

KINGS

BY SARAH BURGESS

DIRECTED BY MARTI LYONS



THE POWER PLAYS OF SARAH BURGESS

BY LAUREN HALVORSEN

Sarah Burgess's plays air-drop their audiences into byzantine worlds. Fueled by a fascination with systems and hierarchies, her plays don't just pay attention to power dynamics—they revel in the granular details and insider jargon of the individuals controlling the levers, demystifying the greater mechanics without sacrificing the complexity.

Burgess studied film production at NYU, but exposure to the London theatre scene during a semester abroad influenced her transition to playwriting. “I realized the type of writing I was doing was more for the theatre,” she recalls. “It had its power in the theatre.” After graduation, Burgess worked as an admissions test prep tutor while cultivating artistic connections, juggling readings and residencies, and joining writer’s groups, including the Ars Nova Play Group and WP Playwrights Lab.

Several of Burgess’s GMAT students worked on Wall Street, and she became fascinated with the cutthroat world of finance. In an interview with *The Washington Post*, she explained that “the idea of moral responsibility and the human consequences of the bankers’ complex and abstract business transactions seemed vibrant ones for a play.” The resulting play, *Dry Powder*, depicts the dizzying deal-making and moral calculus of two warring partners at a Manhattan private equity firm.

Burgess submitted *Dry Powder* as part of her application to the Public Theater’s Emerging Writers Group. The play had already received readings at Ars Nova and Roundabout Underground, and the Public’s literary staff passed the script on to the Artistic Director Oskar Eustis. In a rare move, Eustis immediately committed to producing it, assembling a starry cast and creative team for Burgess’s first professional production. *Dry Powder* received the 2016 Laurents/Hatcher Foundation Award—a \$75,000 prize to support the mounting of a production of an unproduced, full-length play by an emerging American playwright. The play was also a finalist for the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize. Following its debut at the Public, *Dry Powder* received multiple regional productions in the US and had its London premiere at the Hampstead Theatre in February 2018.

Her next play, *Kings*, is a deep-in-the-weeds swamp tour of lobbyists, lawmakers, and legislative power. Burgess was inspired by the complex systems of clout that fuel her hometown; born in Bethesda and raised in Alexandria, she grew up in close proximity to the relentless real-world drama of the Beltway. “My parents were in the military and also worked at different points in the public relations sector, and at one point, my dad briefly worked for a congressman,” Burgess explains. “I’ve always had an interest in the culture of DC and the professionals who work there.”

That interest was reinvigorated a few years ago when Burgess read about the wine-and-dine network of special interests behind congressional fundraising retreats. “There are a lot of firms that take lawmakers out of DC to Napa or golf courses in South Carolina, and that just seemed, to be honest, very funny to me,” she says. “Something about the powerful politicians and important lobbyists together for a weekend of organized fun. And that scenario made me curious about what kind of conversations happen there and how the business of politics gets negotiated.... It’s like

a swingers convention in that, right underneath the small talk, there’s the obvious reason that everyone’s there.”

Kings opens at one of these schmoozefests, hosted at a posh Vail ski resort. Kate and Lauren, two seasoned lobbyists (as well as exes), meet with congresswoman Sydney Millsap, a Gold Star widow fresh off a whirlwind special election win and the first woman or person of color to represent her North Dallas district. But Millsap rejects Kate’s well-honed pitches—already exhausted by Washington’s wheeling-and-dealing, Millsap wants to serve her constituents, not DC’s special-interest machinery. Kate dismisses her as a one-term neophyte, calling out the flaws in her idealism with a straight-up honesty that Millsap finds refreshing after months of faux flattery.

Back in Washington, Lauren tries to sway Millsap into voting against a controversial bill—a legislative move that would ensure millions in corporate and private donations and free Millsap from her grueling fundraising responsibilities. But the congresswoman refuses to be bought, even when Lauren’s former boss, John McDowell, a powerful Democratic senator from Texas and presumed frontrunner for the White House, threatens to derail her re-election campaign by throwing the full weight of the party behind a different candidate in the primary. An unfazed Millsap doesn’t run scared—instead, she vows to challenge McDowell for his Senate seat, and recruits the most direct truth-teller she knows to help her: Kate.

The ensuing showdown damages careers, wrecks relationships, and reveals the corrosive forces shaping American politics and policy, as well as the endless ladder of compromises and sacrifices all power players must scale to retain influence. “It’s not a fairy tale about how great Washington is,” admits Burgess. Instead, *Kings* is a human-scale deconstruction of the division and dysfunction at the core of our government, questioning the resiliency of personal ethics and ideals in the face of ferocious systems.

After premiering at the Public Theater in early 2018, Studio fittingly brings the play, and its playwright, back to DC for their respective regional debuts. Meanwhile, Burgess is expanding her close reads of wealth and influence to new mediums—she recently wrote and executive produced *Compliance*, a half-hour comedy pilot for FX centered around a private equity manager and his government-appointed compliance monitor. But Burgess remains committed to the theatre, and to further examinations of the coercive power of money: she sees *Dry Powder* and *Kings* as the first two plays in a trilogy. “I’m fixated on [how] what we do in our jobs every day somehow makes us who we are,” she says. “And also how money changes us and how easy it is to say that it doesn’t influence us, but how really challenging it is to avoid that.” ♦