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Teaching The Controversy: Seven Ways of Looking at Theater

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A psychic once told me that I came here from another planet where problems like greed and prejudice had been solved. She told me that this explains my persistent astonishment at how far from solved these problems are here on Planet Earth. While I can be as woo-woo as any Northern Californian, I never took her pronouncement literally. Instead, I heard it as a powerful metaphor for something that I share with many artists: a profound conviction that much of what is considered normal is in fact deeply distorted—that often, conventional wisdom functions less as a useful guide to reality than a smokescreen for it.

I'm not the only alien I know. Indeed, in our society, experience of alienation is widely distributed, and certainly not limited to artists. Countless people are made to feel *other* on account of perceived differences: skin color, ethnic heritage, immigration status, sexual orientation, religion, social status, physical ability, growing up in an operationally dysfunctional family, and on and on. But amidst all the aliens, artists have a unique role to play, because we can make beauty and meaning out of the raw material of our alienation. When we perform that task with conviction, presence, and integrity, our work opens a portal of imagination and empathy that anyone can enter. Whatever is found there—pleasure, healing, sadness, awakening, incitement, horror, wonder—enlarges awareness, and that expands possibility. Very often, artists' work is fueled by otherness: no alienation, no compassion; no compassion, no connection.

So let me start by saying this: *Greetings, fellow aliens*. Our journeys to this time and place may have taken very different routes, but now that we are here, we all face the same challenge, which is to close the gap between what we know with conviction grounded in experience, and what is conventionally accepted as true.

When I was asked to contribute an essay to *Counting New Beans*, Theatre Bay Area's volume on "intrinsic impact and the value of art," I thought long and hard about how best to approach the assignment. The book's back cover states the problem concisely: "We make art because we believe it makes better human beings. We make art because we believe it makes being human better. So why do we spend so much energy quantifying the economics of what we do...?"

I realized that closing the gap required a conversation, not a monologue. The conventional terms of debate are just too rigid, too encrusted with unexamined assumptions. I'm fascinated by all that cognitive scientists are learning about how the human mind works. It turns out that many centuries of evolution have worn certain grooves in our thought processes. Probably the most common is "confirmation bias." We naturally tend to notice evidence that confirms what we already believe, and skip over the stuff that contradicts our convictions. The world is so rich in

evidence, selective attention can confirm any hypothesis. Often, each side heaps up evidence of its position and ignores most of what the other side says. Sometimes we even ignore the doubts arising in our own minds. How would it be different if we broke through that thick shell of confirmation bias, pushed as hard at our own assumptions as at our adversaries' assumptions, and let ideas contend on their own merits?

I chose as my model Plato's "Symposium," written nearly 2500 years ago. Plato imagined a dinner party as the venue for a conversation by Socrates, Aristophanes, and a cohort of philosophical companions, each of whom discourses on the nature of love. I shifted the setting to after-dinner drinks and dessert at an imaginary restaurant called "Symposium," and populated the table with seven characters who dearly love theater, but in very different ways. It's a wide-ranging conversation. I'm going to pull out some key themes for you, and hope you'll want to read the rest.

Since I've outed myself as an alien, you will understand when I say that the gap is wide between what I perceive and much conventional wisdom. A lot of our policy and value debates remind me of those episodes on the original "Star Trek" that were supposed to hold a mirror up to earthlings' bias and short-sightedness. Did you ever see that one where two guys from a distant planet are locked in a struggle that no one on the Enterprise can comprehend? Each man's pigmentation and costume are divided down the middle, black on one side, white on the other. For most of the episode, the two go at each other tooth-and-nail. Finally the crew manages to separate them for an explanation of what all the fighting is about. "He's black on the left side and white on the right," yells one character, "I'm the opposite!" I think that was aimed at smashing racism, but unfortunately, not everyone saw the episode—and not everyone who saw it saw themselves in it.

We are now living with an abundance of such absurdities. For example, we are told that all social goods must prove themselves worthy of support by government, foundations, and donors, and that arts funding keeps getting cut because advocates just haven't made the case. Every time a federal budget is proposed, the NEA's minuscule allocation is subjected to minute, ardent scrutiny, which usually results in shaving a little off the top of a budget that has already lost well over half its real value since Ronald Reagan took office in 1980. The whole debate is predicated on a fiction that is treated as reality: that every social good must measure up to the same standards.

