

Making and Watching Theatre as a Spiritual Practice

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I've only known on a conscious level that theater, to me, is a spiritual practice, for a few years, but thinking back, I realize it's something I've felt for as long as I can remember. I've always loved writing and acting in and watching plays, and a great number of the moments I have felt most alive have had something to do with the exuberant ache of live performance. Most of the experiences of personal exploration, interrogation, and growth that I have had in my life so far have been foreshadowed by some sort of theatre I've made or helped to make, in which characters who are not me go through these explorations, interrogations, and growth. The subconscious knows more than the conscious, can see further into the future and further down into the self. Storytelling is how we make sense of and practice for the world.

Early in grad school, I was trying to untangle the relationships between the women in my family: how they always seemed to twist each other's words and attack each other, how my mom braced for conflict every time she was in a room with her mother or sister. One of the last times I saw my nana before she passed, my mom had found all these poems my nana had written when she was younger, and my mom and I were sitting there in the nursing home and I was reading them aloud to her. And then I flipped to a poem she had written when she was sixteen, called "Senility," in which she imagined herself growing old and senile, wondering if she would still be loved. Time sort of collapsed in that moment – I imagined her at 16, in the late 1930's, her whole life in front of her, while there we were almost eighty years later, and I was holding that same piece of paper, reading those words. I could not bring myself to read that poem aloud.

So I wrote a play instead, about us all, and the play ended with my character discovering that poem and reading it aloud to my mom's character. And in the play, we sort of look at each other, and the whole audience feels the weight of that moment of time collapsing, and in the play, I got to imagine a new path forward for how the women in my family treated each other. I didn't yet know how to make

that happen in my real life, so I did something I think every writer has done: I wrestled with it in the mouths of characters.

And in order to be able to do that, a playwright can't only explore their own point of view. It is the writer's job to find a route towards understanding for all of their characters – even and especially the characters who, in the writer's real life, might feel impossible to empathize with. To be a playwright is to pay attention to the world – to deepen our awareness, of ourselves and others, to notice what we take for granted, to scratch at the root of “why” – why would someone behave like this, or like that; why is it so difficult to say what we really need or feel; why is our society structured in certain ways – and then reflect this questioning outward to an audience. Writing makes us look more critically, and with more compassion, at ourselves and each other.

It starts with the writing, but of course the real magic of theater is the alive-ness of it; what happens in the transmission of meaning as it travels from static words on a page to embodied expression by actors to sounds and sensations received in the bodies of audience members. And sometimes, the most incredible moments in a play are moments with no scripted dialogue at all.

I saw a show years ago in which at one point, two random audience members were asked to sit on stools, and tell their fellow audience members all of the contents of the purse or bag they had brought with them to the theater – literally, they opened their bags, took things out one by one, and told us what was in there. Another time, I saw a play set in a movie theater, so the set was just kind of like the mirror image of us in the audience, just a room with rows of seats, where in one scene, a character moves through the rows of empty seats onstage, and just sweeps the floor. Just sweeps the floor, in silence, for what felt like five minutes.

In any other medium – film, TV, a novel, neither of those moments in those two plays would work. And in real life, I don't think many people would pay attention to the action of sweeping for that long, or be very interested in the receipts and spare change a stranger might have in their purse. But the intimacy of theater makes moments like these into spellbinding experiences. Theater is a space where

our most intimate selves can be witnessed, within the safety provided by the artifice of knowing this is not “real,” this is a play.

If you’re a theatre person, you’re likely familiar with the phrase “suspension of disbelief,” which essentially means the unspoken agreement between audience and performers that: yes, we all know in reality we are sitting here in a theater, these are actors performing a play, who are probably desperately trying to pretend that we are not watching them, and we all exist within the real demands of our physical world... BUT – at the same time, whatever the performers or the space or the play tells us is true, we agree to accept it as truth until the end and it’s time for us to applaud.

