

Soul and Service

A Theatre that Builds a Culture

Directorial Manifesto of Kristin L. Schoenback

“The ten thousand anonymous men and women – the et ceteras and the and-so-forths who did the work, the nobodies who were everybody, the somebodies who believed it – their dreams and deeds were not the end. They were the beginning of a people’s theatre in a country whose greatest plays are still to come.” – KAREN MALPEDE

Theatre as a Service

I want to rescue theatre from its current hold of self-involved and superficial amusements and diversions, where it targets only one kind of spectator - which right now can be described as the educated, white, privileged, wealthy being. Theatre’s purpose in our world does not lie in the flawless creature. If that were the case, we wouldn’t need to make art. Our need to make art stems from the need to complete a relationship with something outside yourself. “Makers of art are custodians of issues larger than the self” (Bayles). Art that falls short does so not because the artist didn’t meet the challenge, but because there was never a challenge there to begin with. A good work of art inevitably calls the viewer’s own belief system into question.

“It is not only moral considerations that make hunger, cold and oppression hard to bear. Similarly the object of our inquiries was not just to arouse moral objections to such circumstances... but to discover means for their elimination. We were not in fact speaking in the name of morality but in that of the victims.” – BERTOLT BRECHT

Brecht's epic theatre sought to break his audience from their trance, where it could passively sit back and watch the magical effects of stage illusions and become hypnotized in its depiction of real life events where each member could identify themselves with the hero. (Esslin). But we are not the hero. We have been the cause in our self-gratifying work filled with meaningless noise. We must not forget that while we tell stories, we are a part of crucial struggle. The theatre must become a tool for social change and engineering. The world just outside our doorsteps is crying out for help and the theatre must answer. We must activate our work for our community, cultivating knowledge, dialogue, and action around critical and social issues. Theatre has the power to reject entertainment for the elite and turn its focus towards new truths. It is in these new discoveries that our audience can feel the exhilaration we experience when we enlarge our understanding. We must strive to incite empathy, thought, dialogue and action in collaboration with the audience to cultivate measurable change in attitude and behavior.

I believe we must engage and confront history in an attempt to understand its impact on ourselves and our world, and explore what we must do about it. We have an opportunity to interrogate our history, reimagine it, reinterpret it, and breathe life back into it. We can walk right up to this new life in old clothing and ask it the burning questions we need answered. The world is not yet done! There is always something missing or something that doesn't quite ring true. It is our responsibility to make our place in the world by making a part of it – by contributing some new piece to the set. Engaging with history allows us to call out devastating patterns and to see ourselves reflected in the past in order for us to do something about our future.

“We are the first people who are leaving nothing for our children – and America is leading the charge. We are at war against our children.” – ARIANE MNOUCHKINE

Lauded for her work with the Théâtre du Soleil, Ariane Mnouchkine's theatre sought to explore the contemporary rapport between theatre and society. Through emotional energizing, the emergence of the past, and through stimulation through beauty, the voyage of theatre becomes a learning process, a "modern day quest." (Miller) Declaring history to be on the forefront of her theatrical concerns, Mnouchkine encouraged her audiences to put themselves in the historical process, believing that if "spectators can see themselves as a part of the system, then they will also be able to see that history can be changed and acted upon." (Miller) Just as Mnouchkine, we must recognize the necessity of our past - to invoke stories that have created the culture we stand on today – so that we can challenge the wrongs we face in our world. Culture does not simply exist, we must continue to knead it, expanding on its traditions, changing it to serve those in our world today. We must see how our work and policies of our plays fit the work and policies of our world.

"Theatre is considered to present always a vision of the world in transformation and therefore is inevitably political insofar as it shows the means of carrying out that transformation or of delaying it." – AUGUSTO BOAL

Our world is one of inequality and imbalance, where the law makers rule, and all is well. However, what happens to the disadvantaged? What about those who do not make the laws, but instead are stuck under the heavy weight of those lawmakers? Theatre exists for those who are discontent in their current state of inequality and oppression. Theatre is for the rebel and the revolt ready to tip the scales. And in order for the theatre to belong to them, they must be invited into it in the first place. Augusto Boal speaks about destroying the space between actor and spectator, going so far as to even rename the viewer "spect-actor" encouraging active participation to "explore, analyze and transform the reality in which they are living" (Boal). The

artist has the means of exposing his thoughts on the stage, using their voice to take the power, while the audience sits comfortably, listens, and critically thinks. However, I agree with Boal when he says we can go further. The audience must invade the space that was crafted for them, and transform what is shown.

