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On the Act of Regarding Another: Some thoughts on live performance, silence and fragility

by [Caridad Svich](#)

in [National Conference](#)

(This post is part of the [2014 TCG National Conference: Crossing Borders {Art | People} blog salon.](#))

One: Thinking about Theatre

Let us think now on the nature of silence

the act of regarding another
 at is not the other
 t rather another
 are ow being on this earth.
 eet t us think now on the nature of fragility
 7 rather, say, the feelings
 ie t are conjured when words such as “tenderness, weakness, frailty”
 it mentioned in relationship to a theatre experience,
 it d how, in effect, in the theatre
 sometimes such frailties are indeed illuminated,

and how at others, oftentimes, buried deep

in the noise and din of the loud, the known, or the “look at me” vibe

that is often called “showmanship.”

Let us think now on the nature of darkness,

Which is sometimes mistaken for bleakness

And/or made abject in our regard of theatre work.

So much sadness in this and that play, in this and that show. It is too much to bear.

Please, do not overwhelm, the audience may say.

I come to the theatre to forget. I come to the theatre to escape.

I come to the theatre because my friend said I should come

But really, really I would much rather be at home watching Hulu or Vudu instead.

How long is the show?

Is it 90 minutes?

Oh good. Can we have dinner after? Drinks?

Is it three hours? Five hours?

Is it an event?

Oh, I like events.

I like being seen at events.

Let's make sure we have booked the event.

But what happens when theatre is not an event,

When theatre is not AT you,

Or even generating a buzz

Or even "found" by the media?

What happens when theatre is,

simply is,

And does ask you to regard

Once again, truly regard, as an act of contemplation,

The fellow beings on this earth,
And reflect upon what it means to be human
At one (or not) with nature?

What happens when theatre is “hidden?”
When it is in your living room?
Or sitting round a table?
Or just me and you here in this space?

Two: Thinking About Immersion

Much is made and written about
Interactive, digital theatre and the future of immersion.
Let's put the audience to work.
Let's make the passive creatures move
And BE in the Theatre with US!

All good.
All fun.
All in good time.
And sometimes, rather effective.
Certainly not new. Promenade theatre has been around for centuries.
It is simply making a return. In its own way.

Except many times I think about how
so much of the immersive theatre experiences
I have been part of as an audience member

Are designed for able-bodied citizens

And rather ignore, and dare I say, discriminate quite openly

By virtue of staging, design and structure of the event,

Non-able-bodied citizens and/or the frail or elderly.

Is theatre ONLY for those designated as “able?”

Do we leave everyone else out of the party?

Does it become inconvenient to design a show with interactivity in mind

Without considering ALL of the variables?

Do we allow some people in and not others?

Who is allowed in our theatre?

Who gets to play on stage and in the audience?

The game cuts both ways, you see.

Or should I say ALL ways.

Three: Thinking about Adrian Howells

Performance artist Adrian Howells took his life this year on 16 March 2014.

He had struggled with depression his entire life.

His sad end generated a shock in the community.

He had made it to the age of 51, after all.

The struggle would seem to have been conquered somewhat by virtue of age and experience.

But well, none of us can know the intimacy of despair

And how it strikes upon a person to such a point that ending seems the only way out.

In the days after his passing, what colleagues most often remarked about Howells was, well,
his generosity of spirit,

And yes, his motto, always cheekily said by him, “It’s all allowed.”

One of Howell’s last pieces *Unburden* (performed at Battersea Art Centre in November 2013)

welcomed the audience into a space lit with candles

And asked that the audience find comfort and open-ness in the space,

Enough trust, in other words, to unburden themselves

Of their feelings of anxiety, trouble, and so forth.

In asking that the audience call out their burdens,

The space became heavy with all,

But the audience left the space a bit lighter, a bit freer,

Because the pact between Howell’s deceptively simple construction of the event

and its relationship to the audience

Was that the space, the shared space, could indeed hold

All of the burdens

And allow for a feeling of being unburdened to occur.

You could say that the experience of *Unburden* could be thought of as a prime metaphor

For the what of what is theatre:

We walk into a dark space.

We unburden ourselves.

Or we are unburdened somehow by being in the darkness,

and we walk out, at the end of the evening, into the light.

Four: Thinking about Access

Access is not always about money.

Access is also how you invite the audience into the theatre

(be it in a building, outdoors, or otherwise)

How you invite artists into the theatre,

And whether you make them feel at home.

We talk a lot about values in our society.

We take seminars on the key values we need in order to create effective business models.

We take lots of notes.

But really, all of the note-taking in the world won't mean much

If the basics of what we do in theatre practice are not honored.

How do you invite the audience in? And why?

How do you invite artists in? And for how long?

How many gatekeepers are there?

Who gets to play on all sides of the invisible table?

In the US theatre industry, we have spent a good part of the late 1990s and the 2000s

Talking about the edifice complex

And the dangers of being beholden to a building –

The costs of maintenance, filling seats,

and getting the doors open and closed on a daily basis.

It is pretty much a done deal that being beholden to a building

Does not great art necessarily make.

The building can hold the art hostage and its makers as well.

But we rather love our edifices

And somehow keep fooling ourselves into thinking

That upholding the edifice is the name of the game,

When it matters much more
What the hell we are doing inside the edifices,
How we are doing it,
For whom,
And how we sustain healthy relationships
With our fellow citizens and the world.

