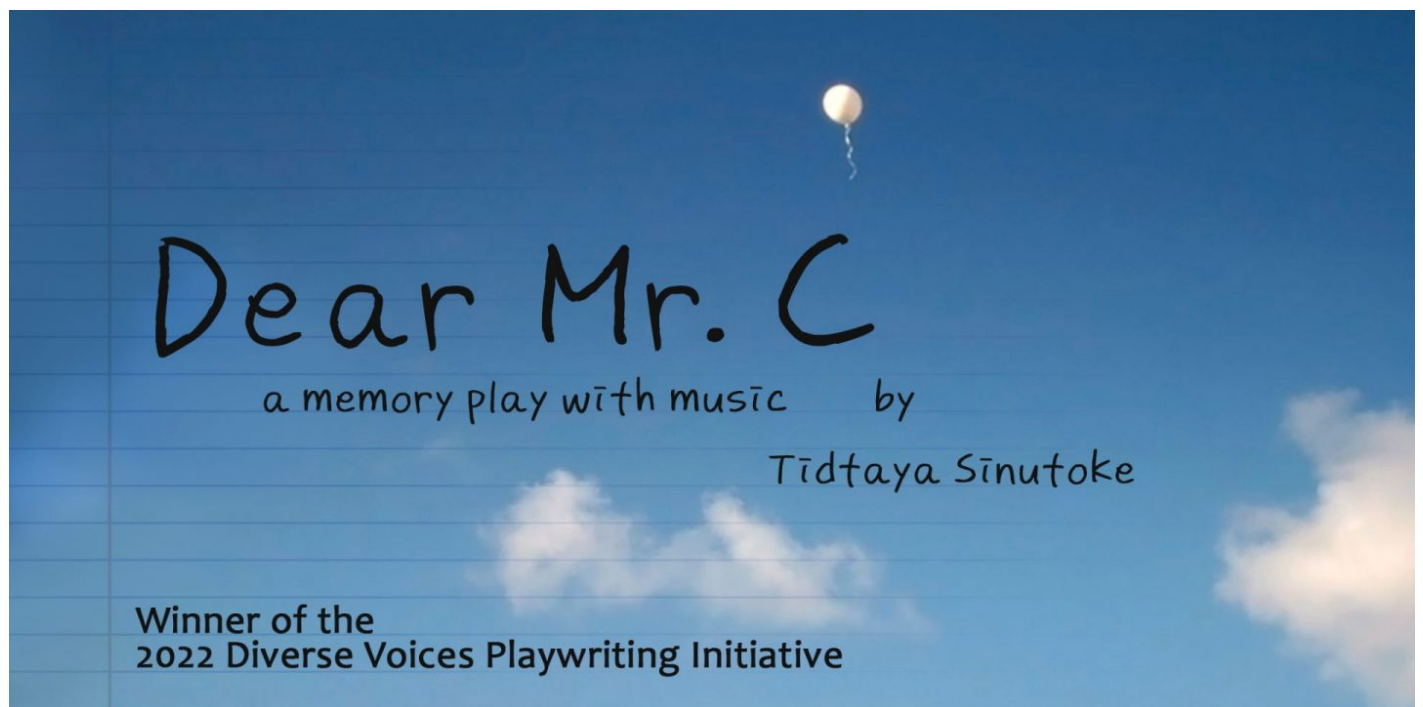


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Meet the Artists Behind *Dear Mr. C*

By Kee-Yoon Nahm April 15, 2022



[Crossroads Project](#) Chair Kee-Yoon Nahm spoke with two of the artists behind the upcoming staged reading of *Dear Mr. C*, winner of the 2022 Diverse Voices Playwriting Initiative. The staged reading will take place on Friday, April 22 at 7:30 p.m. Use the link below to register for this in-person event. These interviews have been edited for length and clarity.

Register

Working from first instincts: Interview with writer and composer Tidtaya Sinutoke





Tidtaya Sinutoke

Tidtaya Sinutoke (ทิดยา สินุต) is a Thailand-born, New York City-based composer, writer, and musician. Composition credits include *Half the Sky* (The 5th Avenue Theatre's First Draft Commission and 20/21 Digital Season, Weston-Ghostlight New Musical Award, Rhinebeck Writers Retreat, Richard Rodgers Award finalist), *Sunwatcher* (The Civilians R&D Group, Weston Playhouse's Songs for Today, Ancram Opera House Play Lab, Rattlestick Playwrights Theater Global Forms Festival), and *Dear Mr. C* (NYFA's City Artist Corps Grants).

