience.

**MAHALA:** That's beautiful. I wonder if you could talk a little more about your writing process and what you learn about writing from creating a play?

**LOVE:** In terms of the writing process, I am in love with structure. I am in love with craft. I like experimenting with the form, figuring out what it means, what it looks like and knowing that every single play is different. I always rely on my technique and the craft and the structure to help get me through and then there's always a special part. For me, one of the most important parts that I need to make room for is the divine. Leaving room for the divine to show up in the writing as well. The way that I make room for that is to acknowledge it, and to also understand that my job is to make sure that the technique, the craft, and the structure of the piece is as well designed as it possibly can be.

At the very end of the play, there is a moment that says that you have permission to be a participant in this story. When Olivia gives her speech, there is a call and response. It feels very much like the black church and incorporates that tradition.

**MAHALA:** That's a great point about making room for participation. Different theaters have different conventions and sometimes people think, "oh, I can't speak up," or "I can't verbalize with what's happening on the stage."

**LOVE:** For this piece you can, one hundred percent. It's very important for me in my work to make space for marginalized folk that exist within already marginalized communities, to allow for individuals who may feel marginalized even in the theater. When you see yourself reflected on stage, you should just feel like that you have the power, that you have the authority and agency to experience the play in a way that is very real, and in a way that's very alive for you.

In this play, there are two figures who are rooted in the black church, who are used to people giving a response to the call that they let out. For me, that was a way of saying, yes, you can respond to this call. You can amen, you can shout, you can laugh, you can cry, you can do whatever your spirit is telling you to do, that adds to this thing that we're creating together as audience members and as performers. We can create this thing together, which is theater.

**MAHALA:** I think that's a lovely note to end on. Thank you so much for taking the time to share your thoughts and your process.