In truth, the burden of proof usually falls in inverse proportion to the amount of resources at stake and the power of those whose interests are involved. In my essay, the character called "Teacher" deconstructs this argument, responding to a statement by Exec, a retired marketing executive who sits on the board of a major African American theater company. When Exec's turn comes, he tells the two previous speakers—a playwright and a sort of critic-scholar—that they are full of it. Their faces show shock.

"You heard me right," Exec says. "And I am speaking from the perspective of someone who is living right here on planet earth, not in the artworld. I was in business for over forty years before I retired. Do you know what I learned? Lesson number one? If people don't want something, you can't make them pay for it."

Later on, then, Teacher questions his statement:

“But that is not true. Do you think if we took a referendum on how much voters want to spend on missile guidance systems, the Department of Defense budget would remain intact? Taxpayers are paying for all kinds of things they would not want to pay for if given a choice. Some of those things are what are called social goods, which, ideally we should all want for the common good. But the common good is not a very common goal right now, I think. Look at all the people who complain about paying for public education, simply because they do not have children in the schools.

“Most societies deal with that by requiring people to pay their taxes and giving elected officials the right to say where those taxes should go. But there are many things like that in the private sector too. We pay inflated prices for some things to cover the cost of advertising or research: look at the difference between what we pay for certain medications and what they cost in other countries. What we pay for fuel makes oil companies rich, but the only choice we are given is pay up or give up driving, so we pay. Even many of the products that supposedly represent the triumph of free markets get a boost from public policy. Look at corn, for instance, all the money that is spent growing corn nobody needs. There is a name for this, is there not? Corporate welfare.

“So it is not correct to portray things the way some people do: over here is the free market where everything is given its just value, and over there is the unfair system where people expect to be paid for doing nothing. What I see is, over here is the part of the system where people successfully lobby for advantage, and over there is the part where they don’t have the money or the power to do that. Isn’t that more accurate?

“A couple of the kids in a play I directed this year did a unit in social studies on how the arts are funded. One of them came into rehearsal with a statistic that made everyone loco: every single day, seven days a week, we are spending much more than two *annual* National Endowment for the Arts budgets on war. They had other figures comparing the prison budget with arts spending, things like that. Do you really think that this balance of expenditures reflects public choice? I am not able to offer proof, because I am not aware of polls on that precise question. But my kids would not have supported that notion of the public good. They were appalled by it. I am saying all this because I would like this conversation to be based on reality, and not the myth that the arts are the big welfare cheaters while the free market rules the day for everyone else. That just is not true.

“Remember what I said about teaching the controversy? I think it would be great to have a national conversation where we clear away the myths and look at what is left. Which things that do not earn their keep do we want to pay for? I would like to have a say in that. Personally, I would choose theater and other such things—music and art and education and medical care and so on—over subsidies for agribusiness, banks, and oil companies. I have an idea that a majority of voters would agree. But even if that is wrong, if the outcome of the debate was based on letting the hot air out of all sides of the issue and giving our values a fair chance to contend, I think I would accept it. It would be a big relief to stop having those debates that ring so false, where we fling assertions at each other without fully believing them.”

I have many opportunities to address audiences of arts advocates, and they tend to be a frustrated bunch, exhausted from making failed arguments. Part of what's so fatiguing is treating the debate over art's value as if it existed in isolation, when, as Teacher points out, the question is far larger: what do we cherish? Which social goods do we choose to invest in? I don't see much to gain by asserting art's importance without engaging the larger question of what matters to us as a society. How are we spending our commonwealth?

In addition to our addiction to war and punishment, we've been making the rich richer. In last year's legislation extending Bush-era tax cuts, the U.S. Treasury lost \$225 billion in revenues from tax breaks specifically tailored to benefit high-income taxpayers; there was no referendum on that. In 2010, corporate profits grew by 32 percent, while overall economic growth was 4.2 percent. In 2011, growth in profits was slower, with an overall increase of only 8 percent, but in dollars, it has been sky-high straight through the recession: fourth-quarter 2011 profits totaled \$1.58 trillion, 36 percent above their prerecession peak of \$1.16 trillion.<sup>1</sup> Analysts say that a significant portion of those profits comes either from continued job cuts or corporate decisions not to rehire as profits rise: these days, rather than creating jobs or investing in infrastructure, the prime directive for many businesses is to pump up shareholder profits and executive compensation at everyone else's expense.