She received the 2017 Jonathan Larson Grant, the 2020 Billie Burke Ziegfeld Award, the 2021 International Theatremaker Award, and the 2021 Fred Ebb Award. Her works have been supported by the American Opera Project, Composer-Librettist Studio at New Dramatists, Yale Institute for Music Theatre, Johnny Mercer Songwriters Project, Johnny Mercer Writers Grove at Goodspeed Musicals, Robert Rauschenberg Residency, EtM Con Edison Composer-in-Residence, MTF's Makers Cohort, and the Kurt Weill Foundation. Sinutoke is a proud member of ASCAP, the Dramatists Guild, Maestra, MUSE, and the Thai Theatre Foundation. She received her B.M. from the Berklee College of Music and her M.F.A. in musical theatre writing from NYU Tisch School of the Arts.

Kee-Yoon Nahm (KN): To start off, tell me about how you got into the theatre and became a musical theatre composer.

Tidtaya Sinutoke (TS): I grew up in Thailand and while there was probably some theatre happening in Bangkok, I only lived there until second grade before moving to another city. So, I did not experience a lot of theatre. But then, I moved to the United States in my senior year of high school. I saw *Grease* on tour, and that was the first time I saw a musical. I mean, do I like *Grease* now? It is not my favorite.

KN: But it left an impression on you at the time.

TS: Yeah, it did. I had never seen something like this before, and it was pretty cool. I saw my first show when I was 17. And even though I knew I liked theatre, I did not think that I could create it. When I was an undergrad at Berklee College of Music, I was what we call "being a duck," meaning that I did many things but was not the best at anything. I took a lot of arranging classes, vocal writing, and piano composition, but I did not take anything related to

theatre writing because I did not think I could do it. By a stroke of luck, I saw a flyer for the musical theatre writing program at NYU right before I graduated, and I realized that such a thing existed in the world. I moved to New York—luckily, my friend has a cousin there who can rent me a cheap place to live. I was on OPT (Optional Practical Training: a program that allows international students to stay in the U.S. for one year after graduating as long as they work in a field related to their degree), and as you know, you either go home, get another degree, or work after that period. I applied to NYU, and I was surprised that they actually accepted me because I was probably the least experienced person in terms of composition to get in. So, I started writing for the theatre in graduate school. It was hard the first year. It felt like everyone else already knew how to walk and I did not. But by the second year, I felt like I got the hang of it. It got easier. And I have been working as a composer since I graduated.

KN: You mentioned the anxiety of being an immigrant: the uncertainty of not knowing what will happen in the future. Some of those feelings are expressed directly in *Dear Mr. C*, when the protagonist, based on yourself, goes through the nerve-racking process of getting an artist visa. When I first read your play for the Diverse Voices competition, I was struck by how the play spoke to my own experiences as an immigrant. That is one of the many reasons I love this play.

TS: Thank you. Yes, there are some specific things that come with the immigration process. For example, my name is hard for Americans to pronounce and spell. Even though I am not the kind the person who would insist that people should get my name correct every time, I need to because it is my evidence for the visa. Sometimes—not all the time—I feel it is a blessing in disguise, because I need to renew the visa every three years and so I have to continue to generate work. I feel like normally I am a lazy person, but because I have to deal with this every three years, I need to push myself.

KN: What was the writing process like for *Dear Mr. C*? Since your background is in composition, I am curious how you came to write this play and submit it to our new play development program.

TS: I wrote two or three songs in 2017 when all of the events in the play happened. I did not know what it was at the time. I think it was in January 2020 that I figured out what I wanted to do with these few songs. Because of COVID, I was in my bedroom with nothing to do, so I joined a writer's group. That got me to start writing. I wrote an outline, read it aloud to the group, and presented the songs. Having a writer's group that met every week helped a lot because I had a deadline. Later, I enrolled in a writing class at Primary Stages. In early 2021, I applied for a City Artist Corps Grant at the New York Foundation for the Arts. I found out that I had to present something, so I finished a draft of the play between June and October 2021. That is the draft that I also submitted to Diverse Voices. I feel that I work well when I have deadlines.

KN: So, when you first wrote those few songs, you did not know that you would use them in an autobiographical play?

TS: I knew there was something in those songs, I just did not know clearly what it was. I wrote some of the songs to cope with my own suffering. In the beginning, it was more of that. But I think an interesting thing about this piece is that I first had to witness all of those stages of grief and filter the experiences enough to feel that I can talk about it. As I wrote in one of the monologues, not many people knew about my mother's cancer diagnosis at the time. It was only a handful of people who were working with me.



