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FORUM

It Is All about Love. Listen to Me, Y'all. Yeah

Closing Keynote

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Before reading this, I would like you to take a moment to put yourself in the body of our students as they step out from the darkness of the wings and into the light, center stage.

It is the dream of a lifetime, yet you feel terrified.

You are in the theatre—a sacred space, a shared space, and for you (a student who for reasons of gender, race, religion, ability, size, or additional reasons), you feel underserved by your educational experience. For you, this place is a contested space. You become hyperaware of the training pedagogies and creative explorations that are excluding the details from your cultural experience.

So now, standing before an audience (of your peers or a casting director), you feel haunted by what is essentially a segregated training experience. Where essential training is dominated by the notion of a "universal experience," and everything that is outside of that is considered an elective or special topic: a topic that is designated for the last two weeks of the learning period or (worse) covered in an entirely different department. With all this in mind, you question your belonging. The phrase "separate but equal" comes to mind.

On that special night, standing before an audience or casting director, you scramble for something to cling to. You grasp basic elements of the training, which you were told are "reliable, universal." You rely on the training, and now, you are afraid.

Now, return to yourself as an artist and teacher in the art and craft of acting. Ask yourself, "Could something else be happening in the mind, body, and spirit of the terrified actor?"

How can you help?

As instructors, what if part of our training was to turn outward and consider what we can give our students and our audience? That is, perhaps, even more useful than the codified pedagogy.

As teachers, how can we do our "work" in a way that might make a positive impact on our students in times that seemingly conjure hostility, disconnection, verbal and physical attacks, and apathy. How can we help to allay fear and replace it with love?

It is all about love.

Toni Morrison said, "There is no time for despair, no place for self-pity, no need for silence, no room for fear" (Morrison 2015, 2). I have this quote is on my office door because I am on a mission to create a brave space for students where they can express the

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totality of who they are in order to make space for what they are capable of and, by extension, what we are capable of as a culture. I wonder how I might make my mission our mission (as a community of educators) without destroying myself, ourselves, and our shared world and art in the process.

As an educator, when was the last time you scoured your language in your course materials and offerings, asking yourself if you are engaging with your students with what American poet Audre Lorde calls "deep participation"? (Lord 2000, 43) Have you asked, "Am I purposefully relating and connecting to those (students and audiences) who are differently raced, gendered, classed, and abled in a world organized around hierarchies and power differentials?"

It is all about love, yeah.

When we constantly credit only a few theatre artists with having a profound impact on language, theatre, and culture, we are reinforcing the dominating importance of a universal experience, while simultaneously devaluing experiences that are not part of the core training. We are teaching our students and, by extension, our audience that some experiences are literally worth less, and we are reinforcing hierarchies of exclusion.

In his 1965 essay "The Revolutionary Theatre," Amiri Baraka states, "The Revolutionary Theatre should force change, it should be change" (Baraka 1965, 2).[1] I know that some of you feel that politics and art should not coincide. Perhaps you are not persuaded by the words of Baraka, and I have to wonder why. I wonder if that is because I learned about Amiri Baraka in an African American studies class, which was not a major requirement. See, I am a product of a segregated educational system. Are you?

In a 1939 unpublished text entitled, "What is the Role of Theatre in Life," acting teacher and activist Michael Chekhov states:

> Many actors come to the theatre for their own purposes and it's like that almost everywhere. About the meaning of theatre-I think, it has a social meaning, nothing personal or individual [. . .] If we really try to get the idea of theatre as a social factor, we should really forget ourselves on the stage and think, rather, of many people before us. We should ask ourselves what can we give our audience as part of our social life. This we can do if we realize that the audience is before us, and not we before the audience. (Chekhov and Cerullo 2018, 199)

When I read this text a few months ago, I was amazed. It affirmed my thoughts that the soil for sustainable pedagogies is already here. Chekhov says, "Real social consciousness means doing whatever work we do, having in mind our usefulness to society" (Chekhov and Cerullo 2018, 199). It is as if Baraka and Chekhov are waiting to have a conversation with each other! Are we ready to facilitate that conversation? Until we start seeing how different cultures and creative practices speak to each other across time, space, race, gender, class and place, our training practices are just dry monuments.

I am not suggesting a binary choice: keep it or tear it down. The question does not have to be binary.