All this is going on, with trillions changing hands as opposed to the NEA's paltry and heavily scrutinized millions, while corporations are not required to prove their worthiness for the many tax breaks, subsidies, and sweetheart deals they derive from the public purse. We need to enlarge the value conversation: don't bring up the public interest in culture without mentioning what we're actually supporting with our tax dollars and tax-exemptions. Make it a question not of artists' worthiness but of public priorities. We can't just sit blithely by while politicians fund the planet's largest prison system, subsidies for Big Oil, a war industry that beggars imagination, and tax breaks for the wealthiest, then pretend to believe that we can't afford decent education, healthcare, or the kind of cultural investment that even the poorest nations typically make.

As I travel around the country speaking at universities, conferences, and community centers, I pose the cultural policy questions I most want to see asked: Who are we as a people? What do we stand for? How do we want to be remembered?

How would the value conversation be different if we all asked such questions as a matter of course, refusing to allow those who don't want to answer them to shrink the issue into a phony contest between theater and school lunches?

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce Bureau of Economic Analysis news release, 29 March 2012: [http://www.bea.gov/newsreleases/national/gdp/2012/gdp4q11\\_3rd.htm](http://www.bea.gov/newsreleases/national/gdp/2012/gdp4q11_3rd.htm)

We aliens notice trick questions and embedded assumptions, rather than accepting whatever conditions opponents lay down for the debate over art's value. For instance, "theater" is a big category, containing a multitude of distinctions. When the conversation remains at a level of generalization—when we speak of "theater" as a whole, or even more generally, of "the arts"—much of what is said can't stand up to scrutiny.

Granted, there are a few essential truths. For example, you can generalize about storytelling as an innate human capacity and a trait for survival, as the character I've named "Artist" does, suggesting that artistic capacity is "hard-wired into human beings":

"I think it is even more primal than tribes. Ellen Dissanayake compares making art to making language: learning to speak is universal, even though every culture develops a different language to do it. I think she nails it. Whether you're talking about images, songs, or stories, it's the same. Denis Dutton says art-making is a survival trait for natural selection. Imagine us back in the Pleistocene. Say there was someone in your extended family who could act out stories in a really vivid, compelling way. Everyone would learn from that. And just like people would want to mate with the best hunter, they'd want to mate with the best storyteller.

"So I think of an ancient ancestor, a woman standing in front of a campfire, casting shadows on the cave wall. She's bending her body into the shape of tiger, to show people how one sprang out of a thicket to attack a hunter on his way home with fresh game. She's showing them what the hunter did to escape being prey. And I ask myself the same question she did: what stories are needed now, when the balance of life seems so fragile? This theater is my campfire. What stories can I tell that honor the true value of stories in human history, of stories as the secret of survival?

"Ancient Greek theater keeps drawing lines between gods and humans, reinforcing the virtues of honor and bravery, warning against hubris. Shakespeare is telling us something about the intensity and impact of human feelings at a time when individuals and what they want starts to matter a whole lot more. In the 1930s, there's all this work about social issues, the Living Newspaper, and theater focuses on the mess we're in right now and how to get out of it. Fifty, sixty years ago, playwrights are demonstrating the absurdity of social convention. I don't mean to over-simplify, but if you take the long view, you begin to see how those answers change and change and change with the times."

Artist picks up her glass, smiling. As she speaks, one finger winds and unwinds a lock of hair. "Fast-forward 12,000 years and that's how I came to write my new play on the Tea Party. Loosely based on *An Enemy of The People*, of course, only instead of being vilified for warning the people about poison in the water, my protagonist warns them about who's really destroying the economy." She tips her glass to her companions. "Let me know if you want comps."

You also can generalize about worshipping at the church of art, as the character called "Acolyte" does when he says he's been waiting:

"...for someone to talk about what theater is to me, and what it also seems to be to some of those people in the interviews." He swivels from face to face, making sure he has everyone's attention. "A place of worship."