Some people have told me that *Dear Mr. C* is an autobiographical piece, and I agree with them. But it is not a play about me being angry at the theatre community. It is just about showing what happened. And because I am a part of the theatre community, I wish we can do better when it comes to supporting collaborators who are dealing with personal matters.

KN: The play is based on your personal experiences, but it also is an occasion to highlight not only the experiences of immigrant artists but also make contemporary Thai identity more visible. Is that something you thought about during the writing process?

TS: It took me a while to understand that. Your experience might be similar, but growing up in Asia, I am used to seeing people who look like me on the television all the time. So, I did not feel excluded. But here, the only representation of Thailand that comes to my mind is *The King and I* and maybe *One Night in Bangkok*. In a weird way, I feel happy that I can be here in the U.S. I can write songs that represent who we are that go beyond what the theatre currently has. I get to work with many talented people and have them present things that they normally would not be able to do in the theatre. That is happiness for me.

KN: Related to that, the conversations that the writer has with their mother and sister are given in English and Thai in the script. You ask that either the actors speak the lines in Thai with English subtitles, or if they cannot speak Thai, to have the Thai in subtitles instead. I am so happy that we are able to present some of the Thai dialogue in the staged reading, as two of our cast members speak the language. Can you talk about what this bilingualism means for you?

TS: It was interesting to translate the dialogue. Some things are hard to understand when you read it in English translation, but easy when you actually hear the actors speak in the native language. Sometimes I think, 'Oh God, I wish there is a way to explain this because it is so much better in Thai.' For me, writing in Thai is necessary because it is easier for me to process. My first language is Thai, and I am not bilingual. I grew up in Thailand and did not go to an international school. So, for me, English was more a subject I studied in class. I did not have the chance to actually speak English until the 12th grade when I went to school in Michigan. I function differently from people who are bilingual. This piece is all based on what I remember. And because I speak to my family in Thai, it is easier for me to write things in Thai first and then translate. Some things are lost in translation, but I tried my best. For example, in Thai, there are many words for the English word "I," depending on who you are speaking to. Sometimes in the script, when people refer to themselves, they might use their nickname, but it is translated into "I" in English. And that is hard. It is still a work in progress for me, and I am eager to learn more about translation through this process. I have never done anything like this before this piece.

KN: I work as a theatre translator between Korean and English, so I know what you mean. But this also makes me think about how I always feel that I am a slightly different person when I speak in English versus when I speak in Korean, even though I am comfortable with both languages. I personally do not like translating my own writing because it feels strange to see the translation become something slightly different. But on the other hand, it allows me to remove myself a little from my writing and see it from a new perspective. In that sense, I wonder if the translation is inevitably a part of this project, where you "translate" your memories into a play with music. Is there a kind of objectivity you can attain by doing that? Did the writing process allow you to see yourself from the outside?

TS: Before I started writing *Dear Mr. C*, I read an article on how to write a one-person play in 10 days. The author of that article suggested recording yourself talking. That is why this is—in a way—a verbatim play because it started with me just recording myself. It is interesting because I am a person with a great long-term memory, although my short-term memory is horrible—I am always losing things. But long-term, I feel like I remember so many details that are unnecessary. Recording myself using voice memos helped bring a lot of those memories back. All of the things that come up in the play, the moment in the subway, and things like that, really happened to me. It is interesting how the brain remembers all these little details.

Also, as a composer, I usually take a lot of time processing things before starting to work on the songs. I feel that I first need to think about the scenes and what the piece is. After that, either the melody comes in or there is some kind of vamp that generates the music. However, with *Dear Mr. C*, a lot of things I wrote were based on first instincts, which is not what I normally do. Usually, even if I have the first instinct, it is filtered until I feel ready to share it with my collaborators. This is the first time that I went for that first instinct. It is an interesting way of writing songs that I never experienced before. And I do not know if I would ever experience something like it again with another project. I do not know if that is a good thing, but it is something that I have observed about this process.

KN: I think that it fits the spirit of the play because *Dear Mr. C* does feel very immediate. I think part of that comes from you relying on your first instincts to write it. How would you describe the style of the play? It is a work of musical theatre, but probably not in the way that people generally imagine when they hear the words “musical theatre.” It feels quite intimate and private.

