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THE PLAY

Valerie is a promising actress, who has her master's of fine arts from a prestigious arts institution, American Repertory Theater. **Jackson** is a surgical intern, who works 12-hour shifts at the hospital and then works more hours at a neighborhood clinic. **Ginny** is a professor of psychology at Harvard, who specializes in identity and depression in third-generation Asian-American women. **Brian** is a Harvard neurobiologist, who studies race and perception.

Valerie and Jackson are African American. Ginny is Asian American. Brian is white.

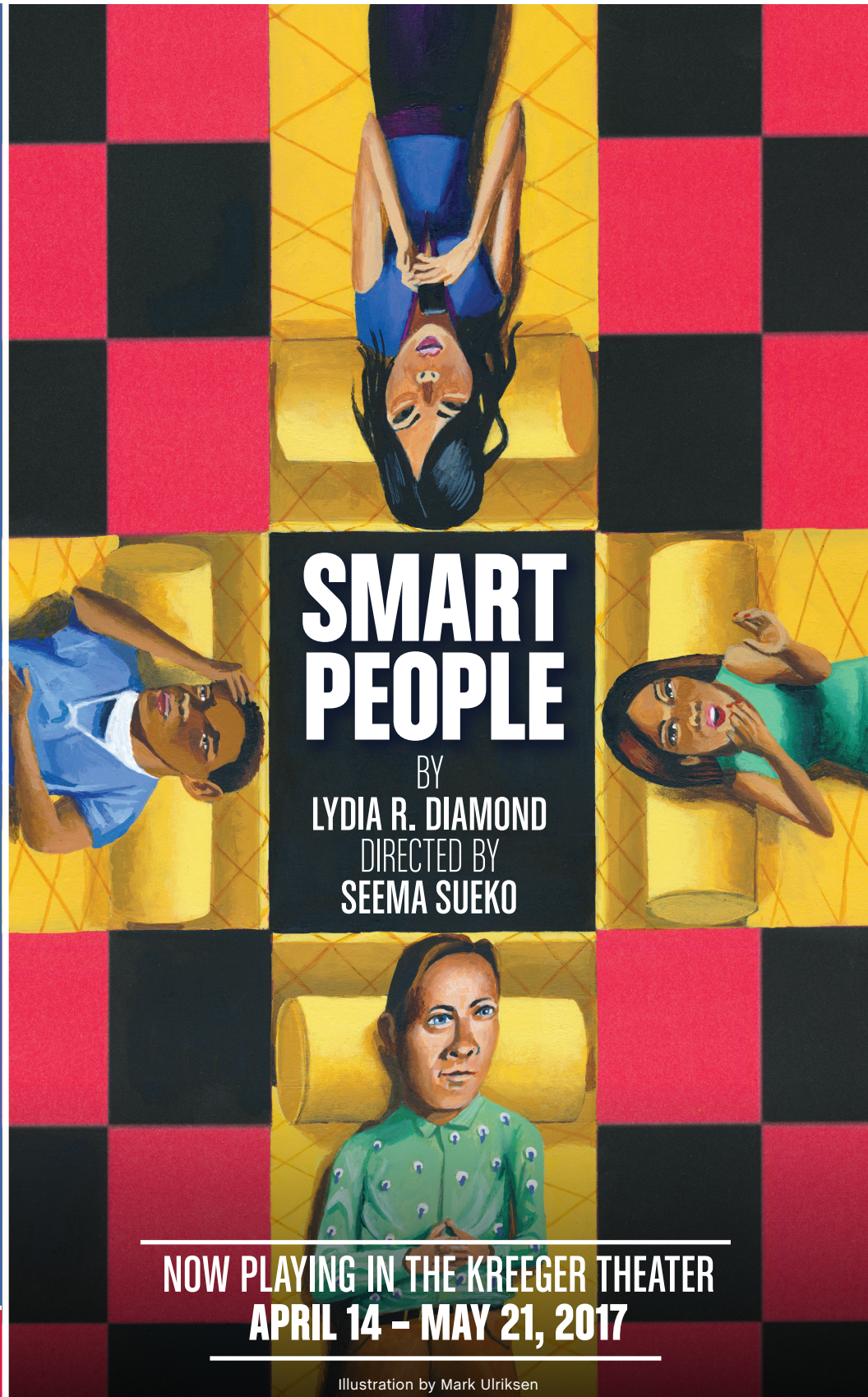
They are smart people, and they know it. But that doesn't mean they know everything, especially when it comes to race, gender and identity. Like the rest of us, they don't always get it right.

