

“Theater As a Democratic Space in the Twenty-first Century”

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Annual Commencement Lunch Speech

May 26, 2007

I am not going to speak about aesthetics today, or at least not specific aesthetic choices, but rather how those choices impact socio-political forces. Our subject today is the notion of theater as democratic space in the 21st century. I'd like to begin by defining our terms. When I say Theater, I mean live performance. For the audience, this requires getting up off of your couch, getting spruced up enough to be in the company of other human beings, using some method of transportation to get to another building that is not your home, and to sit with a group of people who are not your friends and family, or even people you necessarily like, and watching a piece of art created by somebody else. That somebody else is telling you a story—a story that is not your own, that you may or may not like. It sounds so attractive when I put it in those terms, doesn't it?

Why wouldn't I stay at home, on my couch, in my underwear, playing a video game or watching TV? I don't even have to bathe to do that. I don't even have to brush the crumbs from the potato chips from my lap! Surely in a world of fast communication, of on-demand information and entertainment and infotainment, nothing could be less important, indeed less necessary than the theater. Right? We'll return to this notion in a few minutes.

Let us take a moment to define “democracy.” From the Greek, two parts, “demos” meaning the people, and “kratos” meaning force or power. There is a character in *Prometheus Bound* by Aeschylus who is called Kratos, a silent, vicious Titan who hammers spikes through Prometheus to bind him to his mountain rock. This linguistic detail is important. Remember that we don't talk about “demarchy,” which would use the Greek word “arche,” meaning rule or leadership, or first among all others, actually—which we would find in oligarchy or monarchy, sensible, orderly words. No, we talk about democracy, *kratos*, which is power and brute strength, power to the people, power of the people. It's quite possible that the word “democracy” was coined by early detractors of the system, suggesting this notion of mob rule, leadership by the beast with no head. I just think it's important that we keep this messy quality in the forefront of our thinking.

Okay, theater as a democratic space in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In order to turn that statement about in our heads, I'm going to ask us to leave the fast-paced modern world for a few moments and go back 25 centuries. I'm going to take us all the way back to the remarkable city-state of Athens, somewhere around the middle of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, where a tribal culture in Greece is, over the course of centuries, being replaced by what

we would now call Western Civilization. Two “movements” were born simultaneously: one, the social/political movement that we now know as representative democracy, the other a cultural movement that we now know as western theater.

Think about this: what we would consider to be a small city of about 250,000 inhabitants, a city that was moving from a tribal phase to a more organized form of society, produces these two revolutionary forms. That’s not much larger than Providence, RI, by the way. And in that city, around 65,000 people are considered citizens, voting citizens. Think about that theater, the Athenian theater! We are outdoors, up to 15,000 of us at a time, sitting in these acoustically perfect auditoria. On a platform in front of the stage, there is a chorus of maybe 35 young men dancing and chanting and acting as our stand-ins in the drama. There are only two or three actors on the stage. They wear four or five foot masks, and 20-inch platform boots. Players include Gods, heroes, and the occasional satyr with a three- foot-long phallus.

After all, we are celebrating the festival of the god Dionysus. But really, really what we are doing is negotiating our social contract. Think for a minute. Through this new art form, we are deciding what kind of culture we are going to be. We are seeing that if you kill your father and sleep with your mother, you’ll end up blind and in exile. Now, it seems that we don’t need to be reminded that we shouldn’t sleep with our mothers and kill our fathers, but! In our post-tribal Athenian society, this is what is being negotiated by watching Oedipus. And a good thing, too.

Let’s look at a more complex example of negotiation. In the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, the Athenians defeated the Persians in a very bloody war. The playwright Aeschylus was a foot soldier in that war. And one of his first great dramatic successes was a play called *The Persians*. What’s fascinating is that it is a story told from the perspective of the Persians! Oh, sure, there’s plenty of patriotic talk; the Athenians are amazing and really, really powerful. But there is also empathy for the vanquished. There is empathy for the Persian women, who have lost their husbands, sons, and brothers. There is even empathy for Xerxes, the Persian leader. Would that we, as contemporary Americans might access this kind of empathy more often.

This is not mere tribal chest-pounding. This is a complicated negotiation of what kind of society the Athenians will choose. Instead of being ruthless conquerors, we Athenians choose to be “civilized.” And we talk about our civilization in this public forum, in this “theater,” in which all voting citizens participate. So we have a particular cultural moment that gives birth to the western theater, but which is fundamentally shaped by that theater, by the social forces that theater represents. In other words, the way we, as Athenians, define our selves within a democratic context arises from the theater.

Allow me to fast forward two thousand years, around the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, to a little island in the northern Atlantic. We are not in a democracy, but there is a thriving theater, so bear with me for a minute. We are in England, in the middle of the Elizabethan era, and again, the notion of cultural identity is in play, which is really why I’m bringing up the Elizabethan theater. We’ve had a hundred years of civil war in our

recent past at this point, we've split our church from the prevailing European religion, not a small thing to do, and we're being ruled by a woman. Dark times, indeed. On top of all of that, we're trying to start an empire! What we need is a good play, right?