I intend to enact this very idea Boal preaches in his *Theatre of the Oppressed*, calling each artist to arms. Without the public, the theatre cannot be. The contact with our audience is a necessity “as life to water” and should be one that is direct. Theatre should not be alienating, but should insert the individual into a social whole with everyone involved in its action. We live in an age where it is easy to be passive; forgetting there is a human body at the center of each digital transaction – we crave experience. We must find ways to include the audience in our work. If we actively pursue the audience and invite them into the story, blurring the lines between audience and artist, then the theatre has an opportunity to serve its purpose. Those that have been stripped of their voice are given an opportunity and the courage to speak out and become a force for change.

“Our strength lies in the problems of those who make up our audience.”

– KAREN MALPEDE

I believe we fail in our art the minute we distrust our audience. Ideas become diluted when we imagine what we think our audience might imagine. This leads to work that is condescending and arrogant. We must have an active faith in humanity – to gift the audience (and actors) with something that is so rare. “The one tribute we can pay the audience is to treat it as thoroughly intelligent. It is utterly wrong to treat people as simpletons when they are grown up at seventeen. I appeal to reason” (Brecht). We must trust in our audience’s intelligence and let

them rise to the occasion. Trust in the potential of the audience to grow and benefit from new ideas.

In our act of pursuit, we must engage the audience on every level. We specialize in the craft of the live. If we braid all five senses together with language and narrative, we can activate an audience's entire being, leaving something for each person to grab ahold of. When we take down the architectural fourth wall we have opened up an unfiltered line of sight. We've left no room for trickery and the audience cannot be cheated. Instead we build what Mikhael Tara Garver describes as an "open frame of the senses" using such things as smell to trigger memory, sound to incite a visceral response and human contact or interaction to create a relationship between artist and audience and building trust. This immersion creates a unique contract between artist and audience, opening the door to feel necessary to the story. This necessity allows the viewer to participate, take emotional risks and respond to the work in front of them. They become a part of the world, not to escape, but rather to look into a mirror, and experience.

"Theatre is the art of time and space and in that art form we make things happen between our stories and our audience... Two-dimensional processing through sight is too much a part of our current day processing: television, video games, movies computers – our brains are overstimulated with visual stimulation. But in the theatre we have an opportunity... to make human memories: to mark stories with sound, touch, taste, smell, and sight in concert. We have the opportunity to balance this in open-frame work with the music of our senses and bring theatre into a growing phase of story experience." – MIKHAEL TARA GARVER

Theatre of the Soul

“The man who does not live in awe of something outside of himself is dead... theatre is a rare thing that can provide humans with something to find awe, wonder, and admiration in.” – WILLIAM BALL

Theatre making is a communal paradise! In making art you lay bare a truth you perhaps never anticipated – that by your very contact with what you love, you have exposed yourself to the world. Theatre permeates all aspects of life. Humanity’s evolvment towards equality is directly tied to it’s theatre and collaboration. We must build and grow together. Eliminate the egocentric way of thinking in each artist - as that only looks at a road back to the past - and extend the boundaries of theatre together. Art is only as effective as its ability to be shared from one person to another. Thus to make art effective, we must create a safe and liberating environment for process and performance. Healthy art is an environment where artists are not in competition with each other. I find this to be an uncommon practice in our rooms these days. William Ball speaks about theatre needing unity. “When all the artists believe in what they are doing, and all audience members believe what they are witnessing, we have all the component parts believing in something at the same time – all is in harmony” (Ball).