People laugh, but Acolyte keeps his tan, lined face straight, his dark eyes still and open. “Seriously,” he says, “we go to church—or synagogue, mosque, temple—for reasons. We go to declare that we are part of something larger, and to connect with other people who share that awareness. We go to be reminded of the good we are capable of doing, and the harm, and their consequences for ourselves and others. We go for moral lessons—not only stories in the sense that everyone has been deploying that word, a story about this, a story about that—but a grand narrative that all our individual stories fit into and that helps all of them make sense. We go to connect with our best selves, to refresh that connection regularly, so that we don’t subside into the busy, uncaring self that is lurking inside us. And when I think about theater in that light, I see that it’s true: I go there to worship.”

Later on, Acolyte says that:

“I’m not so religious anymore in the conventional sense. I don’t go to services all that much. But I still go to the theater, and like the people in Advocate’s interviews and some of you, I’m sure, I go many, many times each year. It’s not just a metaphor to say I am a *devout* theater-goer. And there’s another word that comes to me when I think about what that means. The word is *sublime*. In aesthetic philosophy, the sublime has a greatness that can’t be entirely captured by calculation or measurement. It puts us in touch with the awe that is our natural condition, what Abraham Joshua Heschel calls ‘radical amazement.’ You can feel it in relation to the natural world: standing at the rim of the Grand Canyon, for instance, we experience awe mixed with an overwhelming awareness of beauty, so intense that we feel we can barely contain it, that we may burst. Whatever gives us this feeling is worship. It reminds us of our true place in the universe, how insignificant we are in relation to the scale of life, and at the same time, how we are the center of it all, in that our own perception enables the world to exist.”

Those are viable generalizations, but once we drill down into the category “theater,” we hit important distinctions. The character I called “Connoisseur” is convinced that not all theater is equal, as he tells Artist:

“It’s not that I’m disagreeing with your point that stories are intrinsic to the human subject. How could I? Once we’re done eating and sleeping and having sex, practically all we do is tell stories. And before you say so, I’ll stipulate: we like to talk about other meals as we eat, we like bedtime stories and pornography—which has some kind of story structure, often. So, yes, with the human species, it’s stories all the way. Let’s be *Homo fabulans*, the storyteller, which is just as good as *Homo sapiens*—man the wise, or *Homo ludens*—man the player.

“So I ask the same question you did, Artist: what stories now? But I come up with a different answer. I don’t see a ribbon of time stretching forward from the Pleistocene to today. I see radical breaks, ruptures, in our self-understanding, and each rupture changes our relationship to that question. The center of life moved to industrial cities, and plays reflected that. The devastation of World War I completely changed what people wanted to see onstage. Now we’re facing climate change, maybe the end of the planet, and what do we have to say about that? Whatever it is, it won’t be *Hello, Dolly!*”

“Of course, most stories exist to ratify a particular social order. We hear enough of them, and that constructs an embedded expectation that is almost impossible to dislodge. All the frames that politicians play off of: the patriarch who belongs at the head of the family, the faithful woman and children who exist to serve him, the rich and powerful man who earns his good fortune, the lazy ne’er-do-well who squanders his.” Connoisseur taps the side of his head. “They all live in there. So do we let them take over, or do we disturb the peace?”

“I can’t simply accept the blanket category, theater, as if it were a unitary whole. It covers too many contradictions. We have to unpack it. Look at all the theater seats that are occupied on any given night in this city. The vast majority will be people who are getting an emotional massage from some piece of hummable drivel or heartfelt family drama that reinforces all of their unexamined assumptions. That kind of theater has absolutely nothing to say about what we really need, which is to deconstruct the old stories and use the broken pieces to create something that hasn’t been seen before. The stories we need aren’t so much stories as hammers that can shatter the trance of stories.”

After listening to these speeches, the character called “Exec” tells the artists and administrators around the table that they’ve been making

“...huge branding mistakes, so huge you might not be able to fix them. You made theater a luxury item. That was a *seriously* bad move. How many people go to the movies every Friday night—these days, they can easily spend eight, ten dollars a ticket—or to a rock concert, where ticket prices are about as high as theater seats? But those people would never think of going to live theater. Why? Because in their minds, you have to dress up a certain way and be on your best behavior, you have to work hard to understand it, you spend a lot of money, and in the end, you haven’t really had all that much fun. It’s a luxury item, and they don’t see it as delivering the same bang for the buck as other luxuries.

