

THEATRICAL INNOVATION: WHOSE JOB IT IS?

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Thank you Teresa for that kind introduction. I feel very honored by the opportunity to share a few thoughts with all of you today at the opening of this conference entitled Model the Movement. After more than 60 years of spreading theatres all across America, the movement has become so big and diverse -- encompassing everything from 1000-seat regional theatres, to 200-seat alternative companies, to peripatetic devising ensembles -- we might wonder if it's possible to model it at all. But I hope that my topic this afternoon, theatrical innovation, is one that concerns all of us. Especially today, with theatre education practically gone from our schools and new forms of distraction everywhere, it feels as though finding innovative ways to speak to new audiences is not a luxury, but a matter of survival.

Innovation is a topic I've been thinking about for some time. Woolly Mammoth's founding manifesto, an embarrassing document I don't readily share, talks in somewhat grandiose terms about solving the contradiction between "the advance of theatre as an art form and the discovery of new and larger audiences" for theatre. I can't say we've achieved this goal, but I know we keep on trying. And for most of our 32-year history, our approach to innovation has been to support the development of the most provocative new American plays we can find, and to get them onto our stage with as much creativity as our talented company members and guest artists can muster.

But a new train of thought related to innovation started for me just two years ago at, of all places, the TCG conference in Chicago. For those who attended, I don't know if you had this experience, but toward the end of the conference I started to notice how many of the speakers had used the word "storytelling" at one point or other as a virtual synonym for the word "theatre." And I obsessed over this for a while, and began noticing in theatre brochures and websites how ubiquitous the words "story" and "storytelling" had become as descriptors for what we do. ("Great stories well told." "New stories that will touch your heart." Etc.) And this struck me as odd. When I was growing up, I thought of storytelling as something adults did with children at bedtime; whereas theatre, which I attended regularly from the age of ten, was quite different. It was about spectacle and language and music and magic and actors and emotions and ideas. We certainly wouldn't call Beckett a storyteller, and even to call Shakespeare a storyteller would be fairly reductive.

Now don't get me wrong -- I'm not saying that stories aren't a critical part of what we do in the theatre, but to say they're the whole thing is a bit like a symphony orchestra saying they play melodies or an art museum saying they show pictures. So I started to wonder why this use of the word storytelling had become so widespread.

Just a few months before the Chicago conference I had taken my first trip to see theatre in Eastern Europe. I attended the Divine Comedy Festival in Krakow, which represents during a single week some of the best in Polish theatre from the previous year. And I can tell you, at that festival, there was hardly a story to be found! There was plenty of realism, and in fact, the level of physical and emotional detail from the actors was astonishing. And while there were certainly narrative elements, they were often secondary to the larger artistic framing -- accomplished through installation-like scenic design or abstracted staging -- which challenged the audience to look at the stories metaphorically or from unexpected angles. Texts were cobbled together or de-constructed from literary sources, films, classic plays, documentary material, community interviews, improvisation. Even the one new play I saw that was actually scripted by a playwright, entitled NO MATTER HOW HARD WE TRY by the brilliant young writer Dorota Maslowska, was only enough of a story to subvert the very idea of story.

At first it appeared to be a colorful portrait of a lower class Polish family as seen through the eyes of a teenage girl; then the lens shifted and it became clear that the characters were in a television show; and then the lens shifted again and it became clear that this family never existed because the character we thought was the grandmother had been annihilated as a young girl during the bombing of Poland in World War II. And the production, directed in visionary style by Grzegorz Jarzyna, had virtually none of the storytelling scenic elements we might imagine from reading the script, but just a few ratty pieces of furniture in front of a large video screen on which some of the images in the play were represented by childlike little squiggles, until the final scene when the bombing of Warsaw was depicted behind the grandmother and her non-existent granddaughter with overwhelming realistic force.

As you may have guessed, NO MATTER HOW HARD WE TRY was one of the most powerful theatre experiences I've had in years. And what struck me was the way in which a very original playwrighting idea worked in tandem with a highly unexpected directorial and design vision, and of course, with actors who really owned their roles, to create something that felt genuinely innovative.

At first I was tempted to dismiss the work I saw in Poland -- and later in Bulgaria, Hungary, and Russia -- by saying to myself that their tradition is more Brechtian while ours is Aristotelian, they have a director-driven culture while ours is playwright-driven, they get more government funding so they can rehearse longer and aren't so dependent on the box office, they sustain whole companies of artists while we have more of a freelance culture.

But the more work I saw, the more it became impossible not to be envious of a few things: first, that the variety of different kinds of work on their stages seemed wider; second, that it all felt like new theatre whether the script was new or old; third, that every play felt like an exuberant civic event because of the way the actors owned the material and seemed to be sharing it as an ensemble with the audience; and finally, that the audiences were noticeably younger than American audiences.

