

Hope is the Antidote

Written and delivered by Allen MacInnis (June 12th, 2016 Stratford, Ontario) as part of the Stratford Festival's Forum and *Play! A Symposium* in connection with the World Festival of Children's Theatre

Thank you for the very kind invitation to speak at this festival celebrating theatre by young people. As a former drama teacher – a background I share with our young Prime Minister, I am proud to say – I have always enjoyed watching young people re-invent theatre. Their discoveries – new or not – remind longtime theatre practitioners like me that theatre must always be reinvented.

Let me ask you something. What was the most significant period in your life so far? Which ten-year period do you consider your most important? Don't think too long, just, in your mind, name those 10 years.

How many of you named the last 10 years? How many named a decade where you really got your professional career going in the direction you wanted? How many named a period when your domestic life blossomed - like meeting your spouse or having children?

How many of you named a 10 year period that fell between ages 0 to 15?

Think about that. For better or worse, everyone's most seminal period in their life occurs between the ages of 0 and 15. It is hard to contest. Nearly everything we are – our talents and weaknesses, most aspects of our personality, our fears, thinking style, coping strategies – our very toolkit for life is established before we officially become adults. A study I recently heard about suggested that trauma in early life alters the brain so thoroughly that we actually never get over it. Instead, we incorporate the "damage" into our personality, sometimes in the form of mental illness. I don't want to dwell on the darkness of what does or doesn't damage us from our early years, but I think it is impossible to disagree with the notion that the most crucial period of every life is the beginning.

I bring this up for two reasons. One: the theme of this symposium is *play*, an activity strongly associated with this crucial period of every life. And two: because I work in theatre and drama education for audiences in the midst of this same period – and maybe that is the reason I was invited to speak today.

So, I am going to talk about *play* and the connections I see with the work I do as a professional theatre maker.

I remembered something when I started to think about *play* for the purpose of this speech. Some years ago, I gave a speech entitled *Culture is a Waste of Time*. My premise was that unless you are willing to waste the time spent looking at a sculpture, listening to a concert or attending a play, you will not open yourself up to its potential benefits. In a sense, cultural experience – and what I mean is an encounter with “the arts” – cannot be valuable without taking a risk. You have to surrender your time to it and give up the certainty that it will satisfy you, touch you, or inspire you.

I remembered this speech, I think, because I have a similar notion about *play*. Play is often considered idle, “not-for-profit” time – appropriate for children, not adults. Yet we know how important children’s play is to their development – so important that it is the subject of enormous amounts of research and commentary. And play for adults – usually called recreation – is now also seen as very important for health and well-being. “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.”

Therefore, like engaging with the arts, I would assert that play involves an intentional waste of time and a degree of uncertainty and risk. When you surrender your time to it, you don’t know exactly how it will go. I wonder if this “not knowing” is not only a condition of play but maybe even a factor in its entire appeal. Why play if you already know the outcome? The difference here, however, is that play generally comes with the expectation of fun whereas many cultural experiences look like anything but fun. Still, even if play is entered into with more willingness, both play and “the arts” come with uncertainty about whether the time you give to them will be of any value or pleasure.

Another similarity: both play and engagement with “the arts” have a decidedly social dimension. Social interaction is pretty much a necessity of both activities. In a sense, therefore, one shares the risks and uncertainty with others.

If this makes any sense to you, then here is my dilemma: the play of children that has been studied and celebrated is mostly the kind that’s unmediated by adults, and that kind of play has been found to be extremely important in children’s development. The kind of work I do – making theatre and drama education for young audiences – has not been studied as much and it is highly mediated by adults. What research *has* been conducted into the impact of theatre arts on young audiences has generally focussed on arts participation wherein the young people are making their own theatre, music, dance, etc. under the direction of adults. It too has shown evidence of genuine value.

Can I argue, therefore, that *attending* theatre as an audience member is actually as beneficial as participating in drama education ... and is as impactful to children's development as play?

Of course I can. I am not a researcher, I'm an artist. I can say anything I like. I propose things all the time - that is what artists do - things that I discover by following my artistic and moral compass, looking at the world and tracing the connections I spy with my little eye. *Is theatre – just attending it – as potentially beneficial to children as their own undirected-by-adults play?* Yes, and here is why I think so.

One of the reasons I propose this is because *I am counting on it*. It is at the heart of the artistic vision I have articulated for Young People's Theatre (YPT), which is to have a positive and lasting impact on young people's emotional, social and intellectual development through our professional productions and our drama education.

I am among those artists who are motivated by the belief that art must have a purpose.

