

Director's notes

Welcome to a new age in American herstory. In *Haus of Mirth*, playwright Kaela Mei-Shing Garvin transports us to a not-so-distant future. A revolution has dismantled the nation's oppressive patriarchal system and the matriarchy takes its place. Finally, all is right in the world. Right? Think again.

Though a civilization run by women may seem ideal to many, Garvin asks us to reconsider the effects of power on various members of society. The abuse of authority is not a gendered phenomenon; the women in control of this world exhibit the very same injustices as those in control of our own. This is because hierarchal power thrives off the demonization of difference. Since humanity cannot (and should not) escape its differences—of race, of religion, of sexuality, of gender expression, etc.—there will always be injustice in society. In the dystopian world of *Haus of Mirth* some people are never meant to thrive.

And yet, they try.

Based off Edith Wharton's 1905 novel *The House of Mirth*, Garvin's new adaptation introduces us to six women, all of whom represent differences in race, caste, and level of authority. While some are born into or achieve wealth and whiteness, those who do not fit neatly into these categories

are forced to code switch, to manipulate their identities for the purpose of "passing" as something or someone they are not. For Lily Bart, this means sacrificing her body for money and acceptance; for Lauren Selden, this means working for the very government that oppresses her; for Sam Rosedale, this means erasing her religious identity to avoid segregation. *Haus of Mirth* is a play about women who must placate the powerful in order to survive.

The world within *Haus of Mirth* is a scary place. In it, people play by the rules of high society to avoid isolation, or worse. The characters are forced to accept a narrative of oppression, one that erases any sign of life before the revolution. But perhaps the play's most frightful component is its eerie similarity to our own world, our own time. Though it is set in the future, *Haus of Mirth* is a critique of our problematic past and more so, our complacency with the present. As long as there are people in power, there exists the guarantee of persecution for the powerless.

We hope you enjoy the world premiere of Kaela Mei-Shing Garvin's *Haus of Mirth*.

Joseph D'Ambrosi

Playwright's notes

My grandma gifted me an Edith Wharton novel some years ago. After my initial read I wrote, "Just finished *The House of Mirth*. Lily Bart is SO the Regina George of 1905. I heard Bertha Dorset pushed her in front of a carriage." *The House of Mirth* glorifies its catty, high-society setting just as it skewers its rulers: in this, the novel displays a kinship with the female-led social comedies I love.

Born into great social standing but little wealth, Wharton's protagonist Lily Bart actively participates in a system that fails her, modifying her behavior and priorities to fit in with her high-society friends. I remember a number of times in my own life when I've made a questionable call so I could get through the day. As a mixed person, I've often witnessed or experienced institutional or workplace injustice. In most of these instances, I modified my behavior in order to preserve comfort, in order to keep the job or get the job, in order to further my career. As Sam Rosedale says in the play, "we all sacrifice a little in order to make it."

With this in mind, my adaptation transposes Wharton's setting from 1905 New York to a near-future New York, in which the obstacles and advantages are eerily familiar. I gave Lily Bart a new identity: an ethnically ambiguous woman who must keep up with her white counterparts.

I looked to the past in creating this speculative future—the dark sides of 1905 still prevail in 2019.

I wrote this play because preserving hope is a hard but vital task. With age, I've started speaking louder in unacceptable situations, but sometimes a need for security overrides my voice; sometimes we stay silent (and therefore complicit) out of necessity, perceived or actual. I'm trying to give life to these experiences in my take on Wharton. I'm writing a play that I needed growing up.

On the first page of my Dover Thrift *House of Mirth*, my grandma wrote, "You're the only young person I know who would really appreciate Edith Wharton—and probably produce this." Six years later, I'm grateful to share this production with you. This play owes a debt to all the women in my family as well as to women like Maya Angelou, Yuri Kochiyama, and Audre Lorde whose words have changed our landscape.

This play is for those of us who make those concessions to a world that isn't set up for our success. This play is for my fellow women of color, especially queer women of color, often ignored, often erased, often expected to appreciate our own tokenization in exchange for paltry support. But still, inevitably, we rise.