

Roger Stevens Address

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Breathe...Move...Reflect

My hands were sanitized and encased in purple gloves. The harried nurse gently handed me the baby tethered to myriad monitors and feeding tubes. Flailing in agitation, Baby Shayna was begging to be calmed. The nurse knew that the calming was necessary—not just “nice”—for the baby to restore normal respiration and stasis. My own blood pressure surely rose immediately as I held the writhing three pound bundle. The flailing increased; the high-pitched, though weakened, wails convulsed in that little body. In my own panic, I realized that we both needed to breathe. We locked eyes. Her tiny arms picked away at my face. I slowed my own breath, held her even more firmly high on my chest, kept my eyes on hers, rocked SLOWLY side to side, and blew gently near her forehead. It seemed an eternity. I calmed. She calmed. In that moment I felt we had found a STATE OF GRACE.

Six days before the pandemic lockdown, I served what would be my last shift in St. David’s Hospital as a “rocker” in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. Although I have the right hair color, the job in reality is not the conjured one of a sweet-faced Mrs. Doubtfire singing lovely nursery rhymes to docile infants swaddled in designer pinks and blues. It is a “rocker” working in tandem with the nurses to sustain a tiny life.

What you may be asking does this have to do with a life in the theatre? For me it is a microcosm and a profound encapsulation of over forty years of nearly relentless work. Basic to all those years for me was a constant testing of what the creative life was about, how to make sense of institutions in preparing artists, how to make a life of the mind merge with the life of the soul, how to understand the epic and the familiar.

It was also a tiny distillation of the basic dramatic structure: stasis, inciting incident, conflict, crisis, climax and return to a renewed and changed stasis.

Rather than reflecting on achievements (and failures!), I found my time in semi-retirement reflecting on my own inner work. Although I earned a Ph.D. from Michigan, I bucked the expectations of a strictly scholarly career and developed my academic work as a “professor of practice” steeped in analysis and intellectual inquiry into texts, but demonstrated in the verbal, spatial and time-based art of live theatre. It was a gloriously two-pronged career in both the academy and the theatre.

My father always expected that I would become a teacher—he said I was appropriately “bossy.” Little did he realize—and much to his chagrin and displeasure—that I would become a professional stage director—the ultimate in “bossiness!”

Not having seen a stage play until I was in high school, I sure knew drama. As a light sleeper even as a child, when my Dad would work the nightshift, my mother and I would watch TV dramas until 11:00. We would tense up, cry, identify with the victims, admire the heroic medical professionals, worry through the details. I developed an unlikely interior life of emotional heft but no place to put it. Eventually I made my way, after years of a scientific path including teaching biology dissection labs as an undergraduate and a nearly completed masters degree in literature, to Michigan theatre where a whole brave new world opened up: Summer repertory casting in the major plays of Shaw, Shakespeare and contemporary writers; annual trips to the Stratford Festival in Canada to study Robin Phillips, Brian Bedford, and Martha Henry; serving as research associate for the UM Experimental Theatre Festival interviewing Liz Lecompte, Spalding Gray, Judith Malina.

Not only was I hooked on theatre, but I knew too much what I didn’t know so I set upon an ongoing watching, learning, experimenting career that has taken me far and wide—never with answers but always with more observations, making intellectual connections, and manifesting these in practice.

This practice has always resided in a creative tension between intellectual query of texts and performance skills/qualities in rhythm, composition, breath, voice and athleticism. I wanted to feel at home in both classical and contemporary work.

Let me share with you two such examples.

Several years ago I directed RICHARD III for the Utah Shakespeare Festival. My written director’s notes to the producers and the design team were organized to distill my research and analysis into an inciting statement that would render the text manageable, understandable and coherent for translation into visual, aural and kinetic designs.

I share with you my portions of my statement.

POINT ONE: SITUATE THE PLAY. “Originally seen as a weird, creative blend of Senecan revenge tragedy and the popular ‘chronicle’ story, the play has managed to entice the intellectual interests of Sigmund Freud in his study of personality, serve as metaphors for political scientists in their examination of leadership and power, and lure major theatre and film actors into assaying the lead role.

In the final analysis, the play is not a tragedy, not a history, and not a bio-pic. The play is Shakespeare's fiction, based on historical figures and literary conventions, which has more in common with melodrama than any other genre. Much like the contemporary film, *THE SOCIAL NETWORK*, this play cuts close to historical accuracy and then veers off—appropriately—to develop themes of avarice, power, virtuosity, and mesmerizing presence.”

