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## THE MAGIC OF THE THEATRE -- EMPIRICALLY SPEAKING

Anna asked me if I was ready for it...if I could handle it. My new-found Italian friend told me she had been asked the same thing just before she first saw it. We both answered the same. Sure, we were ready for it...at least we thought we were.....but as we both would later agree, we certainly were not.

As I looked around from my chair on the orchestra level, the stars grew even more brilliant. Darkness descended over this 2,000 year old outdoor arena in Verona... filled with 16,000 spectators, each holding a candle that made it seem like an inferno had enveloped me. The anticipation was palpable.

The maestro entered, the orchestra began to play, and somehow, without really noticing how, it seemed all those candles were extinguished one by one until a blackness fell upon everything but the glow of the grandest of stages. Verdi's Nabucco was on spectacular display.

I had heard about this opera set during the Babylonian captivity of the Hebrews, beginning with the King's destruction of Jerusalem and abduction of the Hebrew nation into servitude. In reality, the opera is a thinly disguised protest against the Austrian domination of Northern Italy during the 1800s. The famous chorus "Va pensiero" became a rallying cry for freedom, not just for the Hebrew slaves in the opera, but for the Italians who suffered under Austrian rule and eventually for all who have endured oppression.. It soon was the unofficial hymn of Italian national liberation and reunification, and even today almost holds the status of a national anthem.

And so right after the opening of the opera's third act, I was ready for it, the chorus of the Hebrew slaves...all three hundred of them right there in front of me, the famous Va pensiero. It seemed to come out of the darkness, barely audible at first, then ever so slowly and melodically building to one crescendo after another. The audience was riveted...silenced by the music's simple beauty...until it could only explode upon its final peaceful note. The enormous throng roared. I looked over at Anna, and the tears welled in her eyes as I wiped away my own. I had been transported. The bedlam continued and the conductor waited...the audience not allowing the performance to go on. It seemed as if the cheering would never stop until, finally, without ever raising his baton, the maestro somehow conveyed his thoughts across the vast orchestra pit to sing it again. The place exploded again, and I thought this ancient arena would crumble from the magnitude of the audience's response. It was magical.

I have been working in live entertainment for almost twenty years, but I have never fully understood its basic mystery: What constitutes these magical moments? What causes them to occur and can we follow certain steps to create them.

On that warm summer evening in 2001, yet another paper for a convening of The Academy was born.

For the purpose of this paper, let's start with a few explanations of how I'm viewing key words in tonight's discourse. First of all, the word theater is meant to convey the venue in which the performance is taking place. For example it could be a concert hall, a soccer stadium or perhaps even a room in the Downtown Club in Fresno, California...but in all cases it refers to a live setting where real time interaction can occur...where human contact is possible and communication can take place.

The word artist, tonight, refers to anyone who performs in some capacity for an audience, whether it be an actor who is portraying someone else, a player on a football team, an instrumentalist or vocalist, or maybe even a speaker in a room at the Downtown Club in Fresno, California.

And finally, the word magic, as that which suspends our understanding of objective reality, if only for a moment in time.

Over the course of this paper, it is my intention to describe those elements that must be present to create a magical moment in the theatre. In no order of importance, I would propose that the necessary elements are: 1) That the artist believes in the material being performed, 2) That the material be compelling or at least be presented as such, 3) That it be presented in an environment of intimacy, 4) That the audience be receptive and 5) That each of these elements blend harmoniously with one another.

Let me start with Belief - The artist must believe in the material being presented. That is to say, in the case of actors, they must convince the audience that they are really someone else. In a 1990s interview, actor Joel Grey revealed that a believable artist must commit himself to the work...whether it's good or not. He said, "You must believe, otherwise you can't get on the stage. The audience is the ultimate barometer of truth.

It won't buy it if the actor doesn't believe it. To accomplish this, actors need passion and commitment, but they also need technique. One such technique, "Method Acting" popularized by Lee Strasberg at The Actors Studio and the Group Theatre in New York City in the 1940s and 50s fundamentally purports that actors should actually feel what they are supposed to be feeling in their portrayals, not simply be pretending. Generally speaking, the method system typically teaches actors the practice of drawing on their own emotions, memories and experiences to influence their portrayals of characters.

The great Russian actor Constantine Stanislavski is considered the father of the Method, and today many different people teach it, including many versions of it. Essentially, just as with an instrument where you learn its scales, Stanislavski wanted to teach the scales of an actors psyche so they could draw on these levels of experience in performance.

Joel Grey, perhaps put it more succinctly. He says, "It's about using your own life and bringing what's appropriate and applicable and correct for the character. To find that, that's the trick. To find the fullest place, where you can bring the truth of your character and the truth of yourself so that there are no seams."

