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LEARNED CONNECTIONS

For the 2013–14 and 2014–15 seasons at Steppenwolf Theatre I edited a series of essays we called First Person. These essays appeared in our program and were personal reflections on the plays in production at the theatre. When I was asked to write for *Theatre Survey* about "*how* theatre can change lives and impact underserved communities," I thought of that essay series, now on hiatus. Anecdotal evidence informed me that people in our audiences emotionally responded to the series, just as they often emotionally responded to our plays. But does eliciting an emotional response rise to the level of "chang[ing] lives?" I suspect not, especially if that notion of change is meant to be on a par with "impact [ing] underserved communities."

But I was after something more than just an emotional response with First Person, and parsing my way through the assumptions underlying the series has brought some clarity. We certainly weren't changing lives. But maybe, just maybe, we were laying the groundwork for change.

In my view, attending a piece of theatre—or making it, for that matter—is not an act of social change in and of itself. I take a fairly material view of change: I'm focused on who has the power to distribute resources and opportunity within a given system. Change, then, is about altering the operation of that system. And as anyone who has licked envelopes, circulated petitions, made cold calls, marched, or organized knows, changing the system in any way takes a massive amount of time and energy.

Attending theatre can contribute to sustained social change by rejuvenating or catalyzing the energy required for the long slog of organizing. For those on a mission, a theatrical experience can be an energizing reminder of why they committed to a cause in the first place. For the uninitiated, it can mean exposure to a viewpoint or issue of which they had been unaware. But where does this feeling of rejuvenating energy come from? I think we recognize it most clearly when we have a sense of personal connection to the work. Seeing ourselves reflected onstage, perhaps. Or hearing a character give voice to a viewpoint we didn't know anyone

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else had. We gain strength and emotional endurance when we feel connected to something greater than ourselves. But is that sense of connection only available to us if we see our exact circumstances represented in a story? Can we learn to make personal connections if we don't see ourselves onstage?

When I was eighteen years old, my mother took me to see a local production of *Fences* by August Wilson. There were three of us: going to the show might have actually been the idea of her boyfriend. I don't recall. There were two seats together and one further back. Being the chivalrous young man that I was, I insisted that my mom sit with her date and trudged up the aisle to the single seat.

I was devastated by the play. Undone: tears streaming down my face. After the show, I made my way upstream against the exiting patrons to reconnect with my mother. The fact that I was walking against the flow of traffic might have accounted for the strange looks I received. But I do recall that there were no similarly tear-stained faces. None, until I encountered my mother. Her friend stood awkwardly by as my mother and I pulled ourselves together enough to leave the theatre and head home. She and I didn't need to say anything for me to know that we both were thinking of our difficult relationship with the Troy in our lives: her ex-husband, my father.

One of the reasons that experience sticks with me is that in my memory my mother and I were the only ones so moved. Memory is notoriously unreliable, and a cursory glance at strangers' faces is not a scientific survey. But I remember a combination of boredom and bemused surprise—"What the heck is his problem?"—in the faces I passed in the aisle.

As I imagined for the purpose of this writing that there was some sort of bell curve of response in that audience—my mother and I on the emotional end with some sort of mass of the moderately touched in the bulging middle—I wondered what accounts for that difference in how deeply we personally identify with a given piece.

The first possibility that comes to mind is how many degrees of difference you perceive between yourself and the characters or story onstage. For eighteen-year-old me, there were zero degrees of separation. I *was* Cory. His anguished plea to be seen by his father, Troy, was *my* plea. I'm speculating here, but perhaps for my mother it was just one degree. I doubt that she saw herself as Rose, but I'm sure she recognized Troy's behavior. And maybe some of those unmoved faces I remember were simply too many degrees removed from the world of the play to connect to it personally.

Which is to suggest that I had it easy: I had a shortcut to the play through direct personal identification. For the play to work its emotional power on others, it had to find a different route, one through aesthetics or event or theme. And judging from the range of reactions at any performance, sometimes the emotional power gets lost on that journey. Is it possible to encourage an audience member to meet the play halfway?

If I don't connect immediately, viscerally to a play, I still have a number of ways of appreciating the work. I can thrill to its lyricism, be challenged by the arguments it lays out, or appreciate a tightly woven plot. But those sorts of observations don't give me the deeply satisfying—dare I say spiritual?—emotional power

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that I'm suggesting is an important way for theatre to support making change. If that deeper level of connection is solely dependent on the random alchemy between personal experience and a work of art, then there is no *how* to be discerned here. No course of action to take beyond continuing to produce plays and hoping that for some small subset that transformative experience occurs. It's the kind of thinking that leads people to conclude that "if you've reached just one person in the audience, you've done your job." The *how*, if any, is to play the odds. Rather than identifying a specific mechanism to facilitate a deep connection between audience and art, the only thing to do is get more people to come to more plays, increasing the chances of that random connection occurring.