POINT TWO: SPECIFY THE PRODUCTION PARAMETERS. “For many textual and dramaturgical reasons (such as the explosive, ‘shape-shifting’ personality of Richard; the malicious intent of many characters; the sexual lechery that affects Edward IV; the intense, perverse wooing scenes of both Ann and Elizabeth; the distortions of Richard’s physique; the revelation of Hastings’s severed head; the impact of the procession of ghosts; and the linguistic set pieces of Margaret’s utterings, the lament of the Queens; and Richard’s deterioration of language as his grasp of power hovers), I am drawn to the description of the Mannerist period in visual art. Using Wylie Sypher’s definition of terms in his *FOUR STAGES OF RENAISSANCE STYLE: TRANSFORMATIONS IN ART AND LITERATURE 1400-1700*, the visual style for this production seems to me to be asymmetrical, twisted, eccentric, a “tremor of malaise and distrust,” thin or sour color, irrational. For overall composition and color, I am drawn to the works of Parmigianino, Tintoretto, and, especially, El Greco and the prisons of Piranesi.”

POINT THREE: SUGGEST DESIGN DETAILS. “Scenic pieces and architectural elements may help the film noir quality of the lighting with use of traps, grates, shadowy painting of catacomb-like back walls and fog. Sound/music is a major design element with a perverse take on ecclesiastical motifs, underscoring which parallels the scene rather than the character, and environmental sounds of birds of prey and nocturnal animals tweaked into a deeply disturbing sound bed. The climactic fight scene is a hyper-kinetic duel between Richmond and Richard that uses his disability to advantage.”

POINT FOUR: ARTICULATE FINAL IMPRESSION: “The goal is to devise a theatrical event that centers on Richard’s virtuosity as a vital, over-reacher who is charismatic, erotic, ironic, humorous and evil. The visual design, the superbly poetic language, the actors’ athletic strengths, and the all-encompassing sound must unite to tell a horrific, but commanding story of villainy. As Sypher writes, without even mentioning the play, our production must capture the idea that ‘power degenerates into will, will into appetite, which at last eats up itself.’”

Of course, this was only a start, a preparation. Yet the notes established what I recognize now in reflection are the key aesthetic principles that fuel my creativity: the text is the primary launch; actors are like athletes for the stage—their physicality and virtuosity are outsized in their intensity and skill; all elements are rhythmic as they are expressed and then experienced by the audience. Cuing of

sound and light cues rely on breath. Crisis and climax usually rely on actors' physical movement. The audience breathes and moves with them all—the reflection is the immediate after- impression.

Hold onto that image, while I share a second instance that brought other States of Grace.

Nothing is more exciting in having a life in the theatre than discovering a new voice—a playwright who grabs the tempo and tempests of his generation and renders them with a musicality of thought, rhythm, and language. Although my actors and I did not discover Tarell Alvin McCraney by any means, the rehearsal process turned out to be a discovery of sorts.

To back up a bit...when two talented young Chicago actors approached me about directing this piece for them, I was touched by their enthusiasm, determination and deep affection for McCraney's *THE BROTHER SIZE*. Of course, I gave them ridiculous challenges that they had to meet from the outset: one, I would not produce the play, I would only stage it; second, they had to prepare for every rehearsal with lines learned immediately; and third, they had to be in expert health and physical condition in order to deal with the play's deep emotional tasks.

Secretly, I was delighted to have this directing opportunity: I had fallen in love with McCraney's writing...his imagination...his erudition...his blending of contemporary social psychology and the heightened influence of Yoruban myths.

The discoveries in our rehearsal process were multiple: the heart-breaking relationships between the spirit of iron and will (Ogun), the spirit of the wanderer (Oshoosi), and the spirit of the trickster (Elegba). We relished the discoveries of the musical sources; we found deeper resonances of poetry. Gradually we were unafraid of getting to the heart of young black men's societal constraints and realized that these brothers of this generation and race live in an existential fear of identity formation and abandonment. But, most importantly, we discovered genuine respect for each other, for discipline, for trust, for ensemble playing, and for the responsibility of revealing spiritual, personal truths. And so, I pushed them to exhaust themselves physically, mentally and spiritually in bringing *THE BROTHERS SIZE* to life. And they pushed hard back due to their hunger for creativity and for putting their life experiences both literal and imaginative as southside young men encountering a playwright as demanding as Shakespeare. The rehearsals and performances were exhausting, honestly painful, yet ultimately joyful. They had used their research skills, their commitment to athleticism, and their love of language and song for pure transcendence.

