

I want to welcome all the friends and families of the graduating class of 2020. It's my great honor and delight to celebrate the brilliant MFA playwrights of the class of 2020: Dave Harris, Mara Nelson-Greenberg, and Ali Viterbi.

Dave, Mara, and Ali, I will miss you mightily. That's the first thing I want to say. If I were speaking these words live on stage, I would probably start tearing up right about now and reaching for the box of Kleenex stashed in the lectern. You three arrived at UCSD and took it by storm. We knew you were talented before you got here. We knew that from the moment we first read your writing. We knew that from the interviews we had with you before you arrived on campus where we got the first tantalizing inklings of the wondrous ways your minds worked. We knew you three were talented. What was so extraordinary, however, was how your talent grew and kept growing in your time here. With each play you wrote, you took on the biggest, thorniest questions. Your characters shouldered the weight of history and stared down the inner demons with exhilarating candor, fierce intelligence, and an abundance of laughter – lots of laughter, wonderful, subversive, liberating laughter. Time and again, your stories ventured into unknown terrain to wrestle with giants – and sometimes to dance – with a power and grace that left us in awe, still leaves us in awe. And if that kind of immense talent weren't enough, you are also all three of you such incredibly good human beings. You made our community here at UCSD better with your generous spirit and your innate kindness.

Dave, I will always remember watching the moment in *Tambo and Bones* in your first year Wagner New Play Festival where the “Dave The Playwright” doll who's been seated in the house, suddenly gets yanked onstage by the actors, interrogated, and finally ripped in two, an avalanche of coins spilling out onto the floor. Like everyone else in the audience, I watched with laughter, followed by anxiety, followed by horror, and finally quiet reflection as I along with everyone else took it all in. That unabashedly theatrical moment and all the questions that it set in motion about identity and power, violence and grace, about the stories we inherit and the ones we create for ourselves – these have all stayed with me and will stay with me for many years to come. That's what makes your writing so very powerful, Dave. You create hundreds of moments just like that – moments that embrace our world in all its complexity and demand of us that we see and think in new ways. In *Everybody Black*, you gave us a tour de force that took on nothing less than the history of race in America. Like everything you write, the play was fueled by courage, truth, and an astonishing sense of theatricality. Your writing is a call to action that compels us to listen.

Mara, I will always remember the final moments of *The Jefferson Middle School Monthly* where we hear the obituary of Sasha's father. The genius of that moment is how it sneaks up on you. We have spent the last 90 minutes in a fantastically zany, antic world where MJ has mysterious tubes growing out of his body, Cora is turning into a doll, Mrs. Westerman and others have jumped off a cliff, and the new faculty advisor Mr. Whitney is really, really scary. The play is at once raucously funny and genuinely terrifying. Mara, you somehow managed to evoke the most elemental human anxieties and desires – the fear of death, the desire for human connection – and mixed them together with an incisive, ferociously on point exploration of gender and class. And the whole time, you

made us laugh, laugh-until-you-cry kind of laughter. And then we get to the final minutes of your play where the laughter subsides, and we hear this beautiful, unadorned obituary of an ordinary man who loved his family and did the best he could. We hear all the small moments that his daughter remembers, the littlest things, and it's simply breathtaking. As with everything you write, you have built something gorgeous and *sui generis*, and filled it with so much wisdom and so much heart.

Ali, I will always remember your first year Wagner New Play Festival, watching Anya and Caleb put up the tent in your play *Joshua*, an exquisite gem of writing that explores with pitch perfect understanding what it means to grow up. We watch as these two vivid, meticulously drawn characters navigate their complicated, heartbreaking circumstances. Anya and Caleb are grieving the death of their friend while simultaneously grappling with and acknowledging their desire for one another – and they're also putting up a tent. It's not easy. In fact, it's awkward and difficult in all the best possible ways. It's a phenomenal scene where the physical effort mirrors the emotional tumult of their interior lives in disarming, revelatory ways. Later in the play (and I'm quoting directly from your sublime, beautifully understated stage direction): "Caleb and Anya are in the tent. Making love, or something like love." I remember the moment in production – the shadows of the actors inside the tent, the ghostly light flickering. It was truly stunning. The tent became the whole entire world. That's your genius, Ali. You take something as simple as putting up a tent and through the alchemy of your talent conjure a vast universe and illuminate the mystery of our human condition.

Dave, Mara, Ali, we will miss you so much, but we know you will take the world by storm, just as you took UCSD by storm. The best is yet to come for all three of you, and we will be cheering you on from afar and looking forward to when we see you again.

With much admiration and love, Naomi

From Allan:

Dear Dave,

Like Halley's Comet, a literary talent as radiant, radical & political as yours comes just every 76 years. The poetry from your pen is towering. Vision blesses everything you do. Your grand heart & brilliant mind inspire all audiences like a great loving miracle. All love & great wishes to you, Allan

Dear Mara,

Your indomitable wit, so subversive & madcap, transforms the American living stage like no other natural phenomenon known to humankind. You make absurdity a Delphic Oracle. I also adore your kindness. Each superb, twisted narrative from your inner mind slays us to laughter & tears. Plus you own that ageless moral compass. All love & great wishes to you, Allan

Dear Ali,

How you continue to invent indelibly humane canvases of etched beauty & paradox, portraits of spontaneity & formalism, lush erotic motifs & dark spiritual tales, all so personal & universalis a colossal mystery for such a young soul. Your generosity to your classmates, your audiences and to your students seems endless. All love & great wishes to you, Allan