Five: Thinking about History

I did not know that we made theatre to fill seats.
Bean counter like.
I thought we made theatre to invite people,
To welcome them into an experience,
To share a ritual,
To have communion,
To break bread and maybe even some wine,
To think,
To regard,
Yes,
To regard one another
And to contemplate the why of why we are in the world
Today, yes, in this moment, in the now
But also, yes, where we have been, and where we may be going.

Theatre-making is record-making.
That is, making theatre is an act of recording history.

I believe this more and more as I make things-

Reflecting the moment, the cultural whats-it,

Whether I mark the page Now or Then,

Whether the subject is ripped from the headlines

Or “purely” invented.

We are always recording, documenting in our own way

Who we are and leaving traces for the future (in hope)

That someone may remember

If they are able to read the signs we have left behind.

How do we want our theatres to be remembered?

As good seat fillers?

As something more?

Six: Thinking about the Audience

I do not like feeling as if I a mere seat-filler

When I am in the audience.

I don't say this out of any sense of nobility.

I know theatre belongs to the bawd as much as it does to the church.

But I do think, I do want, every single time, yes,

For the event to matter, somehow, even if it's in a small way.

I don't expect to have a life-changing experience every time I go to the theatre.

It cannot be.

We know this.

It's too hard to do the work, to make the work, to simply put things in motion,

To ask that art be able to cast a spell upon us in such a manner

Every single time.

It's impossible.

In fact, I think I would be rather disappointed if

Theatre was ALWAYS great.

I think I would become suspect of it, and maybe walk away

Even though I have given it most of my life.

What I do expect is for the invitation to be equitable somehow.

Which is hard when you are paying hundred dollars for a seat in a commercial house

Or sometimes even, yes, in a so-called not-for-profit house.

But the economics of all of this is another story.

When I talk about equity, I suppose I mean that the engagement,

The human engagement set in motion

Between the event and myself, and myself in the crowd

Be one that levels the playing field, so to speak:

You are here.

We are all here.

Let's play.

Sounds simple. But many times when I am in the audience

I do feel as if the event is made without any desire to engage at all.

It is as if you have walked into a party
And the host couldn't care less if you were there or not.
And you are not offered much of anything.
And you are not asked much of anything.
You are treated, I don't know, like an object.
An object that has to be there to fulfill some sort of function,
But really, the event could carry on without you,
And no one would really care whether you are there or not.

Okay, maybe the actors would care.
Actors do care most of the time.
But for the sake of this argument, and the nature of such events,
Let's say that "caring" is not a word that is high on the agenda at such "parties."

Now, sometimes parties such as these are, well, intriguing
And curious to go to, and say that you've been.
But being held in contempt is not a feeling that warrants much affection for long.
Just as being held in too much rapture can become suffocating.

You are here.
We are here.
Let's play.

Seven: Thinking About Ethics

Theatre lives in its historical materialist moment as much as it lives in the spiritual realm.

Theatre asks us to regard a subject and a subject position: it asks us to witness

Not merely to look.

We do all sorts of looking all the time.

Our lives are filled with meaningless engagements.

So, you could say that when we come to the theatre, we are looking for meaning.

We are searching for something.

We hope to find it in the theatre.

But really we find it in ourselves after the event is long over.

Theatre paints images and words on our mind

And much effort goes into these paintings by all of the practitioners involved.

Hours and hours of decision-making and creative problem-solving

In order to suss out how to make the most of the laboratory space

So that when the audience is invited, the paintings can evoke meaning

(On many levels and not purely of the cerebral kind).

Theatre is holding someone's hand, looking at them in the eyes,

Playing with closeness and distance, and through that interplay

Opening up a space for other "meanings" to occur.

We can talk about values and systems all we like.

We can take notes. We can look at what nifty marketing tools are out there

To keep the business of the business of theatre going.

But the values of theatre have not much to do with spread sheets or time tables

Or whether the lobby has sustained a forty million dollar renovation or not.

The values of a theatre are felt as soon as you walk in –

And here, I do mean, an edifice, if there is one.

Are you greeted?

Does someone say hello?

Are you greeted with a smile?

Or are you made to feel as if you are an intruder?

Is there a place to sit and wait in the lobby?

Do you feel at ease? Or does the space – the waiting area – make you feel nervous?

Are you hustled in and hustled out of the space?

Do you feel as if you would return if there was not an event in the space?

Does the space itself feel like an invitation?

The “values” of a theatre are in how we treat each other,

How we engage WITH each other,

How we behave toward one another,

And yes, how we regard one another

As not the Other

But fellow human beings

In a space democratic enough to allow

For the big and little of our lives

To be welcomed,

And treated with kindness, respect, honor and tolerance,

And for these words to be used as not mere lip service toward some mission statement

Written long ago, but to be part of the daily doing of a theatre’s life.

The theatre that is life. After all.



Caridad Svich received a 2012 OBIE Award for Lifetime Achievement in the theatre, a 2012 Edgerton Foundation New Play Award for GUAPA, and the 2011 American Theatre Critics Association Primus Prize for her play *The House of the Spirits*, based on the Isabel Allende novel. She has edited several books on theatre including *Out of Silence* (Eyecorner Press), *Trans-Global Readings* and *Theatre in Crisis?* (both for Manchester University Press) *Divine Fire* (BackStage Books), *Out of the Fringe* (TCG), and *Conducting a Life: Reflections on the Theatre of Maria Irene Fornes* (Smith & Kraus). caridadsvich.com

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