“And then on top of that, you theater people have your hands out all the time. It’s like—I don’t know, a panhandler in a tuxedo. ‘This is a very elite activity, mostly for people who have money to burn’—look around you the next time you pop into Marine’s Memorial, for instance, you’ll see a sea of prosperous white faces—‘and we need you to pay through the nose for tickets plus give us even more money, because ticket prices are about as high as the market will bear and it’s still not supporting us in the style we prefer.’ Come on! Do you really not see why this isn’t working?”

“Well,” says Acolyte, a tight little smile creasing his tan face, “you make it sound like the last days of Pompeii. Do you really think all the actors who are working day jobs to support their habit of performing at those theaters are living in the lap of luxury?”

“Now you’re getting into labor-management issues,” Artist says, twirling a lock of hair around her finger. “My theater could live for a year on what those theaters pay for props and costumes. But at least during the run of a show, we probably pay cast members more.”

Exec shakes his head. “You’re not convincing me; the opposite. If I give more and it doesn’t trickle down to the artists, doesn’t that make it worse? And those ticket-buyers,

do they even know if they are in a nonprofit or a for-profit theater? Do they actually care? Half the time, you people talk about this as if you were living in a little bubble labeled 'the arts,' and all those other storytellers—the TV, the movies, video games—that make up this multi-mega complex where people spend money like water—as if all that didn't exist. You act like they offer nothing of value. And what's more, there's this fastidious feeling, like if you get too close to them, you'll be contaminated. And yet that's the so-called mainstream, where people choose to spend their time and money. You, Connoisseur, you go one better and say that even most live theater fits that category!"

"Amateur," who fell in love with acting as a child and is now a research scientist, argues that the key value is in doing, not just watching:

"Every child should have both opportunities, to act and to see live theater. Doing both provides an instant feedback-loop that teaches so many things: how illusion and misdirection work with suspension of disbelief; how we can affect other people through things like tone, posture, and gesture; how empathy is activated. These are important lessons about human cognition that can't be learned by watching a film or playing a video game. You have to be able to perceive *how* human beings do these things—not merely *that* they do them—for the learning to come through. Participating builds confidence. It creates social opportunity for kids to interact with peers and adults they might not otherwise encounter. It gives young people a way to comprehend ideas or experiences without having to go through them in real life. It gives them a way to rehearse life."

All of the characters in my essay—and nearly all of us here today—see at least some of these essential values in the general enterprise and activity we call theater. But understanding that leads to the biggest question of all, which is "So what?" There's an underlying assumption—or maybe just a fervent hope—that if we succeed in quantifying art's value, more support will flow to its creation and dissemination. I have no idea if that's true, and neither does Acolyte, who gets pretty worked up about it:

"So is theater a brand, Exec? Is it a new way of telling a story, or a story that speaks uniquely to this time and place? Does it make our mirror neurons jump? I don't think anything I have said satisfies the criteria others have offered for getting people with money to support theater. But tell me, why do so many people give money to churches and synagogues? I think it's because they recognize that somehow, somewhere, we have to be reminded of the deepest meanings we have given our lives. That reminder gives us the inspiration and energy to go on making meaning. Honestly, I don't know if any foundation or government agency values this. But—and this is the least humble thing I could say right now, so if that bothers you, apologies in advance for my *chutzpah*—if they don't, it's not because I'm wrong. It's because they've lost touch with what's really important.

"I have to say, that prospect worries me. The fact that we're all trying to justify what we value according to some rules that don't really fit, instead of pointing out how our society's values have to come in line with what really matters. Maybe we need to be less defensive." Acolyte pauses. "My two cents."



I tip my hat to the smart people at TBA and WolfBrown who set out to capture and quantify the intrinsic impact of art. As with all such assessments, they decided what is worth measuring—and what can be measured—and created an efficient way to accomplish that, one that seems to be generating considerable excitement. At the ground level, I can see their work having utility for theater-makers who pay attention to audience members' desires and responses—although whether it will prove more useful than just talking with current or potential audience members, I can't predict.

