Ben Cameron’s Closing Remarks

Sunday, November 13, 2005

As we close our time together, let’s begin by reminding ourselves of our hopes for these two days—hopes we shared with you at our opening dinner. Whenever we bring people together, we always hope to expose you to people who think and behave differently than you do—people who will provoke self-reflection for each of you, saying, “I’ve never thought of it that way” or “I’ve never heard that point of view—that’s really different from what we do.” Through this exposure, we do not mean to suggest that these ideas are what you should do by any means. The classic example this weekend has been the idea of open rehearsals—an idea espoused and demonstrated by Anne Bogart and that may be appropriate for many of you to consider. But before any of you dismiss it out of hand, I would hope that at least you’d ask yourselves, “If we’ve always done it this way, what would it mean for us if we thought about it differently?”—a process that may lead you to change your behavior but that may also lead you to affirm past practice—an affirmation that may bring new awareness and new commitment.

We always hope, indeed, that you will hear things that affirm your current practice, that remind you of, “yes, that’s why we do that; yes, that’s why that works; yes, yes, yes, we are on the road in a good way; and yes, this has been immensely invigorating, to be reminded of reasons and values that we may simply may have lost sight of in the pressures of the day-to-day.”

And hopefully, of course, we hope that you have met people—friends, new colleagues—that you can call on the phone, you can e-mail, you can reach out to. Because if we make you one promise today, it’s clearly that something that will happen to you in the next six months you don’t foresee. And at that moment, good, bad or indifferent, you’ll want to share the news in celebration, perhaps, and now there’s someone there who can appreciate your journey; or maybe it’s because you’re confused and confounded and somebody else can shed light or join you in that confusion. But part of this weekend is about creating that network—and if you’ve made new friends and acquaintances here, we’ve done our job well.

There were probably, though, two other specific objectives that we didn’t share with you on the first night, that warrant articulation today. On some level we hoped we’d lead you to a deeper appreciation, not only of the craft of theatre, but the complexity involved that goes into making any production. Clearly part of our journey has been about looking at choices. By reading the script of Mr. Marmalade and by investing yourselves in it in through exploring your own creative responses in casting or design or interpretation, by then seeing the production and encountering the creative team behind that production today, we hope that what implicitly became real to you was a very simple fact about theatre: Every production is an infinite set of choices. Once certain decisions and declarations have been made, other decisions begin to fall into sequence logically. Production is not, as many of our audience members sometimes fancy, “Well here’s the script—of course that’s what you did with it.” It begins with, “Here’s the script,” a beginning in which a world of infinite possibilities opens up to us, in which beginning choices led by artists begin to determine that path. As Anne Bogart said yesterday, the
first stroke on the canvas constitutes the first mistake—with everything else subsequently being the effort to correct that error.

Additionally we hope that we conveyed to you how deeply personal and sometimes mortifying those choices can be. For those of you who had difficulty in the playwriting workshop yesterday, I hope that you will always remember how much of a personal investment goes into the creative process. We hope that those of you who heard your words read experienced the shock firsthand of, “That’s not what I heard, necessarily,” when it was read out loud. The sum of the weekend has not been to suggest in any way that we are all now playwrights or directors or that we now can run a rehearsal, but to appreciate how complicated, how complex, how deeply personal and how courageous the artist’s journey is, of the personal cost of investing your life’s energy in this way.

We hope the weekend reaffirmed for you a deeper confidence in trusting the artist to lead. Even as Anne Bogart initially described the artistic process as chaotic—and probably, many of you feared what could have been heard as the chaotic potential of what happens when everyone is a collaborator—we collectively watched a rehearsal in which there was no question that the artist was leading the process. On some level, every moment in this weekend has been designed to remind you that the artist is a natural leader—and that it is our obligation and our privilege, not to supplant the artist, but to rally around him or her with new, profound admiration and gratitude.

These were our objectives for you. And we hope that you’ll tell us on your evaluation forms or in subsequent conversation and correspondence whether we met them. We hope you’ll tell us about other things beyond these that perhaps we didn’t anticipate. Maybe there are other things we should have focused on that you’ll point out to us, urging us to really grab onto those at the next forum. Please take your evaluations seriously, knowing that we will take them seriously, and that next year’s forum will be shaped largely in response to what you tell us about the one we’re now finishing.