Of course, magical moments are not limited to the theatrical stage, but still, belief of the artist or player remains a key component in the creation of it for other performance genres. One might argue that the magic that certainly occurred in this year's thrilling Boise State collegiate football victory over Oklahoma in the Fiesta Bowl stemmed from the players relentless and absolute belief in their ability to win.

Similarly, it may be a sporting venue that most dramatically illustrates the second necessary element for the creation of magic in the theater -- the need for the performance material to be compelling... that is, to have an overpowering and irresistible effect or influence.

In Lake Placid, New York, on February 22, 1980, coach Herb Brooks sent his U.S. Olympic hockey team onto the ice to face the overwhelming favorite and defending champion Soviet Union with the words "the moment is yours." The game took place at the end of the cold war when efforts to reach arms agreements between the United States and Soviet Union dominated front page headlines. It was a time of great mistrust between the two super powers--when the Soviets and their communist regime were viewed as truly evil. The Soviet's 1979 invasion of Afghanistan further fueled this belief and led to the American boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympic games. Just eight years earlier, at the 1972 Munich Olympic games, the Soviets ended the Americans 63 game Olympic winning streak in basketball, winning the gold medal with a highly controversial one point last second victory. Errors by game clock officials gave the Soviets three chances to score over the final three seconds and the Americans were so incensed by the outcome, they refused to accept their Silver Medals.

And so within this context, the hockey game occurred just thirteen days after the U.S. had been destroyed by the Soviets in an exhibition game by a score of 10-3. But in Olympic competition the Americans had unexpectedly won in the early rounds to position themselves for a chance to play in the Gold Medal championship game should they claim a victory over the mighty Russians. This was compelling stuff.

The United States was seeded seventh in the twelve-team field and the Soviets had not lost an Olympic hockey contest since 1968 nor the Gold medal since 1960. It had won 21 straight Olympic games coming into the U.S. game, but only led 3-2 after two periods. Midway through the third period the U.S.'s Dave Silk picked up a loose puck and whisked it toward the Soviet goal. His shot careened off the skate of defenseman Sergei Starikov. Mark Johnson got his stick on the puck and stuffed it past goalie Vladimir Myshkin for the tying goal. Eighty-one seconds later team captain Mike Eruzione (eruption in Italian) scored. According to the Washington Post, his father Eugene, in response, nearly slapped his wife off her chair. Over the final ten minutes, with a pro U.S. crowd of 8,000 on its feet in a frenzy, the Americans withstood a furious Soviet attack to preserve the improbable 4-3 victory. Not only was it a magical moment, it became known, as famously called by announcer Al Michaels "a miracle."

Of course, the definition, of what is considered to be "compelling" is left in the hands of the audience member who receives it. What is considered to be compelling to one may not be to another and so how one experiences a magical moment may vary greatly among members of the audience. It is also true, however, that the overall impact a performance has on an individual can be greatly influenced by the reaction of other audience members in the vicinity or throughout the venue. An emotional response often can propel an audience member who was otherwise not engaged into a state of receptivity to a magical moment.

In a 1993 interview, actress Julie Harris said “We’re only half-alive until the audience gets there, we’re doing it for you and we want you to respond. Live theatre is like a journey and when the actors and audience take it together, magical things can occur.

And so we’ve hit on yet another element -- the collective audience’s receptivity to what is being performed is critical to the creation of magic in the theater. Actor William Hurt reflects that the first thing he does when entering the theater as either an actor or audience member is to suspend his disbelief. The audience must be willing to use its imagination. When you go to the theatre as an audience member, the magic happens to you, so the audience must be willing to have an open and accepting mindset. When we sit in a theater as members of the audience, we must do our best to imagine that the people we are watching are real, but we never forget who and where we are. We never truly forget our own reality, otherwise we’d rush up on stage and warn Hamlet that Laertes’s foil has been anointed with a deadly poison. (Laertes). Even in a sporting arena, we suspend our sense of reality when we enter the stadium. In October, I attended the UCLA - Notre Dame football game in South Bend, Indiana. With more than 80,000 people looking on, Notre Dame quarterback Brady Quinn threw a touchdown pass to receiver Jeff Samarja in the final seconds of the game to win. The place went wild. It was magical. Certainly, these people were living in a state of disbelief. Why else would the fact that some guy ran past an arbitrary line with a funny looking ball be so important to so many people?

In the theater, a communal experience is taking place and we must be accepting of it. According to New York Broadway producer David Black, the theater is where we can come together to purge ourselves of fear so we can be free to live and enjoy life. When you go to the theater, you must be willing to check whatever is nagging you at the door.