These issues loom large in their careers and as they try to connect with each other. The four confront assumptions, their own prejudice and the discomfort in the room when race comes up. Inside, they are people who want to love and be seen, but race and sex keep getting in the way.

As Barack Obama is mounting his historic campaign for president, Brian is studying the human brain's response to race. What if people - white people - are racist on a biological level? Brian is seeking the data to prove it, and the results could be explosive.

"IDENTITY IS TRICKY ... IT SOUNDS LIKE YOU JUST WANT RESPECT. AND WHAT WOULD THAT LOOK LIKE?"

— *Ginny, Act 2, Scene 4*



**NOW PLAYING IN THE KREEGER THEATER
APRIL 14 – MAY 21, 2017**

Illustration by Mark Ulriksen

MEET THE PLAYWRIGHT



“I THINK THAT WHAT WE ENJOY SEEING ARE PLAYS THAT ARE HONEST AND INTERESTING. DON'T BE AFRAID OF WHO YOU ARE.”

Lydia R. Diamond was raised in an artistic family and grew up reading a wide range of stories from J.R.R. Tolkien to fairy tales to *Little House on the Prairie*.

She began as an actress at Northwestern University, but shifted her focus to playwriting. Starting by producing her plays in the basement of a vegetarian restaurant where she worked, Diamond built a successful theater career in Chicago. She started a theater company, and her first play, *Solitaire*, received awards and acclaim.

Then she moved to a national stage. Her play *Stick Fly* premiered on Broadway in 2011 and was produced by Alicia Keys. Her other award-winning plays, which have been performed across the country, include *Harriet Jacobs*, *The Gift Horse* and an adaptation of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*.

She was a resident playwright at Arena Stage during the 2013/14 season. She has also been a W.E.B. Du Bois Institute non-resident fellow, TCG/NEA playwright-in-residence at Steppenwolf, Huntington playwright fellow, Sundance Institute Playwright Lab creative advisor and she serves on the Dramatists Guild Legal Defense Fund Board of Directors.

Diamond graduated from Northwestern University and has an honorary doctorate from Pine Manor College. She is writing a musical with Ladysmith Black Mambazo (an all-male South African cappella singing group), and has said that, in the future, she would be interested in writing a play about fashion.

FROM THE DIRECTOR'S NOTEBOOK



Smart People is Deputy Artistic Director Seema Sueko's first production at Arena Stage.

As a production begins at Arena Stage, there is an event called “First Rehearsal,” when the director, designers, actors and Arena Stage staff explore the vision for the show. There, Sueko asked her audience to think about their morning.

“Did you see anyone today? Really see anyone today? How did you categorize people? Who did you acknowledge? What assumptions did you make?”

Smart People and its characters try to tackle the psychology of racism as they seek to be seen, loved and recognized. Sueko said, “I love this play because it is deliciously human in its examination of how we see one another.”

UNIVERSITY POLICIES AND POLITICS

Ginny and Brian are navigating the politics and policies of universities.

Universities court the best scholars in their fields in order to provide outstanding education, attract funding, draw the best students and be at the forefront of research and scholarship. Ginny raises the issue of lack of people of color on university faculties, pointing out that Asian-American women especially are underrepresented. This disparity is not due to the qualifications of applicants of color.