But before we adjourn, even though everyone’s had their own set of experiences, I want to ask you to indulge me as I think out loud about a couple of things, and highlight some of the things that I will take away from the Forum to ponder in the days to come—even while I know the conference was far too rich for me to adequately cover it all. To use an image from Anne Bogart, let me scavenge in front of you.

The conference began powerfully for me with Jaan Whitehead and Nancy Roche as they stood before us. Jaan, in her brilliant, distinctive way, articulated the very real tension that exists in what we do—the challenge for a board of directors whose primary role is to mitigate, stabilize, manage and minimize risk in an art form where the work will spring to life only if we maximize risk, celebrating uncertainty and freedom—a collision of cultures, artistic vs. board. As Nancy subsequently reminded us—and as Jaan and Nancy do so wonderfully in their book—organizations truly thrive when we can create a mutual appreciation and marriage of these tensions, when we create a more holistic environment when we marry passion with technical and professional knowledge and craft.

This sense of mutual appreciation and forward movement was apparent in Cora Cahan’s address to us, when she spoke powerfully not only about managing risk but about her board’s role in being fearless, of the confidence with which her board proclaimed the
importance of their artistic vision and work. I hope you all paid note when she said, “We
demanded, we demanded that this [the 42nd Street Project] would only work if we were
given a permanent place at the table. We were not going to settle for crumbs or for a
temporary arrangement, because we knew what we did was important. We insisted on
that 99-year lease, even when we didn’t know how we were going to get there.” It was
that confidence that led them to new and unconventional solutions, to that vision of
income, not merely defined as earned and contributed, but now amplified with a third leg:
resources designed to flow into the not-for-profit from a for-profit revenue stream. “Those
commercial theatres feed the not-for-profit and subsidize that kids’ theatre at a 70-
percent rate,” she said—an astounding statistic. “We made sure structurally that that
would happen because we’re so inspired by our confidence in the work we’ve been
asked to do.” That confidence and the ability to articulate the value of their work led
them, not to caution, but to fearlessness and irreverence on every level, to saying, “Yes,
we can put a children’s theatre here in the heart of the Times Square and 42nd Street
red light district. Yes, we can rethink how a theatre for young audiences works. Yes, we
can rethink false and condescending assumptions about what quality work for young
audiences means.”

Lee Devin carried us further down the road by offering us a framework for
understanding. In our theatres we often segregate the two sides of the organization,
separating the artistic from the financial or the managerial in substance as well as in
methodology and style. What Lee suggested so eloquently is that such a division is
simplistic, that much of what we do intermingles the two. The budget and financial
management process, possibly the biggest indicator of what he called the industrial, is a
deeply iterative process—an iteration associated with the artistic process. Budgets are
built in laborious processes of adjustment, of nip here, tuck there—of going back and
back and back and back and back—unbelievably iterative. Managers work in
this iterative, artistic way to bring resources in line. Artists conversely often work in the
industrial way. For all of our iterative work in the rehearsal room, Lee reminded us that
design—for most of us, at least—is a deeply industrial process. We make hard decisions
based on the resources we’re going to spend, months before the rehearsal starts,
precisely because it’s too expensive to work in an iterative way. Managers work
artistically; artists work managerially. False polarizations and segregation of working
vocabulary disserve our organizations and are, frankly, naive. Underscoring every
session was a sense of the value of open communication—and that the building of
mutual trust is the key. That sense of building trust was fundamental to John Borstel’s
creative feedback process that we experienced this morning, a deliberately structured
way of careful steps designed to facilitate openness, trust, candor and, most importantly,
rigor. Indeed, that trust, that ability to listen and the ability to focus on the positive as
prelude helps us bridge these moments when our audience members may react
negatively or in a hostile way to our work. Many of you have heard me say this before—I
learned so much once from Charlie Hensley, a former artistic director, who said, “You
know, I’m stopped a lot in the supermarket by people who hated something I just did.”
Clearly, many of you on boards have had the same experience with your colleagues,
who many times will not tell us they disliked a work, but are not bashful over cocktails to
share their disaffection with you. Charlie went on to say, “In those moments, I’ve
adopted a three-part strategy. First, I let them say whatever they need to say, no matter
how painful, difficult or hard that is, even if I have to count cucumbers over their
shoulders in the produce section to keep from getting angry. I simply let them vent. Then
I touch them.” And this was a big point for me. “I touch them physically. I put my hand on
their arm or on their shoulder, and say, ‘You know, you’re not the first person to say that
to me.’ And then I say, ‘But just so I can understand you better, can you remind me of a moment, in this play or another play, that you really loved, that we offered you?’ Ultimately the reason they’re giving you such a passionate response is because they do care about the theatre, they do care about the idea or the story, they do think what you’re doing is important. If you let them express their feelings, if you touch them, they feel heard, they feel validated—and at the end of the encounter” just as we experienced with John this morning, “they walk away not angry about what disaffected them, they leave remembering what they loved about your work. And you have made a friend for life.” In short, it’s about listening, it’s about mutual understanding, it’s about reminding not what divides us but about what brings us together.