But I want to engage you now on the macro level, because I am convinced that what's needed now is the largest possible dialogue about art's public value. I don't think that dialogue turns on quantification, but on two questions: First, collective, as opposed to individual impact. And second, why should we—we in the largest sense of "we, the people"—care?

One of the reasons that economic impact arguments are starting to peter out is that they don't really say anything unique about art. People who go downtown to see a gun show or a strip club also spend money on food, drinks, parking, and so on, triggering exactly the same multiplier effects as if they'd gone to see a play. Remember "confirmation bias?" In trying to make the economic impact case, advocates heaped up a mountain of data on ancillary spending and job creation and what-have-you, but anyone who asked the simple question "Is this unique to art?" could start an avalanche.

The five elements of intrinsic impact measured in this study are subjective emotional and intellectual experiences: *captivation*, *intellectual stimulation*, *emotional resonance*, *aesthetic enrichment*, and *social bridging and bonding*. In my essay, the Teacher character implicitly challenges their uniqueness by pointing out that people get equally and similarly engrossed in non-arts activities, which doesn't necessarily make those activities more appealing or valuable in others' eyes. She asks her fellow Symposium guests to think of something they hold dear:

"Okay, now imagine someone who is just as impassioned as you, but about something completely different, something you have absolutely no interest in: civil war re-enactments, Lindy dancing, dirt-bike racing, stamp collecting, Esperanto. There are millions of people who live for these activities, and all of them have some story of how they got started and why they continue. You have probably been seated next to one of them on a plane, wondering if you could pretend to be asleep, or whether the conversation would actually put you to sleep so you could avoid having to pretend."

Teacher lets them chuckle for a moment. "So, let us say they do this thing we are discussing: they capture the whole story of their passion, how it was ignited, what sustains it, why it feels important to them. And let us say that they share that with you. What would it take to influence you to take up the same passion? What would convince you to dive headfirst into Esperanto or stamp-collecting, if it held no interest for you until now?"

In the context of my essay, Teacher is questioning the idea that if we understand what makes a theater-lover so impassioned, we could find a way to bottle and share it. If that's true, she says, convince me that you could be swayed to a new passion in this way.

I am asking something similar about collective transformation: all of our reasons for valuing theater, do they add up to a compelling argument for public and private investment? When you aggregate all those individual impacts, does it make a difference in the quality and texture of life, the general level of mercy and justice, our capacity to find a way to live together without diminishing each other? We don't know how to answer that, because we haven't yet done the math, and we haven't done the math because it involves a lot of subtraction, and it takes guts to stand up for that.

To nurture a society that gives true value to artistic creativity—especially to its powerful capacity to cultivate individual and social imagination in the service of empathy and kindness—we have to subtract our addiction to domination and punishment, start spending more to help people prosper than to punish them for defying us. We have to subtract our bias toward accumulated wealth and privilege, balancing the excesses of a market economy rather than making them worse. We have to subtract our racial and gender biases, enabling true equality of opportunity and access.

For people who care about collective well-being, there are powerful arguments for theater's social impact. My character called "Amateur" talks about educating the next generation:

"My son is still in high school, and he and his friends play video games all the time. Most of the stories Mike and his buddies like are things like *Call of Duty: Black Ops* or *Grand Theft Auto*. What capacities are being developed? What are we preparing them for? Violence, mayhem, a dog-eat-dog world? An emotional gamut from rage to triumph? The stories we need aren't going to spring out of Hollywood based on 90-second pitches and focus groups aimed at catching the 18-to-25 male demographic. They have to be worked out on a small scale, with actual human beings at the helm, giving it all they've got. For example, I'm biased toward stories that show immigrants in a fully dimensional way, rather than the way my son and his friends sometimes start to see foreigners after charging their adrenaline in multiplayer world for a few hours, more or less as targets."