In the work I saw in Eastern & Central Europe, it sure looked as if the ideals of Woolly Mammoth's founding manifesto were being fulfilled: the artform was clearly advancing, and new audiences were being drawn in. How could I not get excited?

Shortly after my visit to Poland, three things happened in quick succession that made me start to question my own work at Woolly Mammoth.

First, I had lunch with Dominique Serrand, the great French-American director. I asked Dominique if he could characterize the difference between European and American directors, and he said something startling. "In Europe, the first job of the director is to re-invent the art form of theatre for every production. In the US, this job isn't even on the list of what most directors hope to achieve." And this crystallized what I had experienced in Europe: the feeling that there was a competition among different directors and companies to out-innovate one another, and this was their main way of attracting new audiences.

Was I encouraging directors to do this at Woolly Mammoth, I asked myself.

The second thing that happened was that I went through a series of planning meetings with members of Woolly Mammoth's acting company, including several award-winning actors who have worked at all of Washington's major theatres for two decades or more. When I asked how they would like to see our work evolve, they said they weren't looking for more roles, or better pay, though I'm sure they'd like that. What they said was that they were tired of showing up for the first day of rehearsal – at Woolly and every other theatre – and seeing the set and costume renderings for the first time, then rushing through a 4-week rehearsal process, sometimes absorbing continual script changes, feeling left out of the key decisions, and then having to go out on stage during the preview week feeling anxious and under-prepared because they didn't have time to investigate their roles.

And the third thing that happened: I attended the new play convening hosted by Arena Stage, entitled "From Scarcity to Abundance." During one of the sessions, three or four playwrights spoke about how helpful it is when theatres give them a great deal of control over the choice of their director and other collaborating artists, over casting, design, even the marketing language and images for their plays. And they used this word "control" several times. And so I raised my hand and said quite innocently that writers who give up a degree of control and make room for their collaborators to bring unexpected ideas to the table -- these are the writers who, in my experience, actually get the best results, because they motivate everyone to contribute in original ways rather than constantly trying to second guess what's in the mind of the playwright.

In response, a couple of playwrights whose work I really admire explained with great passion how hard it is to struggle privately for many months to give birth to their words and dialogue, and then hand

them over to directors and actors and designers for fear of what they'll do with them. And listening to this, I experienced an intense inner conflict: On the one hand, I was entirely sympathetic. I've devoted most of my career to supporting and empowering playwrights, and given the brevity of our rehearsal periods in the United States and the importance of premiere productions, it's little wonder that some of them want to control as many factors as they can. And on the other hand, as both an actor and director myself, I thought, couldn't actors say the same thing about how hard it is to wrestle with their text and build their characters, and having to submit themselves every day to the feedback of playwrights and directors? And couldn't directors and designers talk about their struggles to find a creative vision to lift up the play, but having to compromise to suit the needs of playwrights and actors?

Now, let me say, I know full well that no two playwrights are alike and many are highly collaborative. And frankly, I wouldn't have mentioned this isolated exchange if it weren't for the fact that, in the break after the session, two or three artistic directors came up to me and practically whispered how relieved they were that I had said something, implying that I had put my finger on one of the well-kept secrets in the field. And I started puzzling over what this secret is and how to express it, so bear with me, and I'll probably overstate this:

The secret, I think, has nothing to do with whether playwrights are controlling; some are, some aren't, and the same could be said for actors, directors, designers, or for that matter, Artistic Directors. The secret may be that we've built an entire play-producing ecology in the resident theatres -- supported by unspoken rules of engagement, backed up by agents, unions, contracts, schedules, and budgets -- that places the entire burden for innovation at the feet of our playwrights, but asks little of directors, designers, and actors other than to try to fulfill the playwright's vision in the same compressed rehearsal periods we've had for years.

As a result, we don't often see productions like NO MATTER HOW HARD WE TRY where innovative writing, directing, design, and acting all work together, adding layers of richness and complexity on top of each other. It takes too much time, requires too much exploration and experimentation on the part of the whole company. Whether we don't think those extra layers are necessary or we can't afford them, the result is the same. What we see on our resident stages is mostly new stories, because that's what we can accomplish with the tools we've given ourselves. They may be interesting or creative or important stories, they may be beautifully designed, but how often do we see the wider range of innovation, encompassing all the elements of theatre in a re-invention of the art form, which is the goal of companies in Europe and elsewhere?