TS: I started calling this piece a memoir with some music. I would sometimes sit with my good friends who had no idea what I went through during those two years. We would be getting udon together, and I would say, “Remember that time? So, this was what happened to me then.” That is what this piece feels like: a confession. I am just telling the story in a way that is like therapy for me. It is about making clear to myself what happened—seeing what is important and what I should be remembering. It is an occasion for people to come and see what happened to me in that time and hear some songs.

KN: To wrap up, are there any things that you are hoping to accomplish through the Diverse Voices Playwriting Initiative workshop? Is there anything you want the audience to get out of experiencing *Dear Mr. C*?

TS: I am excited to get to work with Sanhawich. I did not know him in Thailand. Because I have lived here for so long, I do not know many theatre people in Thailand. It is nice to get to know people who are sharing this dream. Also, kudos to him for being an artist in Thailand. I know that he wants to change the theatre in Thailand, and I think that is a hero’s job. I do not know if I can do it. There are a lot of things to do.

As a writer in the theatre, you always try to find perfection in your piece, but it will never be perfect. I am happy that I get to rewrite it and shape the story to be better. I look forward to collaborating with the students and faculty, and I hope the audience enjoys the show. I know some parts can be a little intense. I wish the actors could have puppies and kittens to play with after every rehearsal. Workshopping the play in other places, I realized that the actors have to carry those memories instead of me, while I can just sit and watch. One thing that I am starting to notice is that even though it is a story about me and what happened back then, it is also a universal story. People go through loved ones' illnesses or have loved ones in another country. So, in a way, it is a kind of sharing space for people to say, "That happened to me." And hopefully, the play can help them heal some of those memories.

Back in 2019, before I knew what the play would be, I performed *Kisa's Song* (a song in the play where the Writer recounts a Buddhist story about coping with pain and loss) for the first time at a writer's roundtable. For some reason, it lifted some of the heaviness in my life, even though all I did was share the song and explain what it is. I guess once you share trauma with others, it lifts a lot of the weight off of you. I hope that people can start talking more about these issues.

KN: Thank you. I am very excited to share this beautiful, important work with our community.

A seed in new soil: Interview with "The Writer" actor Sanhawich Meateanuwat





Sanhawich Meateanuwat

Sanhawich Meateanuwat (สันทวิชญ์ เมธีอนุวัตร) is a second-year M.F.A. directing student at Illinois State University. Originally from Thailand, he graduated from Bangkok University with the Bu Creative Scholarship and taught acting and directing at his alma mater after he graduated. His work focuses on using his directing craft to create dynamic theatre that supports social movements, explores human relationships, and impacts the larger society, especially in the context of cultural diversity. In 2022, he won the SDC Fellowship Student Directing Award at the Region III Kennedy Center American Collegiate Theatre Festival.

Kee-Yoon Nahm (KN): Would you start by introducing yourself and talking about how you came to Illinois State University?

Sanhawich Meateanuwat (SM): I am an M.F.A. in directing student at Illinois State University. Before coming here, I taught at Bangkok University for three years. I actually started teaching there six months after I graduated: theatre production, acting, and directing—a lot of different classes. And I always felt guilty that I am not qualified to teach students. I was always looking for opportunities to improve myself as a theatre practitioner. So, an M.F.A. program was a great solution for me to find new experiences and have more confidence and pride in myself when I go back to Thailand and teach again—to have more stories to tell my students because I did not know any stories except my undergraduate days.

KN: I am glad that you chose ISU. This school year, you directed two plays on the mainstage season: Clifford Odets's *Waiting for Lefty* last fall and Eugene Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* this spring. Those were both excellent productions. While doing that, you have also been heavily involved with the Crossroads Project and the Diverse Voices Playwriting Initiative. What has that been like, and what interested you about Crossroads in the first place?

SM: This was in the winter of my first year here, and I felt depressed and did not know what to do. We were on Zoom all the time and I had nothing to do except mess around in my house. So I tried to find ways to get involved in things, and I chose Crossroads because I did not know anything about the other RSOs. Another grad student told me that Crossroads is a program that promotes diversity and inclusion and that there are a lot of BIPOC members in the program, so I thought it would be a good fit. It has been a great experience for me because I met a lot of people through Crossroads like Demitri Corbin, who is a master's in theatre studies candidate and director of *Crossroads'* staged reading of *The DePriest Incident* in 2021; Janet Wilson, who is a professor of acting and director of the *Dear Mr. C* staged reading; and others. After I got involved, I feel more connected with the faculty and the other students because I engage with them outside of the classroom.

