Todd London's Closing Remarks

Sunday, November 12, 2006

As you know, this Fall Forum is entitled Backstage with the Board: a Look at Art-Making. What you may not know is that Gigi Bolt gave the convening another name, too. She called it No, Ben Won't be Coming Back for the Fall Forum This Year. For those of you who didn't know TCG's longtime executive director Ben Cameron, this was the moment when, at each conference, he would storm the stage and in his brilliant, thumping, tent revival voice sweep the events of several days into one thrilling whole and send us back to our theatres roused and jazzed and saved, pulsing with pride to be part of this mighty, swelling tide that is the American nonprofit theatre. As Bruce Johnson of Seattle Repertory Theatre joked yesterday, speaking in Ben's closing slot is a little like being the guy that followed Martin Luther King to the podium after his "I Have a Dream" speech. Thanks, Bruce. And thanks, Ben.

I'm here to sum up, to offer some closing observations, to recall the whole of this weekend. Right now, though, everything seems more crowded than whole; crowded with impressions, feelings, brief encounters, big ideas and personal stories heard during the past 42 hours. By the end of dinner the first night, I had heard about a miraculous recovery from cancer, a trip to Syria, an encounter with architecture and art in Barcelona and London and a class in "congregation building" that the remarkable Liz Lerman is teaching to future rabbis. On top of all that are the indelible images of Sicilian peasants milling and spinning, one man being flapped through the air like brutalized laundry.

One question hangs over the jumble. It's the question that Michael Kaiser put to us on Friday night: "What are we for?" Remember, he said that it's easy to know the mission of for-profits, because it's right there in the name. But nonprofits have no inherent mission but the negative. "What are we for?" I heard his question as a challenge, and I've been trying to answer it for myself.

One thing I know I'm for is inspiration, wherever I can find it. I work at a place here in Manhattan called New Dramatists, a 57-year-old laboratory and home for playwrights housed in a former Lutheran church. The church Sanctuary is one theatre space, the former soup kitchen is another, and what was in the Depression a thrift store now holds the Xerox machine where writers make free copies for the course of their seven-year residencies. For 10 years there, I've worked in the company of smart, passionate, outspoken individualists who wear their hearts on their pages. They spend much of their time alone, trying to figure out what it means to be human. By caring so deeply, they've made me care more. By looking at the world in such profoundly personal ways, they've changed my eyes.

I've also found inspiration on the board of TCG. There, the vision is a more wide-angle, vista vision. There, I've found artists, managers, trustees, educators and funders who think for themselves and for their theatres, their cities and the field. They inspire through their devotion to the ideals of this lunatic endeavor and through their rigorous humanity.

All this to say—I am for personal connection. I am in the theatre to be personal; to be surrounded by people who take the events of the world to heart, who speak straight and true, who struggle openly with ambiguity and contradiction, who prize the new above the
known and who are unafraid to reach across the barriers that divide us from one another.

I loved what Long Wharf artistic director Gordon Edelstein said at the workshop with production manager Kent McKay. They were talking about what happens when the artistic director is also the director, how the staff responds. Gordon said, "I'm very aware that I'm the boss, and I don't like it, because I don't like people kissing my ass and I don't like people telling me what they think I want to hear. I'd rather have a straight conversation with someone." A straight conversation—that is a theatre person's dream.

I was also struck by Oskar Eustis' confession yesterday that his most successful relationships with boards and trustees have overstepped the usual boundaries of the workplace. They've gotten intensely personal. Oskar outlined a stirring equation—personal reciprocity leads to shared vision; shared vision unleashes energy to fulfill the fundamental mission of theatre as civilization. That mission, to use his wonderful phrase, is "to enlarge the we."

In the theatre, unlike so many other fields, we are paid to take things personally. We are encouraged in the theatre to "go there." And we are built to back each other up on the journey. Think about Ellen McLaughlin's Trojan Women experience: women from different parts of war-torn Yugoslavia, sometimes crying so hard that they can't speak, hand their scripts to each other to complete the lines—the buddy system of passionate collaboration. Or this: a tall, blonde Serb rocks and cradles a Bosnian Muslim through her stage fright.

Additionally, in the theatre we are trained to elicit the personal from others. This is how we get our material, our stories. What a moment for José Cruz González when Magda, the meth addict, woke up in Lost Hills. In his set design workshop, Robert Brill described previews of Twilight: Los Angeles, about that city's riots. Every night, the show's creator and performer, Anna Deavere Smith, arrived with new material and characters from interviews she'd done that day. And every night the background slides and light cues had to be rearranged.

It's through this personal exchange that we make community with our audiences. Of course, the language of Deaf West doesn't include musical notes, staves and clefs. And of course, this daring theatre has to mount a Broadway musical. What follows is mutual translation—a composition from the hearing world adapted to a deaf one, then translated back for an audience from both worlds. We talk and sign across cultures. We imagine each other.

In the theatre, this willingness to be personal transforms talk into dialogue, chat into border crossing. It's these crossings that show the urgency of this work in the broadest context. Whether it's about China or Brazil, Argentina or Mexico, Romania or Russia; whether, as in Ping Chong's case, it means crossing an institutional boundary—to push a different kind of theatre to a more expansive vision; whether it's about producing one play, developing many or collecting a hundred, it takes time, investment and (I love that phrase Gigi read yesterday) "contempt for danger." This is a long way to travel to unseparate culture, to knit it together. It's a long way to travel for inspiration, but so was it a long way for the Moscow Art Theatre to travel here early in the last century to change our theatre forever.
This weekend, our look at art-making has become, it seems to me, a look at audience. They are inseparable. Oskar is right that an audience made from everybody in Elizabethan England taught Shakespeare how to write his histories, just as the people of Lost Hills taught José where to find his story. A few blocks from here, one of the first great American theatres made its home in the nineteen-teens: the Provincetown Players. Provincetown's founder, a wild visionary of a man named George Cram Cook, said: "One man cannot produce drama...True drama is born only of one feeling animating all the members of a clan—a spirit shared by all and expressed by the few for the all."