As an Artistic Director whose job is to provide the proper resources for our artists, I asked myself: am I supporting playwrighting innovations, but essentially limiting the potential of our actors, directors, and designers? What is this doing, in turn, to the innovative potential of our playwrights? Is this approach still galvanizing our audiences? Will it galvanize our future audiences?

While I was pondering these questions, I was lucky enough to have lunch with Zelda Fichandler, and she happened to refer to THE FERVENT YEARS as one of the most inspiring books about American theatre, and so I went back and re-read it. As most of you know, THE FERVENT YEARS is Harold Clurman's brilliant history of The Group Theatre in relation to the politics of the 1930s. It describes the foment of that period in New York, in the midst of the depression, with the rise of fascism in Europe and Communism in the US, and the urge that theatre artists felt to address these intense things going on around them.

Inspired by the Moscow Art Theatre, Clurman, along with Lee Strasburg and Cheryl Crawford, invited a group of about 25 actors, directors, designers, and playwrights to spend the summer of 1931 at a camp-like retreat in Connecticut, where they talked about theatre and politics, discussed the purpose of having a company, worked on exercises and plays, and considered what they might produce together. Returning to New York for the theatre season, they produced a few plays; and this basic pattern of summer retreats, and then two or three productions per season continued for most of the tumultuous life of The Group Theatre, which lasted only ten years.

I think that most theatre historians would agree that The Group -- which launched the careers of Clurman, Strasberg, Odets, Stella Adler, Elia Kazan, Sanford Meisner, Lee J. Cobb, and many others -- was, despite its short life, the most revolutionary theatre company in American history. It permanently transformed our ideas about the very purpose of theatre, about all the disciplines including acting, directing, playwriting, and design, and it laid the foundations for the core language about theatre, derived from Stanislavsky, that still dominates our pedagogy and our professional practice today. It also attracted whole new audiences to Broadway for plays that wouldn't have been considered financially viable before.

So here was yet another example, an American example, of advancing the art form and galvanizing audiences. And it had something in common with the work I'd seen in Europe: the innovations didn't come primarily from individuals, but from groups of artists working together, with advances in one discipline tied to advances in all the others.

American audiences still get excited when they see innovations in all the elements of theatre together. We've seen this in a few recent British imports to the US: BLACK WATCH, SLEEP NO MORE, and WARHORSE. All of these tell stories, but they are woven into a tapestry of innovative design, performance, and choreography.

There was one more thing I discovered in THE FERVENT YEARS that I think is a key for understanding innovation, and it's something that links all the examples above, from Europe, England, and the US. I want to call it: a shared sense of purpose. The members of The Group passionately wanted to reflect

on stage the experiences of everyday Americans struggling at a moment in history. They wanted to ask questions, raise awareness, provoke debate.

Every good playwright has a deep sense of inner, private purpose. But when that purpose is taken up and shared by an ensemble of other artists, and through them with the audience, then it becomes something powerful, something public, and in some cases, something innovative.

So how can we think about innovation in practical terms? I'd like to share a simple paradigm shift that's starting to help me. But first I need to spend a few moments talking about the assembly line -- and I'm sure you all know what I mean. Every theatre, certainly every resident theatre with its own performing space, needs an assembly line, and at Woolly Mammoth we've worked very hard to build one up over many years. It's a disciplined process to ensure that every play, in a fairly continuous stream of plays, will be ready for opening night. And the assembly line has three big steps:

For each production, we spend roughly two years doing what I'd like to call, step one, script search and development. If it's a new play, this includes a couple of workshops or readings to support the writer's process. If it's a recent New York or regional play, we inquire about the rights and learn it's being held up for a possible Broadway opening, and then a year or two later they finally release the rights and say it was never really going to Broadway in the first place. Even Shakespeare companies have their own version of this search and development process. "It's finally time to do Henry VIII, but how to make it interesting?" They call up a few directors to see if they have ideas, and then decide to postpone it for a season or two until the theatre's finances are in better shape.

Then, once we've committed to the play and lined up the rights and gone through a complex process of agreeing on a director, and then designers, we have roughly 4 months to go through step two, the design process, the goal of which is to complete a set of drawings in time for the technical team to assess the budget and plan the build.

At several points along the way, we do some casting, including one or two offers, some local auditions, a trip to New York or Chicago. Finally, the full cast is called in for step three, rehearsals. These begin in the rehearsal hall for 3 or 4 weeks, and then continue on stage for another 1 week of tech, which is often the first time that all the artists are together in the same room. Then we have a few previews and scramble to make some final adjustments before our donors and critics arrive for opening night and a big shindig. We catch our breath for a day or two, and then turn our attention to the next play coming down the line.