I started university intending to become a social worker after spending a fair amount time in my teens volunteering in community activism and children's recreation. In my first year of university, I signed up for a Creative Drama course because there were no papers to write (true story) and it turns out that I had some ability. I liked it so much, I switched to the Faculty of Education to become a Drama and English teacher. I became very interested in using Drama as a method to make school subjects like History or Social Studies come alive. I also saw how Drama contributed to developing students' self-confidence, positive self-esteem, pro-social skills, and to building cohesion within a group.

My career as a Drama teacher, however, didn't last very long. As much as I liked teaching Drama, I'd become involved in using it *as an agent for social change* through a company called Catalyst Theatre. I left teaching to attend acting school with the intention of getting better at making theatre so I could go back to Catalyst to better effect social change. Acting school opened up the wide theatre world to me. I began to have an identity as an artist and a relationship with all kinds of theatre forms. It was quite a few years before I returned to Catalyst Theatre but the truth is, I am still motivated by the idea of art, especially theatre, having the power to effect change – a purpose. *Why are we doing this play? To whom are we telling this story and why them?* These are questions I ask and answer for myself about every show I do.

For me, theatre art is not education. Education is tied to intended, measurable outcomes. Art is not. In fact, it's ruined by specified outcomes. Good, artful theatre has to be more unruly and daring, less polite, much more questioning than answering, less direct, more open-ended and less certain than education ... more like *play*.

So how then, if good theatre cannot be educational, can it have *purpose*? Eminent Canadian director, Christopher Newton, on the occasion of YPT's 40th anniversary, said this:

Adults make decisions based on their experience. Children have little to no experience so they must base their decisions on their imagination. The value of Young People's Theatre is that, there, children make imagined experience, real experience.

I think Christopher articulated how the *purpose* of theatre for children lies in its resemblance to their imaginative play. When children pretend something, the feelings they experience and the objectives they pursue are real. They aren't deluded. They're just wholly engaged, which makes their imaginative play just about as real as anything else.

We did a production at YPT of *To Kill a Mockingbird* two seasons ago. It was one of those plays that remind you that, for young audiences, there is really no such thing as a classic – in the sense that they are more likely being introduced to the “classic” for the first time than coming in, having had a long relationship with it. At every performance – when Tom Robinson is found guilty of rape despite the evidence to the contrary and Atticus Finch's passionate defense – the announcement of the verdict always brought a huge gasp from our audience. The shock and outrage expressed moments later by the character, Jem, about the injustice of the verdict made him, in that moment, the spokesperson for the whole audience who were still rumbling with disbelief. It was *real* for the audience.

I came across something about mirror neurons that described an experiment with monkeys and the findings are applicable to the way the human brain functions. The monkeys were directed to perform various physical actions. When they did, various parts of their brains - mirror neurons - were activated. When they only observed the actions performed by another monkey, the same mirror neurons were activated at almost the same level of intensity. Interestingly, if they watched the actions on a screen, the mirror neurons were still activated but at a lower intensity.

Isn't that intriguing? And doesn't it make intuitive sense? When we are really engaged in watching a play, we feel, *we live* everything that's happening onstage.

If you will allow me, I would like to cite some principles which happen to have become important in the way we work at YPT. I see aspects of these same principles in children's play.

- Every participant matters.
- Everyone must be seen and heard.
- There must be rigour /rules/logic.
- The stakes must be high.
- It has to be live.

Plus one more I will tell you about later ...

Allow me to flesh these out:

Every participant matters. In children's play, there are no non-participants. Observers are not players, so if you're only watching, you're not having an impact on the play. To play you have to participate. Think of when you hear a child complain to another, "You're not playing!" It spoils the game when players drop out. Every participant counts.

In live theatre, the audience will certainly have a lousy time if they just observe. Surrendering to the experience and *engaging* with it provides the only chance of making the experience better than lousy. Watching isn't enough and it isn't the audience's role to be that passive. Of course, in theatre you *can* just watch -- and we may not be able to tell if you're actually engaging. But this is how I can tell with YPT's audience: when an actor points out above the audience's heads and says, "Look! That's a weird star..." and 450 children turn and look straight up, the audience isn't *just* watching - they're engaged.

But how does this demonstrate to young audiences that their engagement matters to us? In my experience, children won't engage as fully as I just described unless it is worth their engagement. The biggest sin you can ever commit in theatre for young audiences is talking down to the audience. Apart from the obvious risk of losing their interest -- and we all know what that means -- children will feel the disrespect of being talked to like a child instead of a person. Putting on plays that don't insult their intelligence, that don't presume their interest, that are every bit as well-produced as any play for adults is one of the ways to demonstrate to young audiences they *matter to us*.