Much of the potential for that trust is already in every board room. Artist and manager, arts professional and trustee, we’re all deeply united in a common passion, a common delight, a common experience, as André Bishop said: the delight in stories well told. If we weren’t all committed in that way, none of you would be here at this meeting, none of you would have given us your time and attention and energy.

Anne Bogart talked powerfully about the perils of blind agreement, where quick acquiescence becomes the dead-end road. Alternately, finding a mutually respectful way to disagree opens the door for possible collaboration—a far richer dynamic, as Lee Devin told us, than acquiescence or mere compromise. Anne spoke to us about the perils of talking about “what I want,” a phrase that, for a stage director, can establish the director as a parent to the child/actor and design team—a dynamic that destroys the more optimal dynamic of creative partnership. At the opposite end of the spectrum, I can imagine that same notion of “I want” throwing the parent-child dynamic into the reverse, relegating the director artist to a child with our boards: We’ve all watched children throw tantrums because of “what they want.” Indeed, what would happen if we begin to reframe “what we want” and invited conversation in a different way?

Anne cited Bill Moyers and his observation about creativity. Creativity, he apparently said, is not all that hard. Creativity really is four things. First, you show up, really show up—you don’t walk into the room—you show up, senses vibrating. Then, you pay attention. Next, you speak the truth. And finally, you have the courage to let go of predetermined results.

I wonder, in a creative industry, if this isn’t what we want. If what this weekend is about really is our quest to find, cultivate and nurture truly creative boards. What would our boardrooms be like if our board culture pursued Moyer’s analysis: If we all showed up. If we will pay attention. If we will tell the truth. And if we all feel the freedom and courage to let go of our predetermined results. Creative boards for a creative industry.

If this sense of creativity can enter the board room, I think we’ll all feel a new sense of energy, of inspiration, of power and of possibility.

This analysis was especially useful for me this weekend. Between our sessions, I’ve been spending a lot of time on e-mail counseling one particular group of people—a group of people who are the staff and board members of a theatre that I just visited several weeks ago at a critical moment in their history, trying to rally the local populace around a public referendum that produce significant revenue for them at a critical moment. Much of our conversation centered on marketing: Do we understand marketing;
do we know what marketing means? Have we marketed ourselves effectively, have we marketed ourselves in a realistic way? We especially spent a lot of time around the “seven planes of market value”—aesthetics, emotion, impact, differentiation, quality (all dimensions that we should be able to address relatively easily) and especially on the two that confound us as an art form: the importance of predictability, just as you don’t want to buy a Toyota that you repeatedly take go back to the repair shop where the mechanic says, “Gee, I’m sorry, you got a lemon, because the guy ahead of you got a great one,” and of ergonomics or ease of use. Especially in an Internet-driven age—that you use it when you want it, how you want it—ease of use is increasingly important even while it’s a real obstacle for us. The theatre is not when you want it, how you want it, accessible from your own home—on the contrary, if you don’t show up at a particular time on a particular date at a particular location, there is no theatrical experience at all. What does our society’s increasing emphasis on ergonomics imply for us?

