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Changing the World One Play at a Time; The Intersectionality of Theatre and Activism

Joe Moore
Western Washington University

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Joe Moore

Changing the World One Play at a Time

The Intersectionality of Theatre and Activism

Introduction

Activism and theatre are two parts of my life I've always thought of as separate. I had my activist circle, and my theatre circle, and there didn't seem to be perceptible overlap. However, while devising a theatre piece in 2019 on gun violence and youth activism, these two worlds came crashing together. Over the six-month process, I was asked to be both an artist and an activist: going to rallies, writing letters to congresspeople, all while building a play and telling people's stories. This led me to look at art in a whole new light. Theatre can be more than just theatre; it can be a means to achieving an activist goal. I questioned what activist theatre could look like, what it could do, and how it could be done. I conducted a research study sourced from activist theatre projects across the country, leading me to broad conclusions of what activist theatre truly is. I defined the categories activist theatre fell into. Conversations with professionals led me to defining the key principles that make up activist theatre. In this paper I intend to define and justify these key elements, apply them to work of my own making, and create a clear way to recognize and understand activist theatre.

Methodology

My conclusions are drawn from interviews with theatre professionals of diverse theatrical backgrounds, from puppet theatre to devising ensembles. My interviewees, who I will reference throughout the rest of the paper, are as follows:

- **Stephen Wangh** is a master teacher at NYU, author of *An Acrobat of the Heart*, playwright, and has been in the world of political theatre since the Vietnam war.
- **Barbara Pitts** is a member of the Tectonic Theatre Project, a lead on the *Heretoo* project, an actor, and activist.
- **Jessica Burr** is the artistic director of Blessed Unrest (a New York-based devising company), a director, and has been producing new works that explore subjects from our relationship with our bodies, to the Holocaust, and beyond.
- **Uriel Najeera** is a member of Bread and Puppet Theater, a non-profit political theatre that has been making shows and touring the country since the 60's.
- **Karina Ithier** works on the Every 28 Hours play project, a project started after Ferguson addressing police violence against Black men.
- **J. Chavez** is an award-winning playwright and professional drag queen, published in The Methuen Drama Book of Trans Plays.

I used snowball sampling to conduct qualitative Zoom interviews over the course of several weeks. Each interviewee was asked seven open-ended questions, and encouraged to expand on their experience as they saw fit. The questions were:

1. In what ways can theatre be a form of activism?

2. Does a piece have to be overtly social commentary for it to be a form of activism?
3. How have you seen activism intersect with theatre? Was there a particular way that resonated the most with you?
4. Do you see the work you do as a form of activism?
5. What is the importance of accessibility in activist theatre in your opinion?
6. What are the elements of activist theatre in your opinion?
7. Who else is doing good work in this field that I should reach out to?

Responses to these questions yielded common themes. Using the overlap of interviewee's responses, and digging deeper into the broad themes, I was able to form a list of elements important to activist theatre.

Discussion: What does activist theatre look like? What makes "activist theatre" activist theatre?

Overt Social Commentary vs. Normalization vs. Cultivating Compassion

Sometimes it is clear that a piece of theater is activism. For example, at Western Washington University, I participated in the creation of a piece called *Heretoo*, a devised piece about gun violence and youth activism constructed with interview material gathered from survivors and activists. We as a cast became activists ourselves, it had clear messaging and offered a call to action to the audience. However, not all activist theatre is this overt.

When asked the question "Does activist theatre have to be overtly social commentary?", I got no's across the board from my interviewees. Karina Ithier put it best saying,

Sometimes to really understand the experience, it has to be overt, it has to be hey this is it, but I think other times it really doesn't have to be at all. If you think about Paula Vogel[’s play], *How I learned to Drive*, for example... you're getting something out of it because you realize from all this mundanity how wrong it is.

