

Thoughts on Theatre and Unlocking Stereotypes

A homily by Diane Brown

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Good morning. I am thankful to be here, with all of you. I am thankful that I am a part of this Unitarian community. I am thankful to the Musqueam people for hosting us on their traditional, unceded territory.

Of all the clichés there are about theatre folk, this one bugs me the most: theatre people are just orphans in search of a family. Although there may be some truth to that, I have always found that cliché rather reductive and irritating. I think what drives people to work in the arts must go a little deeper than that. So I am here to dispel that cliché and share with you, in part, why I do theatre for a living – and hope that this is somehow interesting and relevant.

As some of you know, I run my own company, Ruby Slippers Theatre. For the company I produce, direct, and sometimes act; I decide what material we will do, who will design the sets, costumes, sound, who will direct it, who will act in it, where we will do it, for how long, what we will charge, etc. There are a lot of decisions to make to begin with.

Once we're finally in the rehearsal room, these decisions are compounded exponentially. Why exactly are we doing this play? What is it about this particular piece that we feel is worthy of people's precious time and money? And what makes it worth it for *us* to spend six days a week together, 9 - 14 hours a day, for three and a half weeks until opening night? More specifically, how will we approach this or that role/theme/piece of violence/piece of eroticism/cultural stereotype, and what do we want the audience to think and feel at the end of it all? A lot of challenging questions to answer. But it's worth it and it must be done, because I want a theatrical experience that cannot be satisfied by mere gimmicks and gadgets or high tech spectacles.

I want a spectacle of minimalism. I want acting that is poetic and personal, intimate and expansive. I want to find resonant shapes for our present ambiguities. I want to encourage the kind of humanity on the stage that demands attention and that expresses who we are and that suggests that life is bigger. I want to engender moments onstage that broaden the definitions of what it means to be human. Doing theatre is one of my ways of taking action that gives rise to hope.

Umberto Eco in his seminal work *The Open Text* analyzes the difference between open text and closed text. The closed text prescribes what we are to feel and think; we, the audience, are simply passive observers being manipulated by the play or film or painting or music. And this manipulation can be very satisfying. The open text assumes engagement and intelligence from its audience, sparks independent critical thought and not just one thought — a myriad of thoughts and emotions just as complex and confounding as the people in the audience themselves. In short, closed text offers one interpretation of events, and open text offers many.

My little company and I propose the open text approach—that is, to try to empower and engage the audience in a dialogue, rather than try to coerce them. So, when it comes to making the hundreds of specific decisions about the production that we make along the way, the decisions are guided by this: *further the question that the play is asking*. Good theatre in my humble opinion, poses the big important questions in life, and asks the audience to grapple with and consider them, together; the audience is a crucial component to a good theatrical experience – thinking, breathing, responding, present, complicit.

Theatre is a lot about memory. We retell or re describe events and people and in doing so, we are assigning meaning to events and people. The act of re-describing, in whatever art form, creates a culture of ideas. This culture of ideas builds up over time and can become stereotypical or cliché. How do you think about the French Revolution, for example, without thinking of the musical *Les Miserables*? How do you play Stanley Kowalski without thinking of Marlon Brando’s performance? How do you deal with our embedded cultural memory of stereotypes (often sexist and racist) when rehearsing or creating a piece of art?

If one imagines that there is some buried bit of truth at the heart of stereotypes, then stereotypes could be history locked in assumption. And if stereotypes are history locked in assumption, then to pander to them is to inflict the violence of their continued reductive existence. But, to attempt to unlock them, to release that history, might be transformative and transcendent, might connect the past to the present and the future. Is it possible to burn through the inherited meanings of stereotypes and unleash something fresh and share that with an audience? I think it is.

Let’s begin by considering ‘stereotype’ as an ally rather than an enemy. Perhaps our obsession with novelty and innovation is misguided. In TS Eliot’s essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, Eliot suggests that an artist’s work should be judged not by its newness, but rather by how the artist handles the tradition he or she inherits. The concept of originality referred to the transformation of tradition through an interaction with it, as opposed to the creation of something brand new. The arts world, it seems to me, has become obsessed with so called “innovation” which doesn’t necessarily have any relationship to or understanding of tradition.