By living outside of ourselves we are able to find the nourishment we need as artists within the work itself. Mnouchkine focuses on discipline and performance with her actors to prevent egos from permeating the work. Instead her actors become part of a ‘semiotic language wherein space, volume, lights, symbolic movements, and music are the central sense-givers’ (Miller). What matters is the process: the experience of shaping the artwork over the polished product. She didn’t see her productions as ‘packages’ but rather as encounters between two

creative groups in a process of exchange. I believe that great theatre emerges from the soul of every individual in the process, and it is my job to give them the space to practice the big ideas and big emotions that inevitably exist in our own lives. I am committed to forming an ensemble of artists that ferociously embrace their work together, as no one artist can succeed on their own. I believe in building an open space where many ideas can gather, giving everyone the freedom to play and discover together; to keep from falling victim to the tyranny of the quick and easy. When we are persistent in asking questions, it not only digs deeper into our unearthing of the truth, but it cultivates an ownership of ideas in order to co-create the world of the play. Through the ensemble the artist can begin to delve further into what matters, what lives on the outside of himself.

“The artists job is to get in touch with the dark places of the soul and then shed light there. Sharing the process with others is the point.” – ANNE BOGART

I want to strip the theatre of all its unnecessary bells and whistles. There is an unmistakable magic that exists in the relationship between audience and actor. If we continue to fill it up with junk, we will obstruct that vision and the magic will fade. I believe people come to the theatre to experience its process, to see how things were created, and just for a little bit, take a little part in that ownership. Grotowski speaks of his theatre as a place where the audience comes and communes with the actor, and “by gradually eliminating whatever proves superfluous... the theatre can still exist” (Grotowski). This is not to say eliminate things such as lights, make-up, set, and costume all together, it does force the question: What is truly necessary? What is direct and specific and proves necessity to help the audience and actor commune in this space for this story? Grotowski’s *Poor Theatre* challenges the notion of art for art’s sake. It challenges the self-perpetuating, self-gratifying “synthetic theatre” that exists today

where our audiences can escape to sit back and become invisible and forget about themselves and their world. I am committed to keeping those questions in the room. What is necessary to share this ritual and experience with our artists and our audience?

Theatre is more imperative than our everyday lives, providing a space for danger, truth, questions, and freedom. In order for all of these to exist in one space, the theatre must break itself of its existing forms. Hélène Cixous, who worked with Mnouchkine, described her theatrical arena as a 'multiform' where the realm of the unconscious, the spiritual, and the political can co-exist. (Miller) While, I don't agree with Mnouchkine that psychological realism is 'venomous,' it should not be the presiding power in our theatre today. The responsibility of the artists involved is to find the form necessary to reveal the truth, one that will strip away the comfort and familiarity, and will jolt the participants into action and engagement, so that they can see, without horse blinders, what life really is. I believe in the athleticism and fearlessness that lives at the core of every artist. The body stores all that has happened to a person, and when we exercise it, we are free to access those discoveries and put them to the test. Navigating a text three dimensionally, in many forms: dance, music, written or spoken word and in all forms of style, allows us to immerse ourselves in the rhythm of the story and begin to understand it together. If we keep moving, we might stumble over something incredible.

"We denied ourselves nothing. We wrote our own texts...or sliced up other people's in all directions, then stuck them together quite differently till they were unrecognizable. We introduced music and film and turned everything top to bottom; we made comedy out of what had originally been tragic, and vice versa. We had our characters bursting into song at the most uncalled-for moments. In short we thoroughly muddled up people's idea of the drama." – BERTOLT BRECHT

I think we as humans, and especially as artists, are constantly underrating our power for good, and because of that we have been standing still – both in our lives as well as in our craft. But when we realize the power we have to transform and transcend ourselves, our fellow artists and our audiences, we can start to really get to work. Peter Brook, when describing the Holy Theatre says, “The theatre is the last forum where idealism is still an open question; many audiences all over the world will answer positively from their own experience that they have seen the face of the invisible through an experience on the stage that transcended their experience in life” (Brook). It is our responsibility not to get caught up in our own personal agenda or nostalgia, but to follow the hunger of our audiences. To create for them a theatre where they can experience something greater than themselves – to transcend their personal experiences, and transform their hearts – helping them to realize their power for good.

Peter Brook comments on the nature of Grotowski’s work with the actors saying that the work created a “shock of being forced to questions why he is an actor at all” (Grotowski). That question must never fall too far down on our list. We must constantly ask ourselves why we are artists at all. If we don’t we will find ourselves stuck, creating our art for ourselves, lost in a pattern of self-glorifying work that comes from nothing but what might live on the surface. Theatre that emerges from the soul and done in service of something greater than oneself - that is a theatre that builds a culture and changes the world, one small piece at a time.

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