Everyone must be seen and heard. At YPT, we assert that the audience has to be able to see themselves in the play. If the kids -- and adults for that matter -- cannot see themselves somewhere in the story, they cannot connect to it. Abiding by this principle affects the stories we choose, the dramaturgy we pursue, and the way we cast. Our audience at YPT is the most culturally diverse in Canada. Paying attention *to how the audience will see themselves in our plays* is how we say *we see you*.

I think kids find a way to be seen in their play with other kids, even if it isn't a smooth process. Parents often fret about how welcomed their child will be when they go off to play. *Will my child be included by the other children?* I think the kids work it out and everyone finds a role and a way to be seen. Kids work out ways to be heard too, but this is harder. Loud voices dominate. Adults want to step in to help quiet voices get attention. Sometimes kids have to go elsewhere

to find other kids to play with in order to participate fully and have their voice heard. Being invisible is intolerable to children.

At YPT, therefore, I hate it when teachers or parents shush the audience at a show. It drives me crazy because often the chatter is about the show, not distracted jabber. I mean, sure there are times when a small group are having their own show and are in danger of spoiling it for other kids. But I want to hear the audience and I want them to hear each other. A collective gasp, a laugh, an involuntary comment from a single voice, a chorus of disapproval, a buzzing of confusion, a deep silence -- everyone needs to hear that! Welcoming the audience's response is how we acknowledge *we hear you*.

We also follow every show at YPT with a Q&A in which the goal is to give the dominant voice in the room over to the audience. We want the kids to do most of the talking in a Q&A. In fact we even avoid taking questions from adults. This is another way of modeling that we want to hear our young audiences and that their response matters to us.

Rigour/rules/logic. Children may resist rules but, let's be honest, they like them too. Learning the rules can help explain how things work. Why do kids adopt rules in their games? Is it because kids need structure, and rules provide it? Certainly, rules reveal the underlying logic of a thing and kids like to figure out how things work.

In a theatre performance, there are lots of rules -- and I don't just mean *sit down and be quiet*. I mean things like: *This represents a beach. I am a spider. The year is 1890. Animals and humans can talk together. Whenever someone drinks this potion they are invisible to everyone.* These sorts of rules are *agreements* and young audiences are enthusiastic about adhering to them. Not only do these agreements make them active in the enacting of the story (since their agreement is required to build the world of the play), but the contract with the audience contains a promise that the rules of the story make or will make *sense*.

The stakes must be high. Children can get involved in pretty high stakes in their games of pretend. Be it winning the game, getting maximum pleasure, overcoming some obstacle, or sustaining the excitement, high stakes deepen the engagement, ignite the imagination, and increase the emotions. When you get emotionally connected to the stakes, you actually care about the game and what will happen. *Stakes* is the word I use to name whatever it is that is making players *care* to continue playing.

I have come to believe that highlighting stakes in a piece of theatre, what we call the *drama* in the piece, is significantly important. Young people want to engage with big emotions - fear, loss, love, anger, indignation, joy, outrage, compassion, pride - the whole gamut. To get really close to those emotions requires entering into adversity. Think of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. After the shock of Tom Robinson being found guilty, the audience then had to hear the news he was

killed trying to escape prison. There was a tremendous silence in the theatre every time this news was absorbed. What is it they say about compassion? The word means “suffering with”? By feeling along with the characters, having come to care about what happens, I think the audience genuinely experienced the grief and adversity Scout, Jem and Dill faced as witnesses to the dreadful consequences of racism in their small town. Thank goodness the play didn’t end there!

It must be live. Play is an activity that happens in the here and now. And, as I said before, a condition of play is “not knowing” how it will turn out. So *play* can only unfold over time. It is only live.

The same is true in theatre. It is only live. Everyone – actors and audience - starts in the same place, the beginning, and they live through to the end. And if the end is *all-the-way-along* predictable, the play is boring. However, when audience and actors truly engage in “not knowing” exactly how – or even if - we will get to the end, the experience has so much potential to be exciting, to be satisfying, to be revelatory, to have impact ... a whole lot more likely NOT to be a waste of time.

I am deeply attached to emphasizing the liveness of theatre, for audiences and actors. It is the only thing that distinguishes this art form from other forms of storytelling. It is the element that inextricably makes the audience and artists *dependent* on each other. What a beautiful, powerful, thrilling contract.

Let me tell you why all of this is important: *the cultivation of hope*.