That is HUGE! Suspension of disbelief showcases our incredible human superpower, which is our imaginations. And it implies a deep level of trust: trust that the audience will believe the fiction, trust that the performers will take care of the audience. Even when there is a fourth wall, a wall of glass, between us. Suspension of disbelief is a sacred contract of mutual respect.

Almost a decade ago, I arrived at a theater to see a play and when I walked in I saw that the theater had been divided into multiple performance areas, each with their own audience seating. When we arrived, we were randomly shuffled into one of the performance areas, and we watched a portion of the play, and then our whole group was shuffled into one of the other spaces and watched another portion, until we had rotated through all of them. Then, there was literally a thirty-minute intermission where we were all required to leave the theater, and when we came back we saw that this was because in those 30 minutes, the crew had broken down all of the individual performance spaces so we walked into one large, theater-in-the-round style space, where we watched the second half of the play all together. I loved that show. I loved the awkward shuffling we had to do in the first half, when serious-faced stage hands would suddenly appear and point us all in the direction of where we had to go next, and we all fumbled to gather our belongings and bumped into each other and didn’t know if we should talk or not. I loved that in-between space it occupied, how it never let us settle completely into forgetting we were watching a play, how the very structure of it created this crackling tension with the idea of our suspension of disbelief.

And then, it was over, and – just like after every single theater performance I have ever been involved with, as an audience member or performer or otherwise, I stepped back out into the street, into the world, into my life, and went home. I’ve thought a lot about the effort of a show like that – the monumental task of the stage crew during intermission, the endurance of attention the experience asked of us as audience members – the whole thing was over three hours long, the deep craft of the actors who made it seem so raw and effortless, and how all of that – all of that time, effort, experience, feeling, simply disappears when the show is over. There is no record of it – at least, no record of it that could capture the experience of what it actually was to be there. Participating in theater means practicing impermanence. Impermanence is so uncomfortable! And therefore, so necessary to practice. We have so few ways of practicing impermanence outside of the context of real loss in our real lives. What a gift, then, to practice it this way. To give ourselves over completely to an experience whose end is inherent in its very existence.

There’s a relatively new field of science called neuroaesthetics, which essentially explores the relationship between art and our brains – what happens in our brains when we experience art. And – no surprise – our brains love to receive art in the presence of other people. Our feelings get heightened when we sense that other people are feeling things. There’s been research coming out in the last several years showing that watching live performance actually can make your heartbeat sync up with the heartbeats of your fellow audience members. Usually, our heartbeats only sync up with others who we are extremely close with, but in the theater, it can happen between complete strangers. And this, to me, is the core of why theater is a spiritual practice: its ability to build pathways to empathy. When we’re watching a play, all we have to do is be present and listen, surrounded by other people who are present, and listening. Just like with that mirroring exercise we did during the Time for All Ages today. There is something deeply human and connective about simply being present and listening.

There is so much contained in the sacred contract of theater. Being one person of many watching a story unfold in a dark room, while we’re half aware of our neighbors and how our butt is falling asleep, and half transported by the breath and spit and imperfections and honesty of actors who are also half aware of the

container of our collective attention and half transported by the desires of their characters and the way the words feel in their mouths...

This, all of this, has the potential to make us engage more critically, and with more compassion, in our lives. Which, I think, is essentially the work of being human, and it's why we seek spirituality. To feel less alone, to understand ourselves and each other better, to know that we are alive and part of something so beautiful, we'll never be able to put it into words. But we will keep trying.

An excerpt of a letter from Martha Graham to the dancer Agnes DeMille:

There is a vitality, a life force, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and will be lost. The world will not have it. It is not your business to determine how good it is; nor how valuable it is; nor how it compares with other expressions. It is your business to keep it yours. Clearly and directly, to keep the channel open. You do not even have to believe in yourself and your work. You have to keep open and aware directly to the urges that motivate you. Keep the channel open. No artist is pleased. There is no satisfaction whatever at any time. There is only a queer, divine dissatisfaction, a blessed unrest that keeps us marching and makes us more alive.

--Martha Graham