ESSAYS: ON THE THEATER & SOCIAL CHANGE

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IT'S JUST A PLAY (AND THAT'S ENOUGH)

Ten Thousand Things Theater performs plays for as many different kinds of audience as we can. We are a strictly professional theatre company that works with the best actors in the Twin Cities (our home for the past twenty-three years), performing Shakespeare, Greek tragedy, Brecht, American musicals, and contemporary plays, taking each production to seven or eight correctional facilities (men's, women's, and juvenile), nine or ten low-income centers (homeless shelters, adult-education centers, housing projects, detox centers, immigrant centers, Indian reservations, rural areas), as well as doing twelve to sixteen shows for the paying general public. That's it—taking a play directly to extremely diverse audiences in order to engage with as many different kinds of people as possible. We do not work with individual marginalized communities over stretches of time to create theatre pieces, nor do we integrate community members as actors or writers or designers in the process. This is of course very valuable work, and such work may indeed change people's lives—it's just not what we do. We have never set out to try to change anyone's life. We never will begin with that intention. We simply try to tell stories as well as we possibly can, engaging with each audience as deeply and strongly as possible.

Ten Thousand Things actually grew out of a frustration with, and even a despair about, performing for traditional audiences. In Los Angeles, where we began more than twenty-five years ago, many audience members seemed to attend out of a sense of duty and obligation, because they had a friend in the cast, or because they were casting directors or agents. They often seemed tired and weary, like they wished they could be elsewhere. Even today, at most theatres I attend around the country, traditional audiences, who are primarily white and upper-middle class, feel bloated somehow; they don't really seem all that hungry. They have seen lots and lots of theatre—probably too much theatre, in all honesty! (As one of my colleagues put it, "It feels like they are there to be fed a second dessert.") They tend to keep a critical distance, sitting with arms folded, ready to judge the play aesthetically, comparing set and costume designs, directors' interpretations, and acting abilities. They come as consumers, having paid a certain amount

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for a ticket, keeping their distance to be sure they are receiving the "quality" they paid for. Rarely does the play seem to move anyone to reexamine their life.

I actually began Ten Thousand Things in search of an audience who cared, an audience for whom the stories we told might actually matter somehow to their lives. We have found such audiences primarily on the margins of society, many of whom live their lives at the same extremes as the characters in the big stories we tell. We are ferociously committed never to condescend to our audiences, who often find themselves looked down upon by others. We approach our audiences with the utmost humility and respect, knowing that most of them know more about the world of the play we are doing than we do. Instead of thinking much about how we might "change their lives," we focus on what they have to offer us, how they change us as artists, with their enormous humanity.

There was a moment early on in Ten Thousand Things that confirmed my thinking about all this: after our very first performance of *The Good Person of Szechwan* in a homeless shelter in Santa Monica, a janitor approached me. He had been able to pause in his work from time to time and stand in the back to watch the show. He looked me in the eye and said, "Thank you for treating us as if we had brains in our heads." That simple sentence was an enormous gift; it became a critical touchstone, embedded in everything we do.

All this is a way of explaining why my hackles tend to go up a bit when I am asked to talk about how our work changes the lives of low-income and underserved communities. I find that question is rarely asked in connection with traditional theatre audiences. I am not aware that the Guthrie, for example, is asked to demonstrate how many people stop abusing their spouses as the result of seeing a performance, or how many corporate managers decide to refuse to lay off workers and forgo larger profits, or how many audience members decrease their intake of alcohol or drugs. When the question about "changing lives" is asked about nontraditional audiences only, it feels condescending to me.

And I honestly don't believe that just seeing a play *ever* changes anyone that much. A play might provide a resonant image, a moment of connection, an inspiration, a bit of solace, an insight or two. But I don't recall a play ever actually altering my own behavior. (I should add that this is particularly true of plays that have "messages." Not only do such plays often "preach to the choir," reinforcing ideas that their audiences already believe, but, in me at least, they inspire boredom and sometimes even feelings of active resistance to whatever message is trying to be delivered.) For me, theatre is a place to go to ask questions, questions that are difficult and deep, that don't have any clear answers. Such active and unanswerable questioning is what makes theatre alive.