Six years ago, a young MA graduate student asked if she could spend a year researching at YPT. Her name is Lois Adamson. For her thesis, she wanted to investigate the value for young people of attending live theatre for her graduate research. She conducted dozens of interviews with teachers, school principals, parents, artists, YPT staff members and leaders over the course of a year while she was essentially embedded at YPT. At the end of the year, she presented her MA thesis paper (and, speaking of “not knowing” - at the end of her research, she began working with us at YPT and continues as a member of our Education & Participation Department today.)

Of course, I found it a page turner – it presented us at YPT with a mirror and, like all mirrors, it was not 100% flattering, but reassuring all the same. She made a number of observations based on her research. One was about the value of students leaving their known school environment and entering the unknown or less familiar public space of YPT’s theatre. In this sphere, where they encountered other students from other parts of the city, audience members were bound to have their expectations disrupted. Lois linked this to *disruption as an educational strategy*: not meeting a learner’s expectations can cause them to be more alert and attentive, on edge and, consequently, more open to the new experience at hand.

Her observation made me think about how the stories we tell can also be disruptive in a useful way. Our space will become familiar to audience members who come back again and again but we insert other disruptive elements by changing the stories we tell and how we tell them. I think Lois's observation actually encouraged me to be braver in my programming.

Lois also proposed this wonderful notion: that when students engage in the stakes of a story, they may experience discomfort from not knowing how the story will turn out or due to disagreement with the choices the characters are making. By staying with the story, however, and struggling along toward what they might reasonably expect will be a positive outcome, audience members may be experiencing what it is to *live in hope*. Lois suggested, therefore that watching a play in this manner may be a way to *practice* hope.

A good play will always invite us to enter into adversity. Even comedies do this. The stakes of the story are bound to get uncomfortable, we will experience fear or embarrassment – shock - fury – overstimulation – anxiety – disagreement - all of the above maybe, as we live through the conflict at the heart of the drama. There is a strange thrill in not knowing. *How will this turn out?* The experience brings us viscerally into contact with the need for hope, for it is hope that helps us survive the discomfort.

Vaclav Havel, the writer and former President of the Czech Republic, said:

Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.

I like this. His words point out that the equilibrium we need to survive long-term (since no one can survive constant instability) cannot be achieved in a world of nonsense. Equilibrium, balance, a sense of calm – these are indicators of our faith that there are reasons why things are as they are. Perhaps one could say that it isn't stability that children need to grow up well, but rather, hope tied to the conviction that there is *sense or logic* in the universe.

American social researcher and TED Talks star, Brené Brown said this recently: "Hope is a function of struggle. When we take adversity from our children, we diminish their capacity for hope."

Brown has been researching and writing about courage and vulnerability for many years. In one of her latest books, she speaks about the necessity of having a strong sense of belonging if children are to grow into adults brave enough to handle life's challenges. She also writes about allowing children to struggle because it helps build their resilience. Her interviews with over 1,200 people showed that a characteristic of those most able to navigate through difficulties was having a very high degree of hopefulness.

Every time I talk about what's necessary for good children's theatre, people say "that would be good for adult theatre too." For me, there is no difference between adult and young audiences theatre *except* our responsibility towards each audience. Adult theatre audiences are made up of grown-ups who made a choice to be there. Children are generally brought to the theatre based on an adult's decision which creates a different responsibility for theatre-makers towards children.

Eminent Québécois playwright, Jean-Rock Gaudreault, frames our responsibility to young audiences this way: the obligation to tell children stories that end in hope.

Now, did Gaudreault mean that it's not our responsibility to tell adults stories of hope? Well, I see a place for plays that shake us from our complacency - stories that expose ignorance, that disrupt power dynamics, that attack conventional wisdom. And I think dark stories that do these things can be appropriate for young people. I don't think Jean-Rock was saying "happy endings for kids" and "dark despair for adults."

I think that his words point out that adults should be responsible to find hope for themselves in whatever stories they encounter. That is part of the hard work of being a grown-up and facing the problems of the world. But young people, as pre-disposed as they are to be hopeful, still rely on adults to show them where hope lies and to demonstrate that hope works. We don't need to give them pat answers or foster empty-headed optimism, but when we invite them into adversity, however great, we have to walk them out of it. I believe we are obligated to give young people experiences that increase their confidence in knowing that their efforts, when they face adversity, are worth it because the complex world does, somehow, make sense. I think of Anne Frank who said, "I simply can't build my hopes on a foundation of confusion, misery and death... I think... peace and tranquillity will return again."

I said at the beginning that culture- in this case theatre- and play are a waste of time, a risky expense of time lacking certainty about the outcome, but full of potential value. In the imaginative realm, both theatre and play provide the opportunity to truly experience feelings, power, ideas, values, choices and to *practice being human*. In theatre, I will add the opportunity to *practice hope*. I am counting on that.

Thank you for listening.