An audience’s receptivity is clearly something that can be gauged by both audience members and artists alike. When an audience is unresponsive - perhaps polite but restrained, well let’s just say near comatose, their obligatory standing ovation at the performance end seems more like an opportunity to gather their things quickly enough to beat the traffic out of the parking lot.

By contrast, we often hear about an electricity in the air when the audience is in a particularly receptive mood. In 2002, when tenor Jose Carreras appeared for the first time in Fresno, he sensed the upbeat feeling of the audience even before he walked on-stage. There was a certain buzz in the theatre, a chattering among the audience -- a real anticipation. When Carreras broke the curtain line for his initial entrance, the audience rose as one and let out an enormous ovation. A receptive welcome, and an important ingredient in the creation of magic.

Stockard Channing who starred on Broadway in Six Degrees of Separation, put it this way, “The audience has to surrender itself to being active participants. The audience doesn’t just lie there and go, ‘All right, do it to me.’ The audience helps. There’s a reason it’s called a play, the audience plays, too. Even with a fantastic production like Six Degrees there still will be people in the audience that you can almost hear thinking out loud, ‘What, we have to go to the theater tonight? You have tickets for what? It costs what? You paid what for them?’ Some audience members just refuse to play.

But, thankfully, sometimes there are people in the audience who seem to be saying “Let’s play ball,” and they just go wild. The theatre is about play. We play, the audience plays and everybody comes out the better for it at the end. It’s not giggly play approval, it’s engagement.

Even elements as basic as amplification, or lack of it, have profound effects on the audience's engagement. Without amplified sound, the audience has to listen a little more, lean forward a little more. If it's unamplified, there is a different response in the audience.

For any of you who may have attended the Audra McDonald concert at Warnor's Theatre last fall, you may have experienced the difference between an amplified performance and an unamplified one. In her closing song, she laid down the microphone and sang Edelweiss with only an acoustic guitar accompanying her. It was clearly different, we listened more, we were engaged.

Another moment. According to actor F. Murray Abraham, in a movie the film can be running if there is nobody in the audience. That doesn't happen in the theater. He said, "If there is no one in the audience, it's not a performance. It's a rehearsal. "We need someone out there."

It's easy to see how the audience participates in a comedy. Laughter tells the actor the audience is with her. But what about a serious play? Can an actor tell if it's the right kind of silence? Stockard Channing says, "Silence is one of the loudest things you can feel on a stage. It's louder than any roar of laughter. It's as if the audience has become one being, and you're having a conversation with somebody. It's one of the most thrilling things, because you realize that silent communication can exist."

When the audience contributes, it almost always does so within an environment of intimacy -- the 4th element. We can feel this sense in our own homes where the TV room is often the smallest and most comfortable room in the house. We create our own cocoon-like setting where it's much easier to get lost in the movie on the television screen. In the theatre, there are a number of elements that contribute to the creation of a similar atmosphere.

(NATASHA, LUKAS, CHORUS ENTER)

Even in the largest of venues, there are tricks that can constrict our surroundings and make them feel much more intimate. In the theatre, it's the darkness and it's why the house lights are always turned off during the performance. It helps us to lose touch with our surroundings and focus more exclusively on what is illuminated on stage. We see this with lighting effects on stage as well, where a single spotlight constricts what the audience can focus on.

Within this element lies the importance of a venue that is full of spectators. A venue that is filled to capacity enables the creation of an environment of intimacy. It also contributes to an environment of safety because as an audience member we are completely surrounded by others and our sense of anonymity is increased. We can't be seen by everyone, we can get lost in the crowd, and we are much more inclined to get lost in what is presented on the stage. Therefore, the bigger the venue, the more important it be filled to capacity.. We can't get lost in a cavernous hall of empty seats!

Even in a sporting arena that seats 100,000 people where there is no opportunity to create intimacy through the use of lighting and other stage illusions, a similar environment can still be created through proximity of audience members and the visual panorama of a stadium filled with people.

When the hall is full, there is an additional energy that is present. One that perhaps can't be seen, but certainly can be felt. Typically, there is a momentum that grows from each of the audience's responses, always paralleling that which is emanating from the stage.

And so there we have it, the ingredients of the magic of the theatre. But like any good recipe, the amount of each needed for a delicious outcome can vary. Most great chefs won't even abide by a measuring cup, choosing to play it by feel so that each dish is truly an original. It's probably true that the same analogy applies to the creation of the magic of the theater, but for tonight, let's just assume that the magic of the theater can be bottled into a recipe. It consists of the artist's belief in material that the audience views as compelling, with an audience that is receptive to it--willing to play along, suspend its disbelief without giving up its reality and all presented within a context of intimacy. If all of these elements can be mixed together so we get the right consistency, can we then do it? Can we really create our own magic?

(NATASHA PLAYS w/o introduction)