Brian is working toward receiving tenure, which means his position at the university would become permanent. This would allow him to explore controversial areas without fear of losing his job.

University professors are held to codes of conduct. This code dictates equity in the classroom and setting a tone of respect even in intense intellectual debates. Brian would argue that if a professor's research was groundbreaking enough, they would get a pass on this code of conduct.

THE 2008 ELECTION



Smart People took Diamond eight years to write. A few years into the writing process Barack Obama was elected president — the first African-American president. This shifted the national discussion about race and became the backdrop of her story.

Before becoming a U.S. Senator for Illinois, Obama had been a community organizer in Chicago. His successful presidential campaign relied, in part, on communicating through social media and mobilizing an army of volunteers. Many of these were young people, like Valerie, who went to other states to knock on doors to spread Obama's message. The central word in Obama's first campaign was “HOPE,” and his speeches would end with “Now let's go change the world.”

Throughout the play the characters discuss Obama's odds and, ultimately, watch the inauguration. How do they respond? Obama has now completed two terms as president. In what ways has the world or country changed as a result of his presidency? To what degree did he fulfill his promise of hope?

WRITING ABOUT RACE



Diamond's play *Stick Fly* explored race and class in an elite African-American family. (L to R) Nikkole Salter as Taylor, Jason Dirden as Kent, Billy Eugene Jones as Flip and Rosie Benton as Kimber. Photo by Scott Suchman.



The cast of *Smart People*: (L to R) Lorene Chesley as Valerie Johnston, Gregory Perri as Brian White, Jaysen Wright as Jackson Moore and Sue Jin Song as Ginny Yang. Photo by Tony Powell.

Race, gender and class are recurring themes in Lydia Diamond's work. In a 2016 interview with *The Interval*, Diamond said, "I've always very organically been drawn to conversations around race and class. They fascinate me because we're so ill equipped to talk about them."

In an interview with Charles Haugland at the Huntington Theatre Company, where *Smart People* premiered in 2014, Diamond said, "In the psyche of people of color, we run into prejudice and feel like, 'Look, here it is. There it is again. It's right here. It just hit me in the face,' and in my experience, some white people respond with, 'I really think you are exaggerating and seeing it through a lens that is perhaps skewed.'"

"I wanted to write a play about a white man who passionately felt that he had discovered a key to the phenomenon of racism in America, a conversation that overshadows all of us, that we've inherited and can't figure out how to fix ... The conversation is part of the fabric of our society. So when I started, what interested me was exploring the reverberations of this character speaking the unspeakable in his professional and personal lives."

President Obama's election in 2008 influenced her approach to the play. Diamond told *Broadwayworld.com*, "I thought I knew how to talk about race — I had that down. I can't do a panel or an interview without talking about race, and this asked me to look at it with a more open mind and also up the stakes in an interesting way."

As a result, she decided, "I'm going to write about [race] boldly and without fear, yet just as funny and quirky and with characters just as flawed as they always are."

She concluded, "I'd like to think that everybody in this play has as much to lose as everybody else, and everybody is equally welcome in the conversation ... It is important that the play feel like an invitation to all of us to own the conversation. We can laugh and not feel uncomfortable because we know that we are all equally uncomfortable (and because it is funny, I can't help it); it is why we go to the theater — to laugh, and squirm, and be challenged and affirmed."

GLOSSARY

CODE WORDS are racially charged words like "volatile" or "hotheaded" that are used to describe a person based on their race and stereotypes.

GENIUS AWARD or MacArthur "Genius" Awards recognize people who excel in their field, giving them \$625,000 for their creative pursuits.

SADDITY is slang for acting snobby or trying to be perceived high class.