We aren't all makers of the art, but we wouldn't be here if we didn't share something of that animating spirit. If you doubt this, I wish you'd been in Laura Crow's costume workshop yesterday. I walked into the rehearsal room down the hall and saw the pillars of the American theatre sitting cross-legged on the floor with kid-safe scissors and glue sticks, cutting pictures out of fashion magazines for collage designs of *Midsummer Night's Dream's* fairies. They might have been doing heart transplants or re-touching *The Last Supper* to judge by the devotional silence in the room.

This animating spirit was everywhere in the workshops, as they investigated the ways theatre artists give form to the invisible. How do set designers dimensionalize the pictures in their heads? What are the practicals that create the mystery of evocative light? How does found sound incite emotion? How do numbers on a budget line translate to stage magic?

These workshops were exercises in inspiration and, together with the panel, exercises in translation, which was the semi-secret subject of this gathering. They have been, mostly, conversations about conversation, which is why Liz's session this morning was so right. So many conversations: how artists speak to other artists through adaptation, how we speak to each other about what we see, when in the process it's best to speak. As we saw this morning, these conversations take work, they take mutual investment, especially if we dedicate ourselves to finding out what we don't already know. This is the real dialogue of art.

And the conversations keep opening out—how does our work speak to our audiences, how does one culture speak to another.

Trustees are the nonprofit theatre's natural translators. You get the inside story. You are often our first, most intimate audience. You travel as ambassadors from the world within your theatre to the world without. You bring news from outside our walls, remind us how other people live and work when they're not holed up in windowless rooms with gelled lights and painted scenery.

What are we for and what is our common tongue? These are questions I go away with. I also hear Michael Kaiser's admonishing: to face difficulty and crisis by upping the ante on imagination and daring, by renewing our drive to achieve the aspirations of our missions. This mission ambition is the thing I hope the weekend has renewed in all of us.

Oskar talked about Joe Papp's insistence that Shakespeare in the Park stay free. There's a footnote to that story. It wasn't Papp who made the argument at first; he was, apparently, thinking of charging a nominal fee for tickets. Merle Debuskey, Papp's press
director, was the one who insisted that Papp "screw his courage to the sticking place" and fight to stay free. This mission ambition can come from any of us, from all of us.

Increasingly, in search for inspiration, I turn to our theatre's founders. Since we're in the house that Papp built, let's turn to him:

On a paying basis it would take just one or two "failures" to wipe us out—one or two rainy nights in the park to wash us out. Off-Broadway and Broadway economics do not give us the right to fail from time to time and still stay alive. If we are to strive for stability, we must develop a structure that gives us this right. It would be an act of irresponsibility on my part to subject the organization to the chaotic gambling of show business.

What may seem an idealistic approach to the theatre is in reality the most practical for what we are trying to build. Broadway and off-Broadway live in a world of romance; the quick buck, the overnight success, the one big break, here today and gone tomorrow—hardly a solid base for operations.

I am trying to build our theatre on the bedrock of municipal and civic responsibility—not on the quicksands of show business economics.

I don't know if you checked out your program last night, but New York Theatre Workshop has been dancing with these Pirandello stories since 1994—for twelve years. A process of discovery and risk like that can't be built on what Papp calls the quicksand of show business economics. It is a chronicle of determined translation. Or even non-translation, when it becomes clear that Italian is the full body language of Pirandello—and as Ed Waterstreet said, so easy for the deaf to understand.

Watching the process of translation of KAOS from stories to film to play text to movement theatre piece by Martha Clarke, Frank Pugliese and Giovanni Papotto is like watching a conversation with Pirandello played out in real space and time. You see how they talk to each other. Pirandello, who first in his provincial stories and later in the passionate, even operatic intellectualism of his plays, is obsessed with the ways we get stuck in life and death, how society constricts us, reduces us to replaying the same scenes over and over. Martha Clarke, whose lush, imagistic theatre has often danced the lines between repression and desire, between the order of society and the chaos of the psyche. One of the things that gave meaning to me—to use Liz's term—was intuiting the process of this collaborative conversation between the dead author and the living artists.

For me there were so many marvels, so many moments of meaning. The frenetic, May Day dancing circles in the center of this tiny sealed-off town. The way the women hung mythically close to the house, the way they disappeared into it. One "a-ha" moment for me—a tiny instance of deep meaning—was the surprise revelation of that high window in the wall, where I hadn't noticed one before.

We live in a world that never loses the urgency to build new walls on ancient foundations in order to separate neighbor from neighbor, where cowboys clamor for longer, stronger fences to keep other people out. Then suddenly there's a breath, the inspiration of art. Suddenly on a wall that is angled strangely, even dangerously, into the audience, a
window opens up. Light shines out. That's what we're for, what I'm for—the window in
the wall, a small powerful "a-ha."

I want to close by reading the fortune cookie fortune I got yesterday at lunch. It says: "Do
the thing you fear and the death of fear is certain." Then on the other side it simply says,
"Duck."