We spent time debating and going back and forth and sharing those kinds of things about their particular theatre. We spent a lot of time talking about their failure to be able to articulate their value to the community and the process of the referendum. But ultimately the reason I’ve been counseling this group is they e-mailed me on Friday and said, “The referendum happened. We got 21 percent in favor, and 79 percent no. Our board met yesterday and voted to close the doors permanently and dissolve the not-for-profit.”

At this moment, part of what I realized that I had sensed but couldn’t articulate during my visit was about what I observed in the culture of the organization—and forgive me, this was a very brief visit, and my experience may have not been representative of the organization. But in my brief time, I saw a staff and a board who with significantly difference visions and values. I spent time with staff members who said, “We don’t dare tell our board members and our community how desperately dire our financial straits are.” I heard board members say, “We don’t dare say to the staff how we really feel about their work and their plans.” Nobody said (even though somebody said it to me over drinks afterwards), “If this referendum doesn’t pass, we’re history.”

Would history have been different if that organization had moved beyond a culture of mutual deception and fear of one another? Would they have been at a very different moment if they had been creative in the way Moyers defined it—if everyone, board and staff alike, had showed up, had paid attention, had told the truth and had felt the freedom to let go of preordained, predetermined results?

I wonder, I wonder strongly, if perhaps that theatre today would be alive.

Those of you who study our Theatre Facts know that we as a field are in a deeply challenging moment. Even as many of you are achieving great, great things, the larger field is entering a moment of redefinition, of reshaping and upheaval and real self-questioning. It’s a time when we need to reground ourselves in our ability to dream. Every theatre I know began with an artist dreaming—an artist dreaming. I often recoil when I see the inadvertent disorientation of a cultural community, when the impetus for an organization, for all of its good intentions, are economic businesspeople who want to open an arts center to drive tourist traffic without a real sense of the animating artistic vision that must be at the center of any vibrant organization.
All vibrant theatres begin with a dream. They begin with a dream that can be realized only, though, when other people hear that dream, come together, rally to it, conspire—conspire from the true Latin sense of “to breathe together”—to make the dream a reality. When people dared to dream what would happen in the theatre—the theatre where we come together not in the spirit of the current airport or subway or train station where we are constantly enjoined to report suspicious behavior, to look at our fellow human with suspicion and hostility, to recoil from one another; not coming together in the spirit of reality TV, with its delight in humiliation and false superiority. But the theatre—the place where we come together with generosity and curiosity, to celebrate those things that unite us as well as be engaged by the things that divide us. That’s the dream that makes us come together in a theatre, as opposed to television, as opposed to movies, as opposed to so many other ways—and god knows, in this country, now is the time when the dream must be kept alive.

This dream only happens when a larger community rallies and says, “We share that dream, and we will work, and we will sacrifice and we will give ourselves.” And that is true of every single theatre in this country. That was the reality when a group of 120 women came together in Minneapolis, Minn., in 1963 and collectively sold 21,000 subscriptions for the first year of the Guthrie Theater before the first actor ever set his foot upon the stage. That sharing of that dream is what happened when Zelda Fichandler in 1950 created the Arena Stage, selling shares to a group of supporters to finance that first season. That is the dream behind Roadside Theater, and Dell’Arte and the Wilma and on and on and on. An artist dreams—and others rally, work and sacrifice to make that dream a reality. On some level, the real test before us is whether we and our communities have the collective will to share in, nurture and celebrate the dreams our artists offer us.

I of course hope and pray that we do—even more; I believe that we do, even as these days press us in unexpected ways. All of you have been an inspiration this weekend—by your openness, by your candor with one another, by your deep and passionate commitment to the dreams that animate and galvanize your theatres. To you, my deepest thanks—to all of our artists and speakers who guided us this weekend. And in the spirit of always letting the artist have the last word, let me close with André Bishop’s diner-reference:

No matter what your journey
No matter what your goal,
Keep your eye upon the doughnut
And not upon the hole.

God speed you in your journey. Safe travels to you all. The 2005 TCG Fall Forum is now adjourned.