

Notes For a Speech About the Meaning of Theater in Philadelphia

By Bruce Walsh

In 1998, when I was a sophomore at Temple, I saw a production of “The Bald Soprano” by Brat Productions. It was the 24-hour version, so after the bars closed, and my friends stumbled home, I secretly took a cab back to the show. I think I caught the 2 and the 3 a.m. shows. And the 4 too. It was a very simple thing the play communicated to me, but one that I hadn’t heard before. Namely: you are not alone in this world, it said. There are others that feel the way you do.

Between that night and this one, I’ve done a lot of jobs to support my art – as have almost all of you here, I assume.

- Bike messenger
- Liquor store clerk
- Usher
- Bike messenger
- Daiquiri bar employee (fired)
- Pizza maker
- Valet parker
- Tour Guide (fired)
- Waiter at Davio’s (fired)
- Waiter at Moriarity’s (quit)
- Waiter at Pannini’s (why not “Panini?”)
- Tour guide (fired)
- Trader Joe’s clerk

It was a total fluke that I began writing for a newspaper. The Metro did a piece on a play of mine in the 2005 Live Arts Festival. The Entertainment Editor, Dorothy Robinson, was new to Philadelphia, and she asked me if I knew any good writers that could write about the theater scene. That is the first moment I ever considered writing anything other than a play. It is the first job I have ever had that I was any good at, and it is the first work-for-pay that I have ever loved.

It is now my belief that every single piece of writing asks something of the writer. Including this very speech; can you hear it? If we are all quiet for a moment, we may hear what this speech, what this moment is asking for. It is my belief that a writer’s job is to listen to that space.

Sometimes a piece of writing asks for your soul, and other times it simply asks you to listen very carefully, be respectful and serve the subject. I don’t see my 400 word articles as being inferior or superior to playwriting. They just ask for different things of me. A play can and will ask you for your soul. It’ll keep you up at night, make you curse the sky and howl in the dark. So it has been such a gift for me to be given writing assignments that simply ask me to listen and be respectful. This is why I love newspaper writing. It has saved me from a downward spiral of neurosis. It has shown me a way to serve readers and artists. And has made me sit up and listen: is there any greater gift?

So I am going to shut up in a few minutes and hopefully you will have something to tell me. This should happen more often. Nights like these should not be optional for public servants. Newspapers, television stations, regional theater companies. They are all given their charters to *serve* the public. How do you serve if you do not listen? And I want to serve you better.

But, like you, I'm hoping this listening and serving adds up to something larger than the sum of its parts. In the end, I want a better theater scene – both as an artist and a journalist. And the theater scene is more interesting and more vibrant – to me – when more voices are given access to audiences. The theater scene is more vivid and more alive when it responds to the instincts and the passions of the artists living in Philadelphia.

So I want and need to listen to each of you. I want to hear what your company is trying to accomplish, so that I can more truly write about it. But I ask that tonight we also listen to each other, and consider the type of theater scene we want here in Philadelphia.

Over the last two-and-a-half years, I've been writing about the theater community almost every workday. And I have been waiting for a night like this to pose a simple question:

1. Is the underground overcrowded? Are there simply too many theater companies in Philadelphia?

I ask you to consider the way we think of emerging theater companies, and I ask that you consider the way this idea developed. I submit to you that this particular way of starting and growing theater companies is an *idea*, and not written in stone. This particular way of forming a company is the way that the major regional theaters in Philadelphia were founded. Basically, this formula goes something like this:

- a. Three or four non-profit entrepreneurs have a vision for a company that serves their needs.
- b. Those three or four people work like hell, and create theater that attracts audiences.
- c. Those three or four people then hire other people to carry out their vision and serve their needs.

This is the trajectory most small companies are still following. But I submit to you that this way of doing things was something that worked in a particular time and place: Namely, the late 80's and early 90's, a time when there was very little, if any, theater in Philadelphia. And I further submit to you that this very particular way of doing things will not work as effectively again (and we can discuss the reasons later). But, I ask you? Are we willing to try new models? Should every third actor have his own theater company, or is there a better way to pool our efforts and audiences

I go to a lot of indie theater for my job, but also just because it is one of the things that makes the most sense to me in my life. Sometimes there are five people in the audience. Sometimes there are many more, but no matter how many people are there, I keep hearing the same complaint about the audience. I'm sure you've heard it too:

“Many of these people are actors themselves. I keep seeing the same people at these shows.”

I understand the practical reasons for this frustration. But just for a moment can we look at the glass-half-full?

Let’s all picture me as a nineteen-year-old-kid sitting in “The Bald Soprano.” No other type of entertainment offered me what this thing – this *local* piece of theater – was offering me. A movie, music, Broadway, regional theater, all of these were a cut-and-dry relationship: I give you my money, and you give me a show, and then we both go home. But, I wound up writing a show for Brat when I got a little older, and later I directed one for them. This piece of entertainment was like no other, because it was not just entertainment. It was a community. It had the power to give me expression if I sought it, to give me inspiration, to give me a job. It was a form of entertainment that *listened* to me. I am of the belief that there is an energy released when that happens. When, cool, fun, passionate people get together around something, it tends to draw other people to it. So my question to you is: is there a better way for us to help each other than the way that is currently in place? Let’s start the conversation tonight.