

Presentation Planning---What We Can Learn From The Theater

The World's a Stage

The world's a stage. Shakespeare examined the parallel and congruent planes of reality of the theater and present human events in *Hamlet*, a play with Kings and a Player King. A Czech playwright Vaclav Havel used creative principles he developed in the theater to lead his nation's revolution against Communism and become its first post-Iron Curtain President. Pope John Paul II was a former actor who played a famously formidable part on the world stage. President Ronald Reagan was an actor who led as "the Great Communicator." President Abraham Lincoln was a devoted theater goer. He loved the McVicker's Theater in Chicago, and tragically, Ford's Theater in Washington, D.C. Flamboyant generals like George S. Patton, Douglas MacArthur and Norman Schwarzkopf used costume-like uniforms and dramatic speeches to inspire their troops and the public from their respective theaters of war.

Theater is not only useful to kings, presidents, popes and generals. We all have our own revolutions to inspire, communities to lead, groups to share our message with, truths that we can only learn through communicating with our peers and colleagues, and battles to fight. An old theatrical truism advises that *there are no small parts, just small actors*. We watch *Henry V*, for example, to learn how to assume personal adult responsibility not the British throne. We are all the kings and queens of our own lives. Theater teaches us how to act, in more ways than one.

Progressive Educators Use Theater as a Pedagogical Approach to Teach Substantive Knowledge and Skills

Medical doctors at Northwestern Medical School study Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night* to gain insights about treating addiction. The Professional Development Program at the Business College of the University of Illinois at Chicago ("UIC") uses improvisational acting training as its primary pedagogy for teaching social and so-called "soft" business skills. There are many examples of other applications of theater training to professional education. What impresses about the Northwestern and UIC initiatives is the seriousness with which the colleges treat the subject, and in the case of UIC, the commitment of time and resources to theatrical studies that the school rightfully considers vital and essential in a professional academic setting.

Knowledge of "High" Theater is Needed By Serious Professionals--- And the Necessity of Distinguishing "High" from "Low"

Any time an audience is present to observe the words and/or actions of a person or persons --- theater of varying levels of quality occurs. Great theater is not the vain pursuit of applause and popularity. Vanity and the lust for approval for profit and pleasure are show business, marketing and advertising---the lowest forms of theater. Low theater tries to tell people what they want to hear in an attempt to manipulate them; it pretends and persuades. Good theater is an authentic search for truth and transformation. Serious people such as educators, attorneys, accountants, business leaders, doctors and all other professionals who work with meaningful ideas and need to comply with standards of ethical and social responsibility must be able to distinguish real theater art from mere entertainment and sales when looking for exemplars.

Theatrical Literacy is a Requirement of Professional Competence and Advancement

The classroom, the court room, the board room, the professional conference, and the webcast, the TV and radio studio are theaters. Theatrical literacy is as important to an educated person as the literacy of the written word. A lack of theatrical literacy severely hampers a professional's effectiveness. A managing partner of a large law firm once complained of a brilliant senior associate who lacked presentation skills. The lawyer was exceptional in all ways but one. He was a theatrical illiterate. *What are we going to do with this guy?* the partner pleaded. *We can't make him a partner when he can't go to court or make presentations and market for new business.*

This brilliant man's ignorance of theater art, if unaddressed, would limit him to a career of writing excellent briefs for other lawyers in a back office. If the ignorance were addressed and eliminated, the man would be positioned to be groomed as a future leader of the firm. Theater can teach professionals the essential skills of communication and presence which are needed to excel and lead in their chosen fields.

Theater is the Means With Which We Share Our Minds' Beautiful Interior Abstractions With Our Communities In Our Beautiful Concrete Exterior World

Imagine a car manufacturer that produces a terrific car but has developed no means of delivering the car to its affiliated dealers. The manufacturer is not going to sell many cars. Theatrical skills

are the means with which a professional delivers his or her information, analysis and insight. The greatest content is useless if it is not shared and interactive with clients and colleagues.

Professional Presentations *Are* Theater

Anyone who teaches skills related to public speaking, teaching and presenting teaches theater whether they know it or not. The theatrical formula: X people in Y space at Z time equals 1 applies any time a person or persons appear before and interact with a group. People in a certain place engaged in a common activity create a specific moment of shared experience. That moment---the present who, what, where, what, when and sometimes why is the creative medium of the art of theater. Making that moment a work of art is the essence of theater. A PowerPoint presentation faces the exact same challenges and opportunities related to facilitating group experience as a Broadway opening.

Professionals Already Know That They Work In, and Learn From, the Theater

Why do so many lawyers and judges quote Shakespeare in court, teachers search for role-playing activities to engage their students, and sales managers hire comedians and musical acts for their annual meetings? They know, at the very least intuitively, that the presentation skills that they employ in their respective professions were invented and developed originally in the theater and that theater itself is an aspect of what they do. No one knows how to relate to an audience better than an accomplished person of the theater.

Participation in theatrical production should be required study at every level of education. Since it isn't, sincere and ambitious professionals should seek out theater training on their own.

Understanding how theater is made is as necessary as learning how to write well or participating in physical education. If you have not developed such understanding from your general experience, education and training you are lacking a necessary tool for living and working effectively.

Making Theater is a Universal and Fundamental Aspect of Our Shared Humanity---If You Need to Relate to Other People, You Need to Understand Theater

Theater is a fundamental part of human nature. Humans have shared experience in public forums as a means of affirming community and facilitating social evolution since dances and pantomimes were shared near a tribal fire in prehistoric times. The contemporary popularity of dramatic sporting events shows the desire and need we naturally feel for such experience.

