

2014

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As with all ritually significant moments, it feels proper to begin with an incantation and a glance to the gods:

Inclusion. Intersectionality. Empathy. Advocacy. Action.

I've been a member of LMDA for 15 years, and I can say without a doubt that nearly every radical idea and new direction I've tried in my artistic life has been sparked by ideas born from conferences and conversations with the people in this room. And 15 rooms past.

The last time I stood up here in this capacity was in 2008, and I mentioned that I was hoping to launch a grassroots playwright development organization in Boston. I remember thinking: Jesus Brownstein, you said it out loud so now you have to do it. Three years after that moment, and after a test run at Liz Engleman's Tofte Lake Center, I formally inaugurated the signature program of Playwrights' Commons: the Freedom Art Retreat. But what is Playwrights' Commons? It's not incorporated. It has no board. It barely has a staff (really it's me, and while she lived in Boston, Corianna Moffatt).

It's an idea.

The idea is this: a dramaturg has the power to be a curator, a facilitator, a teacher, an organizer, a distributor of resources both esoteric and logistical, a node around which a movement can happen, a driver of new forms, and a force for public good.

The Freedom Art Retreat was born in one of the darkest times of my life from my desire, my need, to be in the woods, on a lake, for my own mental health. I thought, well, if I'm going anyway, maybe I can rent a bigger house and let some artists tag along. Then I thought, well, if they're coming anyway, maybe I can organize some programming. And if I'm going to program it anyway, I should probably make sure we all eat really spectacularly. (This is one of the many places where Mara Isaacs and I are totally sympatico – break bread with someone to cultivate trust and humanity.) It seemed worth it. As Cythia SoRelle said the other day, I'm more of a do-er than a thinker, so I booked a house, and put a call out for participants. Six years later, I can point to the 26 early career playwrights, dramaturgs, and designers who have come to the woods for a week of collective creation and experimentation, building aesthetic and collaborative vocabularies that carry them back into the Boston theatre ecology. I can point to over 30 projects (and 1 entirely new company) that were made by Retreat participants with one another across all three alumni years. And I can point to the 375 members of the Boston & New England playwrights network, which I run on Facebook as a space dedicated to de-silo-ing playwrights, and cultivating energy as a sector.

I do it for about \$2000 a year. And frankly, so could you. So please, steal this idea. Adapt it to your needs. Step up and opt in: what does your community need most? In Boston, most professional theatre artists teach in our training programs, but we have enormous creative brain drain as recent grads look elsewhere for their artistic communities. Freedom Art was designed to address this heat-loss, and give early career folks shared collaborative experiences. That might

not be a problem where you live, but surely there's some tangible challenge in your city that could use your dramaturgical intervention. **My soapbox tonight is this: you can make a change.**

As I was getting Playwrights' Commons off the ground, learning to tweet, and teaching my amazing students at BU, I had the incredible good luck to find a home with Company One and its staff collective. For the first time in my life, I felt like all my artistic and professional endeavors were aligning with my own social mission: to make work that makes a difference. The founders of Company One all came out of Clark University, the motto of which is "Challenge Convention, Change our World." This notion infuses all we do. There is a presumption that as a non-profit theatre, we have a duty to represent our city in the widest sense possible, to be answerable to the people, and to provide civic benefit. Our stated core values are:

- Never be satisfied
- Diverse, socially conscious thinking
- Innovation and creative problem solving
- Artistic excellence
- Development of the individual as part of the greater community

In the 3 years I've been on staff, my dramaturgy has been radicalized, thanks to the guiding philosophy of the Company. Though I still relish the act of new play development, of being in the rehearsal room, it's only one part of how I conceive of my practice.

My colleague, managing director, and friend, Sarah Champnois, never wanted to make theatre. She started as a community organizer. Her values and engagement — and those of the other Company One founders — have been a model for me. Boston has just seen the election and inauguration of the first new mayor in 20 years. Massachusetts is about to go through a Governor's race. The statehouse has been a battleground for budget fights, especially around the arts. And for the first time since I moved here, there's a rising energy across our entire arts & culture sector that says (a) there's work to be done, and (b) we could actually do it together. As a dramaturg, I realized I was in a perfect position to join that movement and make a difference.

And so could you. The only barriers to civic participation are apathy and inertia.

Following Sarah's lead, I've been able to testify at city council hearings and town halls, meet with state legislators, and intersect with MassCreative and the Massachusetts Cultural Council. Democracy is amazing when you opt in. And as dramaturgs, we have the exact skills for this task. I often tell my students that the dramaturg is the person in a process whose job it is to identify and open up pathways into the world of the play — or, if you prefer, into the big idea, the question, the issue — to open those pathways to every individual constituency and stakeholder. It's context, it's framing, it's speaking the language of the person you're trying to reach. But now

I'm not just doing it for plays, I'm doing it for the health of the sector, for the future of emerging artists, and for the quality of life for all residents of this city in which I make my life and my art.

I think about Hrotswitha a lot. Did you know she named herself? Her name means “the strong voice of Gandersheim.” It was a radical act that was meant to convey that she “stood firmly within the community of which she was a part” (*citation*). The community of people who allow me to do my best work is extraordinarily large, and if I named them all we'd be here all night. But I want to call out a few specific folks. I feel sometimes that Shawn LaCount, Sarah Champnois, Summer Williams, and Mark VanDerzee saved my life when they welcomed me into the heart of Company One. I am exceptionally, eternally grateful for their friendship. Corianna Moffatt made Freedom Art with me, and any of its success belongs at least 50% to her. Jim Petosa, my colleagues, and my students at BU not only **allow** me to cultivate my art and advocacy outside the university setting, they celebrate the ways it makes my teaching better. The staff of Company One is like a family to me, especially the dramaturgs who have been on my team, most recently Jessie Baxter, Ramona Ostrowski, and Ciera Sade Wade. Julie Hennrikus, Executive Director of StageSource, is a frequent co-conspirator, and between the two of us I am sure we've made a pot of trouble. Speaking of trouble, I deeply appreciate the cadre of amazing women who are like my professional braintrust – you know who you are. And of course my husband Chandran, who not only tolerates but encourages all the barnstorming I've ever endeavored to do.

I'll close here: the common thread that runs through all of this work is a soul-deep dedication to the dramaturg as an artist of impact. If we are to accept that dramaturgy, in its efforts to contextualize and present traversable pathways, has merit as a creative act, then I believe social justice, mentorship, and advocacy have to be at the core of all I do. The thing that sustains me is that theatre is not just an art form, it's a vehicle for empathy and humane connection. It comes to us through a history of ritual and spiritual practice, and though we've largely moved on from those structures, the roots remain. The human condition is one that seeks connection—something we're sorely in need of these days. If any communal activity holds the promise of bridging the gaps, it's the theatre.

And so: I advocate, I mentor, I seek to make my small corner of the world better for us having been here. So can you.

Inclusion. Intersectionality. Empathy. Advocacy. Action.

Thank you.

— Ilana M. Brownstein