

UC San Diego

UC San Diego News Center

By Anthony King

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From left, UC San Diego professors Gentry Patrick and Judith Dolan with Hilton Als at the Mandell Weiss Theatre on Feb. 9. Photos by Erik Jepsen/UC San Diego

Issues of Identity: In Conversation with Hilton Als

Pulitzer Prize-winning theater critic joins UC San Diego neurobiologist to discuss access and student mentorship

In celebration of Black History Month, the UC San Diego Department of Theatre and Dance welcomed Pulitzer Prize-winning writer and critic Hilton Als to a public event on Monday. The conversation framed by the department's new production of the classic "[A Raisin in the Sun](#)"—included UC San Diego neurobiology professor Gentry Patrick, the director of Mentorship and Diversity in the Division of Biological Sciences.

“This is an engagement between two iconoclasts, and reflects the nontraditional approach and philosophy of our campus, where the arts and sciences actually seek each other out to find where the common grounds are,” said Department of Theatre and Dance professor Judith Dolan, who led the discussion.



Department of Theatre and Dance MFA student Michael Rishawn in “A Raisin in the Sun,” running Feb. 9-17.

The conversation took place on the stage at Mandell Weiss Theatre in front of more than 200 guests, with sets and scenery in place for the “Raisin in the Sun” production. Written in 1959 by Lorraine Hansberry, the story is a portrait of a dynamic African-American family that still reverberates today in many ways, Dolan said, in particular when discussing access for African-Americans.

“The point of ‘access,’ for me, is a really important part of my trajectory and my story, because without access I wouldn’t be here today,” Patrick said, with Als agreeing, saying

that without access, there is no knowledge and no way to move forward.

“Access for all should be something that everyone cares about,” Patrick said. “I hope that everyone can find their own journey, but it’s something that everyone has to contribute to in order to see a certain change take place.”



Hilton Als spoke with Department of Theatre and Dance students about his writing history, and gave advice for new actors.

With roots in Barbados and New York City, Als has been a staff writer for The New Yorker since 1994 and is currently their lead theater critic. His writing is known for a rigorous, sharp and lyrical perspective on the theater arts, as well as a deep knowledge of performance in music, visual arts and dance.

“I don’t really see in terms of better or worse, but I see it in terms of different, because I’m older and I can help someone. When you’re a kid ... what you’re really looking for is very selfish. You want to be nourished. Now, I can give,” Als said.

“You can see the ecology of giving, [because] it can only really happen once you’ve been given and fed, and nourished and loved, and so you can give back without fear and without regret,” he said. “I think it’s the greatest gift—teaching is the greatest gift you can give.”

Patrick, a professor of neurobiology in the Division of Biological Sciences, comes to UC San Diego by way of South Central Los Angeles. He has degrees from UC Berkeley and Harvard University, and maintains an active neuroscience research laboratory that investigates synaptic plasticity and neurodegenerative disease. He spoke of the influencers who helped him succeed, including his mother, who told him one of the few ways out of poverty was education.

“Women played a very big role. All three of my advisors were women, and they were truly advocates for me, [as well as] hungry for themselves in science, and I just emulated everything that they did,” Patrick said. “There are a lot of other kids who are just like me, with the same potential. They need a mentor, they need an advocate.”

Patrick is a strong and energetic advocate for initiatives concerning access for underrepresented communities on campus, within the local community and beyond. He is spearheading [PATHways to STEM through Enhanced Access and Mentorship \(PATHS\)](#), a groundbreaking new initiative with a mission to improve the success of UC San Diego’s underrepresented students in STEM.

Before the evening’s public talk, Als met privately with students and faculty in the Department of Theatre and Dance. The conversation dove into his writing history, his relationship to theater and family in New York City as a queer man, and advice he had for new actors.

“You really have to have that desire, to disappear, and give life to someone else’s thoughts,” Als said, addressing the importance to see artistic careers as very personal and individual. “Self-care is [to] pace yourself. Don’t feel like you have to do it all at once, and know that the story that you need to tell will come out.”

This day’s events were made possible by wide support on campus, including the Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion; divisions of Arts and Humanities, Biological Sciences and Social Sciences; Jacobs School of Engineering; Office of the Provost of Thurgood Marshall College; Institute of Arts and Humanities; Black Staff Association; and UC San Diego Extension. A special thank you was extended to Phyllis Epstein for her underwriting support.



From left, Hilton Als with Department of Theatre and Dance MFA student Yonatan Gebeyehu in front of students and faculty members.

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