Theatre can achieve subtle activism in two ways: through cultivating compassion, or through normalization. Above, Ithier references a play which talks about sexual assault and pedophilia told through the metaphor of learning to drive. It is not overtly activism, like *Heretoo*, but it still has a lasting impact on the audience simply by getting them to think about issues and recognize them in their own lives. This play is not only social commentary, but it also does something else--it cultivates compassion. Encouraging audiences to understand another human's experience is a form of activism.

Normalization is subtle activism by putting something onstage that is generally cast to the outskirts and creating a new norm. Uriel Najeera spoke to this when he said, "I think some of the most powerful things have less to do with pushing a message and more about exaggerating the norm, or what we consider to be the norm, and how that in itself creates so much politics". An example of normalization is *Angels in America*, a play by Tony Kushner. It is set in New York during the AIDS epidemic, following the ups and downs of relationships torn apart by AIDS and internalized religious homophobia. Putting gay love onstage and humanizing someone with AIDS normalizes these concepts for the audience, and by doing so, encourages empathy towards people in their own lives who are like the characters they see onstage.

The interviewees gave many other examples of how theatre can be activism with either overt social commentary or subtle commentary that cultivates compassion or normalizes issues. .

Is this to say that a piece has to be one of the three? No, a piece can do two or three at once, but these three categories best describe the different forms activist theatre can take.

Praxis

Now that we've established the categories of activist theatre, it's important to establish what activist theatre achieves. In activist theatre, the audience and the actors engage in a dialogue. The actors ask the audience to get active in some way, by taking part in more conversation or thought, or something more tangible like getting out the vote or donating.

Playwright J. Chavez called this type of dialogue:

Praxis praxis praxis! Praxis is the act of dialoguing and then reflecting and then dialoguing and then reflecting. And so, with theatre that is the first step, it is a dialogue. You are having a dialogue with the audience regarding this content, which then they go and continue the next stage of praxis.

It is this dialogue with the audience where the activism lies. The actors don't tell the audience how to think, but engage them in discussion. The discussion can be direct with the audience breaking the fourth wall, or indirect maintaining the fourth wall while still encouraging the audience to think. Chavez expanded on this dialogue between actor and audience saying that as an artist "if you always at any point think you are one hundred percent right, you are one hundred percent wrong." This highlights the importance of empowering the audience to walk away with their own conclusions.

Beyond opening a dialogue with the audience, activist theatre contains a call to action. It asks the audience to do something, giving them an in to the issue. Importantly, this action should

be achievable, even as simple as: take the time to reflect on this and be more compassionate towards people who are directly affected. When talking about her work on *The Laramie Project*, a devised play about the murder of a gay college student in Laramie, Wyoming, Barbara Pitts said “One of the reasons that play leaves everyone feeling cathartic is that that’s a call to action we can all succeed at. I can just make the choice not to use the word against myself or against other people. That words are the seeds of hate.” The beauty of that call to action is in its simplicity, that the audience thinks before they use slurs towards other people and make the active decision not to. With Bread and Puppet theatre, Najeera voiced a similar sentiment when it comes to what is expected of the audience with this call to action: “You don’t have to be the person on the street. You don’t have to be the person running the fundraiser. All you can do... is just be open and consider... we’re not telling you to move mountains.” Activist theatre doesn’t solve the issue, it starts a dialogue and gives an achievable call to action.

Honesty

Something that every interviewee highlighted was the importance of putting the honest human experience onstage (I use the word stage here as a stand in for wherever the performance takes place, activist theatre is by no means limited to one kind of space but can be done wherever people will engage with it.) The audience can sense honesty, and, on the flipside, they can also sense dishonesty. Jessica Burr put it best when she said:

We understand inherently as humans, the same way that we understand the laws of physics, if you take a rubber ball and you bounce it you know how high it’s going to bounce, I couldn’t explain to you in mathematical terms, what that is or why, but we get

certain things. We're programmed to understand certain things about the world, and we understand when people are bullshitting.

Activist theatre artists can't speak to an audience and expect them to listen if the audience can sense deep down that they're being dishonest, that they don't actually know what it's like to experience something, that they are putting on an act instead of being authentic.

