

STAGES

# In playwright Lenelle Moïse's 'K-I-S-S-I-N-G,' a portrait of the artist as a young woman

By Terry Byrne Updated February 28, 2023, 9:20 a.m.



Regan Sims (foreground) rehearses a scene from "K-I-S-S-I-N-G" with Patrese D. McClain at the Calderwood Pavilion. CARLIN STIEHL FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE/CARLIN STIEHL

“‘K-I-S-S-I-N-G,’” says director Dawn M. Simmons, “is a play filled with extraordinary tenderness.”

Cambridge native Lenelle Moïse’s play, which is having its world premiere Friday through April 2 at the Calderwood Pavilion, explores a pivotal summer in a teenager’s life. But calling it a “coming-of-age” story doesn’t begin to cover the play’s emotional landscape. While tension and trauma exist for a young woman navigating class and racial barriers as well as family challenges and different kinds of love, “K-I-S-S-I-N-G,” says Simmons, is filled with light and hope.

“Lenelle has written a language-based poem play that invites us to open our eyes to the things and people around us that we take for granted or just look past,” says Simmons. “Her characters debate, and have conflicts, but they want to understand each other.”

“K-I-S-S-I-N-G” is a co-production of Front Porch Arts Collective, the Black theater company Simmons co-leads, and the Huntington. Front Porch is in the second year of its three-year partnership with the Huntington.

The play, which takes its name from the schoolyard rhyme designed to make kids blush, follows Lala (Regan Sims), a Boston teen, over the months when she discovers romantic possibilities with twin brothers, as well as the moment when she gives herself permission to become an artist. But the setting is also the adult Lala’s art installation, artworks that emerged from her sketchbook during that pivotal summer. The projections of Lala’s sketches reveal her development as an artist, starting with simple sketches of the housing project where she grew up and advancing into more detailed drawings of faces and hands, as she becomes more adept at creating her world and more aware of her place in it.

ADVERTISING



“The sketches serve as transitions in both time and in Lala’s own development,” says Simmons. “They also allow the audience to take a breath.”

“‘K-I-S-S-I-N-G’ is a play full of duets,” says Moïse. Often those duets involve physical action — dancing, climbing, dropping, rolling on the floor — and both Simmons and Moïse say that for the actors to stay open to the discoveries in the story, everyone had to feel comfortable with one another. Intimacy consultant Gregory Geffrard “created opportunities for everyone to get past the mechanics and deepen the sense of wonder about these characters,” Simmons says.

Developing characters that are easy to recognize has been an evolutionary process, says Moïse.

“I started writing the play when I was a Huntington playwriting fellow in 2014,” she says, “and I kept coming back to it. It always feels like I’m coming home because it’s closest to my memories of growing up in Cambridge.”



Director Dawn M. Simmons (left) consults with playwright Lenelle Moïse (right) during a rehearsal of "K-I-S-S-I-N-G" at the Calderwood Pavilion. CARLIN STIEHL FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE/CARLIN STIEHL

Before and after her time as a playwriting fellow, Moïse has been the poet laureate of Northampton and released two albums of music. She has performed as a spoken-word artist and actress.

"I write with my ear," Moïse says with a smile. "Poetry organizes our senses. The way the mouth holds the words creates the textures and the rhythms that are true to the heart. It allows me to bring flowers into the room when there are sirens just outside the door."

Those dramatic contrasts caught Simmons's attention right away. "I loved the truth of these characters and the way Lenelle makes us feel we are in the living room with these folks," she says. "She has even included Lala's 5-year-old brother, who never appears, but when she speaks to him, she is directly addressing the audience. I think it's an amazing way to bring them into the story, allowing them to imagine themselves with the wonder, curiosity, and trust of a 5-year-old."

The play, Moïse and Simmons say, also retains a sense of mystery, offering possibilities without easy resolutions, and asking audiences to wonder what might happen to these characters next.

“I hope after seeing this play, someone will look at a Black teenager in a hoodie and say, ‘Oh, that might be an artist,’ ” says Moïse.

### **Arlekin assists Ukrainian artists**

Igor Golyak, the founder of Needham’s Arlekin Players Theatre, will direct Jessica Hecht, Bill Irwin, David Krumholtz, Nathan Malin, Will Manning, and Tedra Millan in a staged reading of “Just Tell No One” March 6 at the David Rubenstein Atrium at Lincoln Center in New York.

The event, which can also be viewed online, is part of the Center for International Theatre Development’s worldwide Ukrainian Play Readings program, which has commissioned plays from over 30 Ukrainian playwrights, translated them, and partnered on more than 300 readings globally since the Russia invasion of Ukraine began in February 2022.

“It is our honor to be part of this international effort, and this is a critical moment to shine a light on the artistry and powerful perspectives of Ukrainian artists,” Golyak said in a statement.

Tickets are free, but donations are appreciated to support Arlekin’s contributions to Ukrainian Play Readings. Details are available at [www.arlekinplayers.com](http://www.arlekinplayers.com) or [www.citd.us/worldwide-ukrainian-play-reading](http://www.citd.us/worldwide-ukrainian-play-reading).

### **Bogart and ‘Bluebeard’**

Anne Bogart returns to Boston to direct Boston Lyric Opera’s “Bluebeard’s Castle/Four Songs,” March 22-26 at The Terminal @ Flynn Cruiseport. Bogart, who directed BLO’s “The Handmaid’s Tale” in 2019, and has helmed productions at the American Repertory

Theater and Trinity Repertory Company, is renowned for the musicality of her staging. For more information, go to [blo.org/bluebeard](https://blo.org/bluebeard).

## **K-I-S-S-I-N-G**

A co-production of Front Porch Arts Collective and the Huntington. At the Wimberly Theatre, Calderwood Pavilion, Boston Center for the Arts. March 3-April 2. \$20-\$119, [www.huntingtontheatre.org/whats-on/k-i-s-s-i-n-g](https://www.huntingtontheatre.org/whats-on/k-i-s-s-i-n-g)

---

Terry Byrne can be reached [attrbyrne@aol.com](mailto:attrbyrne@aol.com).

[Show comments](#)

---

©2023 Boston Globe Media Partners, LLC