The word stereotype actually comes from the Greek word *stere*, meaning solid, having or dealing with three dimensions of space. *Type* comes from the word pressure or pounding, such as the action of typing on a typewriter. In the original French, stereotypes were the first printing machines. A stereotype was a plate cast from a printing surface. The French verb stereotype means to print from stereotyped plates. The word cliché came from the sound of metal jumping when the ink dye is struck during the printing process.

Negative connotations first arose in the nineteenth century in England when stereotype began to refer to art as formulaic or rigid. During the 20th century it worsened and became an oversimplified opinion or prejudice; a set of wide generalizations about a

group or class of people. And yet, the etymology of the word stereotype suggests solidity and three dimensions. Inherited shapes, even prejudices, can be entered, embodied, remembered and reawakened.

So if we think of a stereotype as a container, the task is suddenly quite clear; what if we set a fire inside the culturally transmuted containers, fill them with our wakefulness, and thus awaken them? Perhaps then, in the heat of the interaction, we can re-access the original messages, meanings and histories they embody. Perhaps then we can stop trying so hard to be innovative and original, but rather try to receive tradition in this way, and pass it on to the next generation. The containers of culturally inherited stereotypes are powerful visual and audio stimuli for audiences and, if handled with great vigilance by the artist, can connect us through time.

I hope you don't mind if I briefly share a personal example. Recently, I was challenged to play the role of Wallis Simpson, the notorious American divorcee for whom Edward VIII famously gave up the throne in 1936. Our collective memory of her is of a raven-haired, blood lipped, gold-digger who would stop at nothing to climb the British Royal ladder and get to the throne. People, my own friends and family, would ask me "Why are you playing *that woman!*?" "Why are you doing a play about someone so unlikeable?" Well, I thought, was she so unlikeable? I mean, how did she get into a position, in stuffier than stuffy 1936 England, where she was able to meet, woo and marry the King of England?

This plain looking girl from the wrong side of the tracks must have had quite a head on her shoulders, enormous drive to lead a better life than her mother had led, (her mother ran a boarding house in Baltimore), a great deal of charm, and had enough imagination, intelligence, and ambition to conceive of and realize a different future. Perhaps most astonishing of all, she must have had unflinching *belief in herself* at a time when women were not rewarded for that. What a fabulous character to play! So that was my starting point; get inside the negative, reductive container she was trapped in and set fire to it with my skills as an artist (and the directors' and the playwrights'.)

It was difficult at first; I had to burn through many of my own internalized clichés I held about her before I began uncovering something approaching genuine expression. The incorrigible, notorious Mrs. Simpson was as complex and multi-faceted as anyone else, after all, so I worked hard to try to find a trace of her essence through research, and analysis of the actions that she took in the context of the times that she lived in. When I walked onstage on opening night, people were so quiet; judgements already made; harsh stares all around. And then, people heard Wallis speak the whimsical and witty text by Linda Griffiths and – after some hesitation – smiles started cracking. Gradually, reluctantly, people gave themselves permission to enjoy her banter, her obvious insecurities, and her raucous eccentricities.

People were enthusiastic to give me feedback about Wallis after they saw the show. "You almost changed my mind about Wallis", "You almost made me root for her", "Who knew she was so fun?", "Was she really that smart?" and so on. Now all this is not to

excuse Mrs. Simpson's behavior; some of it was reprehensible for sure. And this is not to pat myself on the back. I had lots of help and support. The point here is, she was human, a three dimensional person, and it was powerful to unlock her stereotype, if only a little bit.

Another example I will quickly share is a story I read in a book called *Essays on Theatre* where the author sites the time her friend saw a "sweet elderly woman" sit next to a "flashy transvestite" on a very crowded bus. These two wildly disparate people pushed up close to each other on a narrow seat on the bus was something she just couldn't avert her gaze from. Would they interact? Could they?