Succeeding at this is critical for conveying an activist message--Burr went on to explain:

If you create a space where artists can come together and work together in an honest way, to create something that isn't faked, to create something that is really happening, you will literally build compassion in the people who witness that, because when we witness someone have an experience, the mirror neurons in our brain respond as though we were having the experience too, so you are quite literally forging neural pathways in your audience--that is compassion.

This compassion is where the effectiveness of activist theatre lies. Activist theatre artists can't get their audience to care by putting something on, they get them to care by putting the honest human experience on the stage. This kind of honesty is not always easy, but it is vital. Stephen Wangh built on this same concept, discussing how he asks actors, "Are you really saying what you mean? Are you allowing yourself? Are there parts of yourself that you're hiding from the audience? And I like not hiding." we can't hide in this kind of work; it takes risking being really seen in order to be really heard.

What makes for an effective, honest performer when it comes to activist theatre? I noticed during my time devising activist theatre that you have to care about the issue you are

speaking to. If you become disenchanted with it, or couldn't care less, then your audience will struggle to care. Pitts agreed and talked about how she noticed that when seeing young people work on *The Laramie Project*, she is "taken in by exactly what you're describing, like you can just feel how much it matters." There is an element of honesty that can't be faked as discussed earlier and caring as an artist is a part of that honesty that can't be faked. As honesty is one of the key tenets of acting training, performers must risk being honest, and as Wangh said they must risk "not hiding" and they must care.

Audience

Activist theatre artists don't do activist theatre for ourselves, they do it to spread a message to make an impact of some sort. The piece itself is important, but vitally important is the audience. The praxis that Chavez talked about isn't possible without an audience, change isn't made unless you really speak to someone. We have to respect our audience as actors in general, but especially in activist theatre because they are vital to our work. Wangh told a story about a new age violinist who gave a performance that was not very palatable to the audience and a student asked "what would it be like for you if we left while you were playing?" Wangh told me the violinist's response was "Oh, that would be fine with me, I don't care what people think I'm playing for myself." This is the opposite of an activist actor's goal, they do it for themselves, but mostly for the audience. Wangh's point of view aligns with mine: "I just care a lot about what the audience thinks. It matters to me that they're having a good time, it matters to me that they're thinking." If your audience isn't thinking while witnessing activist theatre, then you have failed as an activist artist. Without critical thinking there is no dialogue, there is no praxis, and there is no impact.

Accessibility

Possibly the most common theme throughout all the interviews was accessibility. Accessibility applies to many different aspects of theatre, so it's important to think about it in three different ways.

Accessibility of audience: Who do we let in the room, who are we reaching, how do we make this show/piece accessible to a wider audience?

Accessibility of roles: Who are we showing on stage, who is working on the show, are these roles accessible to everyone?

Accessibility of content: Are we thinking about interpreters, wheelchair access, are we making sure that differently abled people can experience the show?

It is well known that theatre, especially at the regional and Broadway level, is economically inaccessible. The average paid admission for a Broadway play in 2019 was 116.12 dollars, and 122.73 for a musical (Statista). This is a price few can afford to shell out, which begs the question: Can a political piece charging 100 dollars a ticket be considered activism? The answer I got from my interviewees was a resounding no. When asked if it was hypocritical for a theatre to put on a piece about social change and then charge Broadway rates and reach a small audience, Burr answered simply "yes". I pushed further asking how her company combatted that with their work to which she replied "Well, we don't charge a lot... we have a caveat on our materials, it says, we will not turn away anyone because of money". This sentiment held true for most of my interviewees. Wangh points out "we live in a capitalist society in which the inequalities are staggering... And so, one is as an artist already compromised because one is

playing for a certain audience. And that's why it's important for me to do street theater". It is of utmost importance to be able to reach more than just the typical theatre going audience when doing activist theatre, and to work actively to make your show accessible.