It takes a theatre years to build up this capability. But hearing it described like this, it makes you wonder how we manage to get anything good on our stages at all. Somehow we do, and I think American theatre artists may be the best in the world at accomplishing so much in such a short time.

But if, as I suggested earlier, innovation happens with all the disciplines interacting together, driven by a shared purpose, then where on the assembly line do the actors, director, designers, and playwright come together to even talk about the purpose they might share together, and how they might approach this play any differently from the last one they worked on? Most especially, where on the assembly line can they have this conversation at a point where there are still innovative possibilities waiting to be discovered, and time to discover them?

So I've been wondering if we can somehow get a little bit more activity just off the assembly line, where the clock isn't ticking so loudly. And the paradigm shift that's starting to help me is this: What if, maybe not for every show, but for some of them, we shifted away from what I've called script search and development and toward a more holistic step I'd like to call production development, or maybe purpose development, right from the beginning of the process.

For example, if we're thinking we'd like to do a Chekhov play, can we gather a group of actors and designers together for a mini-workshop, read a couple of the plays, and ask them what it would mean to tackle Chekhov today? If we can't afford that, could we start this inquiry with some students or members of a think tank or local residents, maybe along with just three or four professional artists we'd like to work with? If it's a new play or adaptation, can we commission a group of collaborators working with the playwright on research, interviews, or other formative steps? To begin our design process, could we gather a few of our actors, whichever ones are already cast, and devise a workshop for them and the designers together?

Every time we create an opportunity, early in the process, for the entire team to work together, we dramatically increase the chances for both purpose and innovation. When we make the space for our artists to ask: what does this play mean to us, what does it mean to do it here and now, what are we trying to express to our audience – from there, it's a short step to asking: what could we do to surprise the heck out of our audience so they really sit up and listen. That's when innovation happens. That's when a production starts to have a point of view, a shared passion that goes beyond telling a story.

Sure, there are barriers: Schedules. Contracts. Dollars. The fact that so many of our freelance artists have to string one project to the next in order to make a living. Obviously, extra steps like these would be easier if every theatre had a resident company. But every production has a company, every city has an extended company of artists, and with even modest investments, we can transform their experience of working on plays, and energize our audiences.

While you've been listening, I hope you've been thinking what's quite obvious: steps like these are being taken at many American theatres, and in fact, some recent trends could make this an especially fruitful moment for theatrical innovation in our country. Generous funding flowing into the new play field, developmental partnerships and co-productions among many theatres, the mushrooming of new devising ensembles who work on a whole different model -- all of these are creating opportunities for longer, deeper, more inclusive artistic processes. At Woolly Mammoth, for example, a special fundraising campaign called FREE THE BEAST has become a game-changer for how our artists engage together. You'll hear more examples from the colleagues joining me on stage in a few moments -- practical strategies to gain control of the assembly line and make room for innovation.

At the new play convening I referred to earlier, Rocco Landesman famously said that there might be too many resident theatres. I don't agree, but I think there's an important caution. If our theatre buildings become homes for assembly lines that crank out too many plays, and if there isn't an opportunity for the artists working on those plays to develop a real sense of purpose, beyond just doing a good job and filling a slot in the season, then we're in trouble.

The most dangerous thing about the assembly line is not that it moves so fast, but that it just keeps moving, demanding more plays. We can deceive ourselves into thinking that if we just find the right plays, we'll find the right audiences; and in the short run that may be true. But in the long run, it's the purpose behind the plays we make, and the energy and invention with which that purpose is shared on the stage, that galvanizes audiences. It's not just the stories we tell, but why and how we tell them that determines our success.

So, my conclusion is simple: theatrical innovation is the job of actors, directors, playwrights, designers, dramaturgs, production managers, technical directors, and everyone else who works in our theatres. But creating the space for that innovation to happen -- that is the job of artistic directors, managing directors, and other theatre leaders. And we may need some help from agents, unions, funders, and others, to shake up our model just a little bit, and give ourselves some flexibility in the way we gather artists together.

Our work in the American theatre today sits on top of two great revolutions. The first half of the 20th century saw a revolution of purpose whose goal was to more truthfully reflect the realities of American life. One of the great fruits of that revolution, DEATH OF A SALESMAN, is on Broadway today. Its premiere in 1949 featured several veterans of The Group Theatre.

The second half of the 20th century saw a revolution of access, with the spreading of theatres across the landscape, and opening them to artists and audiences from many different backgrounds. All of us here today are a part of that revolution.

Perhaps we'll look back on the first half of the 21st century and see a revolution of process, with deeper collaborations among theatre artists leading to an explosion of innovation. Perhaps that revolution will get us closer to resolving the contradiction between "the advance of theatre as an art form and the discovery of new and larger audiences."

Thank you.