Then the unthinkable happened; the bus lurched and the elderly woman got her hair net caught on one of the transvestite's rings. The moment this happened, the two were caught up in an exquisite mutual crisis. Forced by circumstances to deal with each other, the boundaries that normally defined and separated them dissolved instantly. Suddenly, in its place, the possibility of something new and fresh sprang into being – they found themselves without the cushion of definitions that had formerly sufficed to keep them separate. The two burst out laughing, and started talking. The "flashy transvestite" and the "sweet old woman" struggled together, joyously, to free her from the ring. Stereotypes dissolved, a real human interaction achieved.

This story embodies an important lesson about what is possible between actors onstage, and between actors and an audience in a theatre, and between people in real life. Some believe when you meet someone, you decide within the first 10 seconds if you like them or not. You put them in a box of "they are like this" within the first 15 seconds. Well, what if...

Let's consider Stanislavsky's magic *What If* Constantin Stanislavski (1863–1938), was a [Russian actor, director](#), and theatre administrator at the [Moscow Art Theatre](#) (founded 1897). He created perhaps the most famous technique –but by no means the only technique—for actors to find inspiration and truth in their performances. The Stanislavski system is a progression of techniques used to train actors to draw believable emotions to their performances. The system is the result of Stanislavski's many years of efforts to determine how someone can control in performance the most intangible and uncontrollable aspects of human behavior.

Stanislavski believed that the truth that occurred onstage was different from that of real life, but that a 'scenic truth' could be achieved onstage. A performance should be believable for an audience so that it appeared truthful, or revealed truth. As Picasso said, *art is the lie that tells the truth*. One of Stanislavski's methods for achieving the truthful pursuit was his "magic if." Actors were required to ask many questions of their characters and themselves. \

Through the 'magic if,' actors were able to satisfy themselves and their characters' positions with the plot. One of the first questions they had to ask was, "What if I were in the same situation as my character?" The "magic if" allowed actors to transcend the

confinements of cliché stock gestures by asking them what would occur "if" circumstances were different, or "if" the circumstances were to happen to them. By answering these questions as the character, the theatrical actions of the actors would be believable and therefore 'truthful.'

So *What If* we take this one step further, and unite Stanislavski's *magic if* with Umberto Eco's *open text* and our thoughts about *stereotypes*, *what if* we were to approach each other with an open text approach? What if we suspended casting personal judgements, stereotyping each other, long enough to actually imagine the other person's point of view, the other person's circumstances and history; would this foster a real exchange of ideas? Would we be able to see each other better, perceive more nuance and complexity within each other? By simply employing empathy, asking the question *what if I were you*, how might that impact the world around us and beyond?

I believe theatre can be profoundly powerful. I know it can also be dreadful. But when done carefully and consciously with much attention paid to the intelligence and humanity of the audience, theatre can open people-- theatre can change people. It's the power of having live people all in a room together focused on the same thing at the same time, the power of the craft, and the power of *communion*.

The passion behind my life-long commitment to relevant, accessible theatre is a belief in our ability to change, to *transform* into the best people we can be. I do theatre in an attempt to celebrate and inspire courage, heart and brains (as the saying goes) in diverse audiences young and old, and in myself; to inspire meaningful critical dialogue, compassion for each other, and joy, all of which engenders more self-aware and empowered individuals, all of which strengthens people's sense of being connected to each other, and people, as we know, who feel connected to others become more thoughtful, responsible citizens; and thoughtful responsible citizens make choices in life which, in turn, create healthier communities. And so on...

So if theatre can help us transcend our own biases, grievances, and narrow mindedness and make us feel more connected to one another, why isn't there a theatre in every neighbourhood? Maybe that's where Church comes in. Well-crafted, intimate storytelling, stories that reveal truths, the shared experience, can deliver transcendence, can help free us from the prison of reductive, dehumanizing stereotypes and connect us through time. This is one of the reasons why I do theatre. And Church. And I am very grateful for both.