The second aspect of accessibility bleeds into representation. Making sure that people are honestly represented onstage, and issues can be honestly spoken to by such people, requires representation. Chavez speaks to this eloquently:

While representation is not inherently activist, it's not inherently radical by any means, it is still an important step to take. An important thing to acknowledge that you can have, and you should have people of varying abilities, and body types, and skin colors, genders all of those things like I said, not only visible on the stage but also working on the production. And that is important to telling the story and allowing the audience to see who this is affecting.

They mention how it isn't inherently activism just to have representation, and this is something that other interviewees touch upon. Casting people of every race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and so on shouldn't be seen as radical but rather the norm. Chavez points out that seeing who the issue affects is an important step in authentic storytelling. Seeing who it affects tells the full story, and telling the full story will cultivate more compassion.

In activist theatre it is important to reach as wide an audience as you can, including people of all abilities. It is important to consider interpreters, wheelchair access, etc... Ithier refers to Every 28 Hours' method of ensuring accessibility as "access checks." They make sure that people in the community working on the show with various abilities have the space to voice their concerns about the accessibility of a project and adjust accordingly. The COVID-19

pandemic, for example, offered increased accessibility to mobility-impaired patrons with online theatre, but that in turn impacted hearing-impaired patrons without closed captioning. Successful activist theatre should acknowledge the inaccessibility of theatre and take purposeful steps in order to make it more accessible in every aspect.

Impact

One question remains: does it work? What is the social impact? I got answers that fell into two categories. In the words of Wangh, “There are two things that people talk about (with) political theatre. One is about waking people up to think things that they haven’t thought, the other is simply encouraging people who already agree with you to get more active.” This ties into the call to action, activist theatre artists ask their audience to become more active, think more critically or openly, or both. If the audience is being asked to become more active, artists should also give them the tools to do so. At *Blessed Unrest*, Burr says that they “will include a little activist handbook in our programs, so that if you want to donate to whatever... organizations, or if you want to do something... that you can do actions you can take (actions) as an audience”. In this sense, the call to action is more active, we ask the audience to go out to do any number of things, such as agitate their politicians, vote, show up at a rally, or donate--but not all activist theatre has to do this. Sometimes, as Ithier describes, “You experience something that you might not have otherwise (experienced), or at least witness it. That makes you reflect and... even if it’s just you think about it for the rest of your life, that’s an impact.” In this example, the call to action is to be more open minded, to have hard conversations, to think and by doing so hopefully change the way you see an issue or other people. Unfortunately, we can’t always see the impact of the work, since as Chavez described, the audience goes off and continues praxis, or goes off and gets active, or perhaps doesn’t change at all. Sometimes we see the impact, like Pitts

and Wangh did with their work on *The Laramie Project*, but more often than not, as Wangh says, “God knows what the impact actually is.”

Analysis

Elements

Throughout my interviews, interviewees gave many examples of activist theatre pieces. By analyzing these pieces, I was able to break down activist theatre into these categories:

1. Overt social commentary
2. Normalization
3. Cultivating compassion

Additionally, in the interviews, broad themes including accessibility, the audience, a call to action, honesty, compassion, and impact were widely touched upon by interviewees.

Connecting the dots across the discussions, I’ve developed a list of elements that define activist theatre. These elements are purposefully broad and open-ended, because through my research I’ve concluded that activist theatre is also broad and varied in what it looks like and what it does.

The elements are:

1. It is accessible.
2. It puts the honest human experience on the stage.
3. It has a call to action.
4. It is designed to make an impact.

The elements each strengthen one another and serve to create activist theatre. Forms of accessibility serve the goal of getting more people to see the show, and by doing so getting more people to engage in dialogue. Additionally, the more people who are engaged and impacted, the more likely progress of some sort can be made. By putting the honest human experience on stage, we create compassion in our audience, open them up to the call to action, and make an impact through empathy. A dialogue awakens the audience and asks something of them. Finally, activism at its core is meant to create change. Creating change is never easy, Americans merely have to look at the world around us to know that that's true. The same is true of activist theatre-- it is meant to create change, but there is no guarantee that it will in a perceivable way. This is why activist theatre must be designed to have an impact. It is possible, and necessary, to create an environment in which your audience can be impacted, that you can just possibly make a change, but to limit activist theatre to only shows that actually have a perceptible impact goes against activism itself. Change is not made by a single person overnight, but by the collective effort of many over time, and activist theatre is a part of this collective effort.