A companion notion to rejuvenating emotional power being a result of a mirrored personal experience onstage is the assertion of a "universal" in theatrical experiences: the idea that something in the performance will allow absolutely any person to connect with it. I think as a field we hold these two somewhat contradictory ideas simultaneously, applying the one most convenient to the conversation at hand. When we talk about bringing new audiences into the theatre, we often assert that these new audiences want to see themselves reflected onstage, presumably so they will connect to the work. I think a better argument is that theatre institutions demonstrate who they recognize and value through the optics of their programming and that we need communicate to a potential new audience that they are valued through sustained and repeated representation. But, that's not the argument I most often encounter. More often it's a formula built from the kind of experience I had with *Fences*: I recognized myself in something, and it was a powerful experience. I want to create that experience for others, therefore I need to bring them something in which they can recognize themselves.

The conversation about "new audiences" is usually a demographic one: we need more young people in our theatre or more people of a given racial or ethnic identity. And when someone raises a question of how audiences who won't recognize themselves in a given piece will react to that piece, we switch over to the universal argument. This play is for everyone, we suggest, but somehow it is also *more* for this group.

Well, look at that. Identity and representation—which I experience primarily through the lens of race—has snuck up on me once again. When I sat down to reflect on our First Person essay series as a highly personal approach to audience engagement, I didn't expect to find myself here. But as I think about it now, what appeals to me about that series is that it is potentially a practice—a *how*, if you will—that can encourage audiences to find a personal connection with work that doesn't depend only on a direct shared experience or some generic universal.

The goal of the First Person series as conceived by Associate Producer Rebecca Rugg was simple: the writer would articulate a personal connection to the current production in the hopes that witnessing that process would encourage audience members to search for their own connections to the work.

When I was the writer, I used a few repeated tactics. I would focus the essay on a single moment of the play: I didn't want to share an interpretation of the entire work, just find a way in to the ideas with which the play was wrestling. Whenever possible, I would use the personal as a pivot point between the play and the wider

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world. In an essay for *Good People* by David Lindsay-Abaire, for example, I shared a bit of personal mythology about how academic excellence created opportunity in my own life and used that as an opportunity to reference studies about the lack of upward mobility in the United States. And finally, I would invite the reader to participate by turning my exploration into a question or a challenge: Could they dig up a similar personal experience? Did my wild swing at a personal connection ring true?

Of course, I didn't have that immediate *Fences*-level connection to every play Steppenwolf produced in the past couple of seasons. I had to find a number of different approaches. In one play I might build a personal connection to a relationship between characters in the play. In another, I might speak personally about my concerns regarding representation of ethnic identity within the work. And in another, I might find a personal anecdote lurking in the design concept for the show.

Some plays were easier for me than others, but as we continued the series, I found that I was able to find a personal connection more quickly. That didn't translate to emotional power, but I did get better at finding ways to make my appreciation of a play less theoretical and more personal.

In short, I was learning.

I think it's important to make the distinction that I was not learning to see myself in the work. After writing my essay for David Adjmi's *Marie Antoinette*, it's not as if I more closely identified with Marie. Rather, I got better at letting the play ring through my life and seeing what experiences might resonate. I got better at letting the work affect me through the practice of looking for its effects.

Did our audiences also get better at letting the work affect them? I have no way of knowing. But I am intrigued by the idea that we can learn to make connections with plays, in the same way that we can improve our emotional skills or our empathy. Although not every theatre experience can be the soul-deep reenergizing that I think fuels social change, asking audiences to make personal connections to the work—beyond merely seeing themselves represented—is a step closer to it. And finding that connection takes us out of the mode of judgment, both aesthetic judgment (this is a "good" play or a "bad" play) and judgment of characters and their actions ("I never would have made that choice" or "They deserve what happens to them"). By searching out personal connections, the underlying question is not "Is this a good play?" or even "What is the takeaway from this play?" Instead it becomes "How does this theatrical experience speak to me?" The more we are in the habit of asking that question, the better prepared we are to be changed—or at least reenergized—by a play. We might become more open to exploring an alternative viewpoint or a belief counter to our own. And ultimately, we might be more likely to find the emotional endurance that can support the sustained grind of making social and political change.

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