Yet, we found one scene particularly difficult to decipher.

In scene seven, the three actors are faced with this sample of language with no indication of locale or stage directions other than the opening narrative line of Oshoosi. Let me share a bit of this text:

OSHOOSI SIZE (says)

Oshoosi Size begins walking to work!

OGUN SIZE

STEP!

ELEGBA

STEP!

OGUN SIZE

Step.

ELEGBA

Step.

OSHOOSI SIZE

Hot sun on my back,

Hot in my face!

Hot.

ELEGBA

Step.

The text continues like this with pressure from Ogun and Elegba and Oshoosi revealing more ambiguous text. We could figure out the dynamic among them, but couldn't get a handle on how to stage this or actually what to stage. And then, miracle of miracles, overnight my own deep unconscious brought forth a memory—of sound/song! As a young child, I remembered hearing Harry Belafonte (and perhaps other singers on the radio and especially on selected television variety shows) engaging in these unusual rhythms. I raced to the next day's rehearsal and revealed to the actors that I thought this text referred to the chants of chain gangs in the south. Suddenly it made sense. Intellectually we knew that Elegba and Oshoosi had been in prison; that Ogun was working valiantly to keep his brother out; and the pressures of their circumstances were bringing them to a crisis.

We began to beat out rhythms, stomping for emphasis, keeping up a ruthless drive in the choreography of relentless circles with collapses in what I called "stations of the cross." The actors brought their experiences with call-and-response to the vocals and even found a Belafonte snippet of melody to one repeating phrase.

Within five and a half pages of text, we found an iconic representation of the black man's struggle with injustice and incarceration—all expressed primarily through breath, movement and voice.

After repetitions of text and increasing pressure, all three actors collapse over with fatigue and then resume with sweat, weakened voices and bodies in the final coda of the scene:

OSHOOSI SIZE

Well, it's hard...

ELEGBA

It's hard.

OSHOOSI SIZE

Lord Almighty.

OGUN SIZE

Step.

OSHOOSI SIZE

It's hard.

ELEGBA

It's hard.

OSHOOSI SIZE

Lord Almighty mighty.

OGUN SIZE

Step.

OSHOOSI SIZE

It's hard.

ELEGBA

It's hard.

OSHOOSI SIZE

Lord Almighty.

OGUN SIZE, ELEGBA AND OSHOO SIZE

Come on, boys, a wella.

Enervated, they trudge off the scene with pickaxe and shovel in hand.

We looked each other in the eyes and knew then that I, a blue-collar white woman in a position of seeming authority, and three young black actors, who matured in an instant, had suddenly reached an understanding of a blazing, suffocating social reality for which no essay or lecture could have prepared us. Our bodies now deeply knew the truth.

Our creative work cemented our relationship to this day.

As I write this nearly a decade later, these actors have established the Definition Theatre in Chicago using our exploration of *THE BROTHERS SIZE* as their inaugural production. They have received a \$1.6 million dollar seed grant from the City of Chicago's Neighborhood Opportunity Fund to establish a theater center in Woodlawn. Their goals are to gather artists and activists to provide a safe place for theatre-making, provide career development opportunities for youth of color, and to serve as a business incubator for minority entrepreneurs.

From our early conversations over a three-hour Italian dinner, the actors refined their identity: "We are a culturally diverse theatre dedicated to telling language-driven, relationship-oriented, socially-relevant stories about and created with underrepresented communities in Chicago."

So, what does all this mean now?

The work I do and have done—the work I see and am moved by—all depend on a few key but substantive principles. The execution of the elements in production come back around to considerations of preparation, breath, movement and reflection.

I confess to you that I am still grieving the last five years: our politics, our debasement of language and thought, the need for Black Lives Matter campaigns, the pandemic, the loss of employment in the arts and across society, the insurrection, the mistrust of expertise, the collapse of ethics and order.

But you know that as theatre-makers, we have the power to breathe life into words, lift words into action, act with design and intention, celebrate ideas, thrive with artistic ambiguity, build actor-athletes who can startle us with moments of virtuosity.

In my life now, I want to think big and start small again. I will return to St. David's and hold a different distraught baby in my arms. I will breathe with her, hold her close and rock her side-to-side. Soon, perhaps, that tiny life will lift herself up.

What life will you breathe into our theatre and our humanity?

Thank you, dear colleagues, for this opportunity to speak with you today.