Limitations

It would be remiss to not acknowledge the limitations of this research. These conclusions are drawn from interviews with six individuals. While I strived to get multiple perspectives--and, in some ways, achieved that--I know that there are countless perspectives missing from my research. Given the limitation of time, and limited connections, many people I reached out to did not respond. With more time and connections, my research would be more holistic. Another limitation was my preconceived notions about activist theatre. This likely affected the questions I posed in my interviews, and the questions were not peer reviewed. My list of elements is

purposefully short and open ended, but in making it so, it may fail to as effectively paint a picture of what activist theatre looks like.

Application

Once I had solidified the elements of activist theatre and the categories in which it can fall into, I made a piece of my own. In my short piece titled *When I Grow Up: Or Empathy*, I explore my own relationship with empathy, my goals in life, and a particular moment in my life in which I was confronted full on with the world's deficiency of empathy. While the piece contains overt social commentary, the piece falls into the category of cultivating compassion. The ultimate goal of the piece is for the audience to walk away with more empathy.

My piece also implements elements of activist theatre defined above: My piece is accessible. It is published publicly on my YouTube channel, it has options for closed captioning, and most importantly is free. I put my own honest human experience on the stage. The stories are from my life, and the ways in which I responded to the events are accurately and honestly portrayed. The call to action within *When I Grow Up: Or Empathy* is to try to have more empathy for others. The piece is designed to bring just a little more empathy into the world, and by doing so, as I say in my piece, "Young people might not wake up in their beds to another new tragedy every single day." So, according to my elements I have created a piece of activist theatre.

The creation process was a lot more personal than any other piece I've worked on. This seems to be a result of putting my honest human experience onstage. More than other plays I've created or worked on, I focused a lot more on what it could have the potential to do, rather than focusing solely on telling a story. There was a pressure to get it right, which came from the fact

that the subject really mattered to me. That I had a personal connection to the material and a genuine drive to make a change.

Is it a perfect example? No. The creation of my piece had limitations of its own. While it is accessible in some ways, there is no guarantee of the piece being seen by a large enough number of people to actually make a difference. Had I had more time I would've made the piece more collaborative rather than a one-person performance. In a world without the pandemic, I would've performed in a theatre, and charged very little with proceeds going to charity. Understandably extenuating circumstances have made activist theatre difficult, but under time constraints and COVID-19 restrictions, this is the piece I came up with.

Conclusion

Through interviews and analysis, I have concluded that the elements of activist theatre are accessibility, the honest human experience on the stage, a call to action, and that it's designed to make an impact. I broke down the categories of activist theatre into overt social commentary, normalization, and cultivating compassion. By applying my learning to a piece of my own creation I was able to see what the process of creating activist theatre through this element approach looked like. I heard so many inspiring stories from all my interviewees on the work they've been doing, and this research has opened my mind to the possibilities and importance of theatre more than ever. I've seen firsthand what activist theatre can do. There's a scene in *Heretoo* known as the fence scene. The scene is about these two students: one is a survivor of a school shooting and the other is her best friend, and they are being interviewed and they talk about the memorial at the school. It was a fence with flowers all around it piled high. And while we describe it, a visual of the fence was drawn, constructed from nothing to the whole memorial

to nothing again. While performing *Heretoo* at a college theatre festival during the fence scene, we heard so many people in the audience crying, being impacted. We got backstage after the show and an audience member ran in and said, “I’m a survivor of a school shooting, and I’ve never cried over a fence before, but I just want to say thank you and I love you.” Hearing that was all the impact I needed to know that activist theatre was important and worked.

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