But that's exactly what we need. A good play in our theater. I'm going to ask you to picture this theater, the Elizabethan stage. Again, the play is outdoors; again, it is raucous and festive. We're on a wooden platform raised just a few feet above the people who are standing around us. It's midday. Most of the standing people are eating lunch, shouting at the players, threatening to throw their lunch if the play isn't good. The perfect recipe for drama.

And here comes Shakespeare. I will go so far as to say that Shakespeare is a genius without peer. In his book, *Mother Tongue: English and How It Got That Way*, Bill Bryson talks about Shakespeare's contribution to the language. Did you realize that he used about 12,000 words in his plays (somebody counts these things), and of those 12,000, nearly 1,500 of them were new words, words that had never been used before. Bryson makes the mind-boggling statement, Imagine if one in ten words you wrote was utterly new. Imagine!

But Shakespeare's real contribution to our Elizabethan culture is the way in which he shapes how we think about ourselves, the way in which we negotiate our understanding of ourselves as English. Listen to this passage from *Richard II*. Do you all know Richard II? Not hunchback Richard, but talky Richard. It's a speech from Act 2, scene 1, in which John of Gaunt, who is dying, pleads for sense in the profligate King Richard.

This royal throne of kings, this scepter'd isle,  
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,  
This other Eden, demi-paradise,  
This fortress built by Nature for herself  
Against infection and the hand of war,  
This happy breed of men, this little world,  
This precious stone set in the silver sea,  
Which serves it in the office of a wall,  
Or as a moat defensive to a house,  
Against the envy of less happier lands,  
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England . . .

These are the words of a weak dying old man? These words should be in the mouth of the KING, shouldn't they? But it is in feeling the pain of the other, the unwanted, the forgotten, that Shakespeare achieves his greatest eloquence, his highest patriotism. Not a simple thought to feed to our audience of rowdy groundlings surrounding the stage. But Shakespeare does it, and in such a way that, five hundred years later, his plays still send powerful messages to us.

You might say, Curt, these are interesting demonstrations of the theater's historical importance, but what does this have to do with us in a 21<sup>st</sup> century, technologically

sophisticated American democracy? Noam Chomsky said, “The most effective way to restrict democracy is to transfer decision-making from the public arena to unaccountable institutions: kings and princes, priestly castes, military juntas, party dictatorships, or modern corporations.” I will go a step further. The most effective way to restrict democracy is to hand over decision-making power, and then become increasingly isolated, increasingly unwilling to collect, to connect, and to converse.

I believe that we have reached another of those historical moments when the culture needs the theater—when we need to renegotiate the social contract if you will. I know that there are 700 hundred channels of television, and Netflix, and the internet. But none of those options are even aware of our presence. You can get up during a television program, go to the bathroom, die on the bathroom floor, and the television will NOT EVEN NOTICE. Television is ignorant of our presence, as are movies. The internet knows that we’re there, but it remains another form of isolation in a world of isolations.

That’s why I think we’re at just such a cultural moment. The media in our culture has raised its volume to a deafening roar. People are starving for a genuine point of interaction, a way to fight the isolation of television and film and the internet. They want to find meaning through conversation, through community. And they want to gather in a room with other people to become engaged, enlightened, and entertained. The theater is at the crest of a cultural tidal wave in America, ladies and gentlemen, if we will just take our place there.

I’ll remind you of the examples I’ve been talking about. Shakespeare was making art for audiences of several hundred people a day, no more. One could argue that the Elizabethan age was among the most enlightened of all of the monarchical periods of the Renaissance. In fact, when Cromwell and the Roundheads took power and restricted freedoms in the century after Shakespeare, one of the first things that they did was to shutter the theaters.

Walt Whitman said, “Did you, too, o friend, suppose democracy was only for elections, for politics, and for a party name? I say democracy is only of use there that it may pass on and come to its flower and fruit in manners, in the highest forms of interaction between people and their beliefs – in religion, in literature, colleges and schools – democracy in all public and private life...”

The American archeologist Howard Winters said, “Civilization is the process in which one gradually increases the number of people included in the term ‘we’ or ‘us’ and at the same time decreases those labeled ‘you’ or ‘them’ until that category has no one left in it.”

And University of Chicago educator Robert Hutchins said, “The death of democracy is not likely to be an assassination from ambush. It will be a slow extinction from apathy, indifference, and undernourishment.”

I'm sure there is a small amount of self-aggrandizement in thinking that theater can save American democracy. But I know that great Theater is a place where you see the other and walk in their shoes, which is the ultimate humanist act, and where you rub up against the rest of the world, outside your limitations, outside your comfort zone. And that is where the democratic impulse begins at the very least. Thank you.