If we engage as a new generation of artists and teachers and reconsider pedagogies, then we can make work that stands within, beside and behind the historical approaches of training in order to create a dialogue. I think we have an opportunity to create a new civic space around these "monuments"—a civic space that can help us move toward the resolution of generational colonialism, racism, and oppression by excluding the pedagogy that the monuments hide.

It is all about love, y'all.

I show my love, and I grow my work continuing to question the origin of the creative practices I teach. I am inspired by Dr. Brenda Dixon-Gottschild who argues in her seminal book, Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance, that African American aesthetic has been "invisibilized" in the arts and specifically in American dance. Her research looks at George Balanchine's style of ballet. Following the same path, I am presently researching the Michael Chekhov technique. So far, I have discovered that he was greatly inspired by Uday Shankar, an Indian dancer, choreographer, and musician. I found this information in the archives that the Michael Chekhov Association is continuing to grow for scholars and artist who are curious about the origins of the work.[2] I wonder how many other cultures and people have been "invisibilized" over time. I hope that we will honor lineage of our work by shining light on the overlooked origins of our practices.

There is beauty all around you. Let the light shine through your mind.

In The Price of the Ticket, a collection of essays by James Baldwin, I read:

> No matter how [. . .] you survive this and in some terrible way, which I suppose no one can ever describe, you are compelled, you are corralled, you are bullwhipped into dealing with whatever it is that hurt you. And what is crucial here is that if it hurt you, that is not what's important. Everybody's hurt. What is important, what corrals you, what bullwhips you, what drives you, torments you, is that you must find some way of using this to connect you with everyone else alive. (Baldwin 1985, 208)

But the work is hard, sometimes too hard. I have to thank my Voice and Speech Trainers Association (VASTA) colleagues. I thank Micha Espinosa, in particular, who helped me in the roughest of times and said: "No, you like living inside. You can't quit your job." I want to share with you a conversation I had with my 91-year-old father. He lives on a small island and has seen perhaps three plays in his lifetime. I called him and told him I was done, quitting. "It's too hard," I said. "I just can't go on anymore." He simply replied, "You can't quit. You teach humanity, not acting, humanity. It's the most important job."

It is all about love, yeah.

Baldwin says:

> You must understand that your pain is trivial except insofar, as you can use it to connect with other people's pain; and insofar as you can do that with your pain. You can be released from it, and then hopefully it works the other way around too; insofar as I can tell you what it is to suffer, perhaps I can help you to suffer less. (Baldwin 1985, 104)

Insofar as I can tell you what it is to experience joy, perhaps I can help you to experience more joy.

It will make you feel much better, yeah.

What if the training was less about being in the light and more about illuminating darkness?

James Baldwin, Michael Chekhov, Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, the VASTA leadership, and VASTA itself, are urgently calling us to grow up: grow up our teaching and performance practices to meet the world we live in today and create the world of (if, of course, there is still one) tomorrow.

The precise role of the teacher and, by extension, the artist is to use our art and craft to illuminate, to blaze roads through a vast forest, so we (in all our doing) will not lose sight of the purpose of art and craft: to make the world a more human dwelling place.

This moment requires something most of us have never experienced before: Love. In this time, we are living in, love requires us to tell the truth, so we can expose the totality of our humanity.

As cultural organizer, Piper Andersen, said, "Because only by letting our full humanity shine, so can we notice those spacious outer edges where peace can be found, where hope and inspiration live, and where we discover the possibility for transformation of ourselves and the world" (Anderson 2016, 1).

Do you hear what I am trying to tell you? You have got to love and illuminate all of the beautiful students around you. And if they do not see beauty in themselves, then show them the beauty! Have mercy! Listen to me. Yeah!

Notes

1. Amiri Baraka was born Everett LeRoi Jones. The essay was originally published using two names: LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka).
2. For more information on the Michael Chekhov Association, see https://www.michaelchekhov.org/.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Margaret Laurena Kemp is an actor, a multi-disciplinary performing artist, and teaching artist. As an actor, she has toured Australia, South Africa, and the United States. Her film *CITE* opened at the Elaine Jacobs Gallery in Detroit, MI. She recently received the prestigious Lucas Arts Fellowship Residency (Montalvo Arts Center), the Kennedy Centre KCAT award for directing, MICHA's Michael Chekhov Artist Scholar Award, and the VASTA Featured Artist Award. Other awards and residencies include The Headlands (USA) and Bundanon Trust (Australia). She is an Associate Professor of Theatre and Dance at the University of California, Davis and a Fitzmaurice Voicework Master Teacher.

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