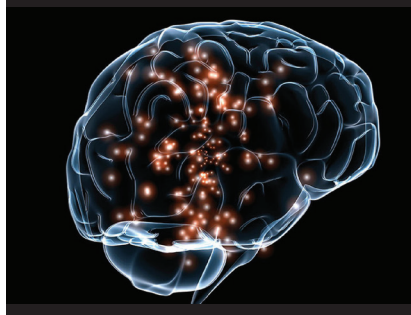
TWOKEN is a play on "token." A "token" is a person in a group that has been formed who, in addition to their merit, is meant to represent a race, ethnicity, gender, etc. As a woman and Asian American, Ginny counts as two tokens.

NEUROBIOLOGY & BRAIN IMAGING

Neurons are cells that make up the nervous system. According to *Science Daily*, there are over a hundred billion neurons in the human brain.

Brian's field of study is neurobiology, which is the study of how the brain and nervous system function and develop. Unlike neuropsychology, which links our brains and our psychological behaviors, neurobiology is concerned with only the brain.

Neurobiologists use state-of-the-art brain imaging to see inside living brains. Brian uses EEG (electroencephalogram) and fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging). EEG amplifies and records electrical impulses in the brain through electrodes placed on the scalp. fMRI tracks the flow of blood in the brain and thus can show which areas "light up." Brian is watching what parts of the brain "light up" when study participants view pictures of people of different races.



Diamond was, in part, inspired to write *Smart People* after reading "Dehumanizing the Lowest of the Low" by Susan Fiske. It describes a study that used brain imaging to show that people's brains respond to photographs of out-groups (people they deem other) as less than human.

THE CLARK TEST

One of the most famous psychological experiments related to race is The Clark or "Baby Doll" Test. Studying the impact of segregation in the 1940s, psychologists showed dolls to children, aged 3-7, of different races. The children identified the dolls by race and which doll they preferred. Though the dolls were identical except for skin color, a majority of children of all races chose the white doll and assigned it positive characteristics. This was part of a larger study about feelings of inferiority among African-American children.



Read the Huntington Theatre Company's article "Inside the Brain" written for its production of *Smart People*. tinyurl.com/spinsidebrain

Read a synopsis of the Princeton study that inspired *Smart People*: tinyurl.com/isprejhw

THREE BIG QUESTIONS

1 How can we talk honestly about race?

2 What makes up a person's identity?

3 What affects how you perceive people?

HELPFUL HINTS FOR THEATER AUDIENCES

As an audience member at the theater, YOU are part of the show! Just as you see and hear the actors onstage, they can see and hear you in the audience. To help the performers do their best, please remember the following:

- Arrive at least 15 minutes early.
- Visit the restroom before the show starts.
- Sit in the exact seat on your ticket. Ask the usher for help finding it.
- Before the show begins, turn off your phone, watch alarms and any other electronic devices. If anything rings by accident, turn it off immediately.
- Do not use your phone for texts, calls, games or pictures.
- You cannot take pictures or make recordings in the theater, even before or after the play.
- There is no food allowed in the theater.
- Do not talk, whisper, sing or hum, unless invited by the performers to do so.
- Keep your feet on the floor and off the seat in front of you.
- Avoid getting up during a show. If you must leave, wait for a scene change and exit quietly and quickly.
- Respond to the show; you can laugh, cry and gasp. However, don't repeat lines out loud or talk to the performers on stage.
- Be sure to applaud at the end!

RESOURCES

"An Interview with Lydia R. Diamond"
The Interval
tinyurl.com/intervallrd

"...On Why She Needs a Dictionary App and How Obama Made Her Up Her Game"
Broadway.Com
tinyurl.com/bwwdiamond

"Exploring, Not Exploiting a Shameful History"
The Boston Globe
tinyurl.com/diamondglobe

"An Interview with Lydia R. Diamond"
Huntington Theatre Company
tinyurl.com/htclrdiamond

Department of Neurobiology – Harvard University
neuro.hms.harvard.edu/

Seema Sueko
The Best of Washington
tinyurl.com/ssueko

"Brown at 60: The Doll Test"
NAACP Legal Defense Fund
tinyurl.com/naacpdolltest



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