We are all audience members at times, and at other times players on the stage. Being an attentive audience member is one way that we learn how to play. Each authentic piece of theater art directs audiences to go forth and create. Great theater liberates and leads to concrete and positive action. Great theater involves contemplation and initiation of deeper consciousness of individual and collective humanity. Even a prosaic presentation regarding compliance with company policies should have this creative dimension. When it does the necessary if mundane information is disseminated more accurately and memorably and a beneficial intangible influence on the work and lives of those present may be released.

Theater is All About Learning---In Character

Stephen Sondheim, the great writer of musical theater, makes two points relevant to our discussion here...*theater is teaching; and writing is acting*. Every time you present before an audience you are creating a theatrical experience---a story. Story occurs when one, some or all of the people in a space over a defined time learn something and in so doing transform in some manner. The transformation could be professional, intellectual, existential, spiritual, artistic, communal, cultural, societal and/or personal. Telling or acting out stories in real time is the way that theater teaches.

When you create and deliver your theatrical message you must inhabit a character or characters--*-act---*as writers such as Sondheim and the actors cast in their plays do in their theaters. The presentational form requires personality not merely the dissemination of dry, purely objective information. If you are in a physical space with other people you need to be personally present or they will---at least sub-consciously and perhaps consciously---be resentful of your imposition on their time. Personal presence provides your audience with emotional, even existential or spiritual truth in addition to the intellectual insight and technical information that you have prepared. Your conscious and developed *character* adds a basis for personal connection to the crowd, the immediacy of relation to the moment and the possibility of story.

Developing a character for your presentations does not have to be an act of imagination. You don't have to inhabit a multitude of characters as Stephen Sondheim does. Explore your actual persona---not analytically but through experience, by observing yourself as if viewing another person; and heighten and inhabit that person to a larger scale when appearing before an audience. More than your voice has to be amplified in order to share your story all the way to the last row.

Theater Can Be Immediate, Rough, Holy Or (Ugh!) Deadly

The theater director Peter Brook in his famous book The Empty Space described the four ways that stories are presented in the theater: immediately, roughly, in a holy way and in a deadly way. Good theatrical presentations possess one, two or all three of the first qualities and never possess the fourth.

Immediate Theater is of the moment. The actor or actors' presence and awareness heighten a sense of the here and now. All in attendance experience present reality. Brook says that such theater *leaves a trace on the mind and soul*. It is learning beyond mere mastery of a skill or fact. Whenever an audience is inspired, shocked, challenged, loved, moved to action and above all changed because something unforgettable has happened to them presently and on a deep level, immediate theater has occurred.

Rough Theater makes use of what's available. It doesn't require elaborate lighting, stadium seating, costumes---or really any material object besides performers and audiences. Brook once took a troupe on a tour of small villages in Africa and simply had his actors perform for locals on clear patches of land. A virtue of *Rough Theater* is that it shows that the entire world is indeed a stage and makes acting less precious and more real. It also is a strongly focused theater. Niceties are dispensed with and messages are delivered purely and clearly without distraction.

Unsurprisingly, excellent examples of *Holy Theater* are religious services. Secular artists, William Blake and Albert Einstein come to mind immediately but there are many others (including Peter Brook at times), also write for and perform on a holy stage. The purpose of *Holy Theater* is to remove the audience from the everyday and here and now to consider unseen

aspects of existence---relations to the eternal and beyond linear time. It is a specific type of theater with a specific purpose.

Unfortunately there are many examples of *Deadly Theater*: mirthless situation comedies on television accompanied by digitally manufactured laugh tracks, lifeless and bloated touring productions of Broadway musicals with the performance equivalent of paint-by-numbers kits instead of authentic interpretation and feeling, interminable PowerPoint presentations delivered by speakers who read in a monotone from densely worded slides and fail to make eye contact with the people before them, classes taught by teachers who barrel through material without noticing whether or not students are following what they are saying. *Deadly Theater* occurs whenever presenters talk *at* instead of *to* and phone-it-in instead of expending the energy to be present and connect with the individuals of the audience.

The Deadly and Annoying “Expert”---Lively Theatrical Presentation Involves Discovery, Learning in Real Time

A particularly annoying practitioner of *Deadly Theater* is the “expert” who thinks that actually communicating with one’s audience is a sign of frivolity and that seriousness is only possible when warmth, humor and human connection are avoided. Such professionals are trying to maintain power over their audiences. They are implicitly ordering their listeners to honor their expertise and follow their directives. These orders ultimately are unprocessed and ignored and such speakers only effectively master the power to bore. This lack of openness makes it impossible for such a presenter to effectively teach *and* learn from his audience and the experience of presenting. It is a terrible approach in a classroom, a boardroom, a court room---or

anywhere else in a free society. Theater leads writers and actors to transform as well as audiences. Great theater and presentations are on the frontier of knowledge and experience. Kevin Spacey discovered the new during his 200th consecutive performance of *Richard III*. Anyone who feels that he knows everything about his topic---doesn't. We go onstage to learn.

Making Theater Does *Not* Require Talent---You Make It When You Share Your Best Self With Others Who Do the Same In a Public Place

If any reader is feeling a bit overwhelmed at this point, please take a deep breath and relax.

Theater is the most democratic of art forms. It does not require “talent” as, say opera or ballet do. The great teacher of improvisational acting, Viola Spolin opened her seminal book Improvisation for the Theater with the simple but loaded sentence: *Anyone can improvise*. Theater is not about displaying natural gifts. It is created with commitment to, and execution of words and actions in service of, values---the greatest of which are honesty, authenticity, humility, vulnerability and openness to others.

Enough talk! Theater can teach you just about anything. You just have to get up and do it. The moment will sing to you.

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