Artist talks about telling the stories we need now; Connoisseur wants to dislodge people from their comfort zones and shatter the trance of self-ratifying stories; Acolyte sees theater as spiritual practice, as a reminder of the deepest meanings of our experience. Advocate, the convener of this conversation, tells her guests that:

"I want us to talk about the real questions. What impact will it have on our society if there is less theater, especially less professionally staged theater? *That's* a real question. Less theater by people who don't have access to private wealth—okay, that's a real question too. Less theater by people whose stories are not going to attract what the numbers tells us about the current mainstream theater audience, mostly older white people. Those questions, I want to talk about: what does it cost us if the main criterion for the vast majority of the stories our culture disseminates is that they make money? In some sense, I think it costs us our soul, the idea that we're all in this together, the idea that we care about each other. To me, that really matters.

"It's easy to get cynical in this business. I know someone who's been watching the funding scene for a long time, and she says that even though the guidelines change, often with big fanfare—announcing a totally new funding program from Foundation X!—fundors usually find a way to give the money to the same groups they were supporting

before. She says they adopt new guidelines so they can have plausible reasons to say no, which they need to do almost constantly, since they reject at least a dozen applications for every one they accept. Cynical, or what?”

Artist shrugs. *What.*

“But, yeah, there’s some truth to it too. So I could just say, okay, yes, there’s no reason to think that proving that theater has a positive impact on individuals is going to change that. I don’t know. Sometimes I get totally lost in the gap between the way things should be and the way they are. Like maybe we *will* be able to quantify intrinsic impact: you know, 43 percent of the audience members were transported and felt more connected, more able to see things in a new light. But should we have to quantify everything? Maybe what we’re saying about the importance of stories and empathy is hinting at a completely new way to value things, where we can stop having to reduce everything to numbers as if that were the only way to judge. Sometimes I actually fantasize that we’re doing the last iteration of the numbers game before it’s finally over and done.”

Me too. But for it to be over and done, we need to answer that second question: why should we—we in the largest sense of “we, the people”—care?

The answer is in your hands, or rather, in the work of your hands. Because when it comes to the public interest in theater, Connoisseur is right, all theater isn’t equal. If people have the capital and inclination to stage a massive multimedia production of a comic book or the musical of a play or a film of a best-seller, more power to them, but I can’t stretch the public value argument far enough to qualify their ambitions for public support. Pleasure and distraction loom as large in my personal hierarchy of needs as anyone’s—I’m guessing I’m not the only one here who is more likely to curl up in front of the TV than with a volume of Hegel at the end of a tiring day—but I can’t stretch the public value argument far enough to suggest that others should pay for my distractions.

That leaves plenty of things to pay for, though. We are privileged to be living in one of those moments when, around the globe, individuals are standing—often at great personal risk—to declare their refusal to bend to illegitimate authority, both governments and corporations. The great questions are everywhere being engaged: Who are we as a people? What do we stand for? How do we want to be remembered?

I am drawn to the artists who recognize this pivotal moment, when our collective efforts can tip the balance toward liberty and justice for all. The strongest public-interest arguments rest on theaters that collaborate with communities to tell the stories that need to emerge now; the theaters whose leaders consciously see themselves as cultivating social imagination and empathy; the theater-makers willing to interrogate their own assumptions even as they puncture complacency, drawing attention to the emperor’s nakedness. Their tools may be laughter or tears; they may be speaking in many tongues or none, but they aren’t just broadcasting, they are in dialogue—asking as many questions as they answer—and they understand that dialogue as part of the great conversation we need to be having now.

Conventional advocacy turns on writing emails, making phone calls, holding meetings, and signing petitions. It astounds me how seldom we think of using our skills as artists to transform awareness of art’s public purpose. I often wonder why we don’t see more plays and films, hear

music, and read poems about the public interest in art, or even about the paradigm shift that is now taking shape as people around the world rise in refusal to be treated like numbers and objects, demanding that their stories be heard.

Look at it from your alien perspective, with that powerful X-ray vision that cuts through conventional wisdom. I love the way James Baldwin said it: “The purpose of art is to lay bare the questions which have been hidden by the answers.” How would your work change if you understood it as using all the skills and resources at your command to engage that deep dialogue? If that is already your understanding, how can we move beyond capturing individual impact to making it matter for everyone?

Soon, we are going to take a few minutes to consider those questions, but first, my fellow aliens, I want to thank you for listening, and offer the hope that all the commitment, skill, and beauty you pour into your work will be returned to you a hundredfold.

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