KN: When we were reaching the final decision for Diverse Voices and it looked like *Dear Mr. C* was going to win this year, I probably was not the only one who thought that it would be perfect for you to direct the staged reading. I thought we are lucky to have a student from Thailand in the program right when we want to present a play by a Thai writer. But we were all surprised when you asked if you could play the main role instead. What made you want to be in the staged reading as a performer?



SM: I was assigned a lot of plays to read during the selection process. But then, when I came to *Dear Mr. C*, I felt a lot of connections between the main character and I. I felt very attached to this specific character. The things that the Writer in the play says, I also say in conversations with my mom. And that blinded me a little bit from the directing side.

My favorite song in the play right now is *Cry* (a song in which the Writer recounts memories of her mother's visit to New York City). That song expresses something that happened to me. On normal days, I try to be cheerful when I check in with my mother. I try not to show my exhaustion. I try to cheer her up because she is in Thailand by herself—I don't have any sisters or brothers. So, I try not to worry her as much as I can. I try not to say anything that might upset her. Even I am scared if something would happen to her and I am here. So, what would happen if I said something that concerns her, that I am in trouble or depressed? How would she feel when she cannot do anything to help? I think about that and try to be cheerful.

KN: I was a little nervous at first because we were asking the playwright to change the main character's gender, when that character is so clearly based on herself. But Tidtaya graciously accepted our proposal and made edits to the script and music to accommodate that change. We are lucky to have a playwright who is so open and eager to work with us. I am glad that we ultimately decided to go in that direction.

SM: I am grateful for that. There is a certain feeling that I get when I have the urge to direct a play. But this is the first time in my life that I felt the urge to portray a character. That feeling is what caused me to pitch that crazy idea to all of you.

KN: How would you summarize the play?

SM: I feel that this play is a journey about the Writer's grief and how to manage it. Also, it is about handling grief while also forging your career path. How do you handle grief internally while also trying to manage your life and career? Another part of the story that resonates with me is when the Writer's sister asks why they do not just go home. That leads to the song "Mango Tree," which is about planting a seed in new soil. The Writer says that here is the land and soil for them.

KN: That really is the immigrant story.

SM: That also resonates with me. So, I would say that it is a journey of managing grief, but also a journey of creating and developing a new path as an artist. I think the conflict in the play becomes very clear by the time that the sister asks whether you are going home. Your mom is sick, but if you go now before the immigration process is completed, you might not be able to come back, or it is ten times harder to come back. So, you have to choose between your career and personal life. And that comes back to how much you have to sacrifice to be an artist in a foreign land.



KN: Is there anything else you want to say about the process?

SM: This might be off-topic, but I think this is a great opportunity for me to explore the actor's perspective. Because I have been directing for so long, sometimes I do not know how the actor would feel when I give them specific ideas or coach them. It is good to be in their shoes sometimes. So, this is a valuable opportunity for me to explore that. I know it is just a reading, but I am really stressed, you know. Now I understand that I sometimes underestimate actors' efforts. They have to put themselves out there—their body, their face, their voice, their everything—not me. They are trying their best. I started to realize that as I am preparing for this staged reading. I am taking weekly voice lessons to get more training because I do not want to embarrass myself and I do not want to disappoint everyone. That is one thing that I learned, and I am so thrilled to see what I will learn in this process.

Also, I have never worked with a playwright this early in the process. So far, I have mostly directed plays by playwrights who are already dead. So, I am excited to see how the playwright responds to my or the director's interpretation of the play. Having her in the rehearsal room will give us an opportunity to talk with her and hear how she plans to develop the play further. That process is very exciting.

KN: I think it is a brave thing you have decided to do. Of course, as a director, you are putting yourself out there through your work and it is brave of you to be a director in a country you have only lived in for a couple of years. But to stand in front of an American audience takes a lot of courage. But I am not worried. I have a feeling you will do great.

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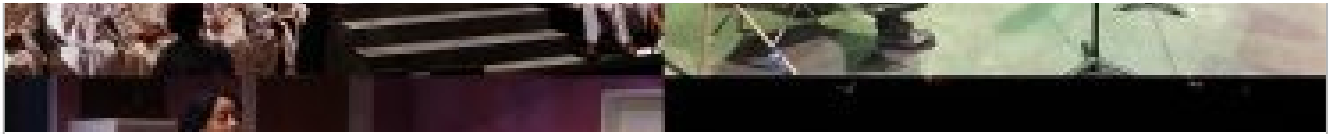
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