So out of my huge aversion to ever seeming condescending and out of enormous respect for our audiences, I have chosen to focus on how our nontraditional audiences have changed *us*—specifically how they have made us all, whether we've performed for TTT over decades or just for one show, better artists. Our nontraditional audiences demand that we be utterly clear, urgent, and lively with every single moment of a play. They did not pay $30 for a ticket, and most of them have a lot better things to do with their lives than sit around and watch a play—like going to find food or shelter for the evening. If the story is

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the least bit confusing, if the stakes for the characters are not incredibly high, if the actors have not dug deeply enough to match the truth of the lived experiences of our audience members, they will get up and leave. As well they should. We love their honesty, so often vocalized in delightful comments made to the characters during the show. Our nontraditional audiences bring out the best in us as performers, because they so easily and readily respond to actors who are generous and full of life and playful imagination.

Our nontraditional audiences, and the bare-bones conditions in which we must perform in order to reach them, have taught us a great deal about what stories work best in theatre—stories that happen in another time and another place, stories that, rather than realistically trying to replicate the painful reality of contemporary urban poverty, take place in world that we all make up together as equals, where no one is an expert. And they have taught us a great deal about how best to tell those stories, with very little in terms of set and costumes and props. Our focus is on using empty space to create delightful opportunities to actively engage our imaginations together. The list of lessons our audiences have taught us goes on and on (and indeed I have written a whole book about it: *All the Lights On: Discoveries about Theater with Ten Thousand Things*).[1] Our nontraditional audiences have changed us profoundly, as artists and as humans.

Although it doesn't seem to me that we have much opportunity to change the lives of audience members in the several hours we spend together, I do think we provide our nontraditional audiences with a few valuable things, at least briefly—respect for their intelligence, their imaginations, and their hard-won life experiences, respect that is often in short supply in the lives of those on the margins. So there's that. And the most frequent kind of comments we get after the performances have to do with gratitude for making people on the margins feel part of the human community, even if only for a little while. I don't know how long any of this lingers, but it's real in the moment.

I do, however, think the work of Ten Thousand Things is political. Not because of the content of any of the plays or our effect on nontraditional audiences. Our work is political because it radically alters the distribution system for theatre, which now hugely favors those who are white and have education and wealth. Instead of expecting audiences to come to us, we come to them. And when this distribution system changes, everything else changes profoundly as well. Because we use the donated space at community centers, we no longer have to spend our resources on buildings. Because we cannot use theatrical lighting, elaborate sets, or costumes or special effects, our financial resources can be focused on fairly compensating human creative energies instead of buying things. Our small company now pays professional actors at an hourly rate that is comparable to their pay scale, although our budget is literally twenty times smaller than that of the largest theatres in town. And our work is political because we have caused traditional theatre institutions and traditional audiences to have to think about what is *truly* important and *truly* necessary for creating excellent theatre.

And I'd like to add that while we resist any claims that we have significantly changed the lives of our nontraditional audiences, we *would* like to change our traditional audiences! Any TTT actor will tell you that it is as difficult, if not more

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difficult, to penetrate the barriers our paying audiences put up against truly engaging with a play than it is to get past those of our initially suspicious nontraditional audience members. It often takes even more persistence, with playfulness and generosity, to get people who've paid for their tickets, people who are used to hiding in the dark rather than being seen in the full light of the room, to let go of their resistance as critics and consumers and to drop their emotional reserve. By introducing every paid performance with a few stories of the profound and humorous ways our nontraditional audiences have responded to the play, we also work to cause paying audiences to start to imagine the story from points of view that are quite different from their own. They start to wonder how a homeless person might view a certain scene, or how a female inmate might have reacted to a specific line. Once they get used to sitting in a room with all the lights on, in a circle, where they can see the rest of the audience and the audience and actors can see them, they often open up at least a little more and start to enjoy and appreciate each other's company. They begin to let go of their ideas of being somehow greatly different from those on the margins and start to grasp, through their imaginations at least, the places where we all connect as human beings, no matter where we come from. It's one small change our way of doing theatre can perhaps sometimes make, for at least a little while. As the British director Declan Donnellan once said, "The only social service theatre does is to make us bigger."

ENDNOTE

1. Michelle Hensley, *All the Lights On: Discoveries about Theater with Ten Thousand Things* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2014).

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