

A Different Kind of Heart Surgery

By Nina Lee Aquino

World Theatre Day, Canada
March 27, 2018

When I am asked why I do what I do, the answer I always give is: to make the world a better place. This is because I fundamentally believe that theatre can change the world. Maybe that belief is – to some – too facile, even foolhardy or cliché. But this is the marathon I run; the long-distance race I ask all the artists I align myself with to run alongside me.



For me, it really is as simple as that.

Theatre has survived and thrived despite all that would threaten its existence or relevance. From radio, cinema and television, to sporting events and the ubiquity of streaming technology. It is the only art form that, by its nature, absolutely **requires** an audience. It needs us all together, watching an event that happens in space. And when you think about that, it's really quite miraculous. We put something on stage and people come. Could be a group of friends on an adventurous night out, could be family members wanting to see their loved ones perform, could be out of obligation... doesn't matter. When the lights go to half and then out, they rise again on a united community, bound by the story about to unfold.

On our stages (traditional or non-traditional) the audiences become not just witnesses to, but active participants of:

stories that show us the wounds
stories that show us the medicine
stories that allow us to forget about the world outside
stories that remind us there is an outside
stories that punch us in the gut
stories that make our insides go fuzzy
stories that teach us something
stories that make us un-learn everything
stories that throw us back to the past, reminding us how far we've come
stories that catapult us into the future and make us imagine

All of these are vitally important – from seat-filling crowd-pleasers to theatre about hard truths, from theatre that comforts to theatre that disturbs.

I've seen my fair share of productions – big houses, small houses, no houses – and for all my theatrical adventures, I know this much to be true: I walk in one person and walk out someone different. Every. Single. Damn. Time. That's what theatre does; it opens up something inside of us or re-confirms something essential we'd forgotten about ourselves or others or the world. Whether we realize it or not, we come out of it changed, transformed, re-arranged. It's breathtaking, if you think about it. We hold so much power to change the world.

Maybe this makes it easier to understand why it's so important to rally for a more inclusive and diverse theatre ecology... why some of us have dedicated our entire careers to this cause. The belief goes beyond a hashtag or quotas or getting more funding from government bodies. It goes beyond the standard reply of "...reflecting the city and country we live in..." Diverse stories present diverse solutions; imaginative ways of telling stories unlock answers to seemingly impossible questions, can lead to innovative ways of solving problems, infinite new perspectives and a renewed capacity to dream bigger than we have before.

That is, after all, the job that is tasked to us as theatre artists: to ask our people, our community, our citizenship, to experience something together; something immediate and visceral and necessary. We remind people how big and important and complicated of a thing it is just to be human. And while we are sometimes beset by the trappings of ticket sales and reviews and awards, we trade in something much more valuable. It's a different kind of heart surgery.

The work that we do on or behind the stage; we are communicating something, expressing something important. We can remind or help forget. We can rally, call people to action. We can influence and illuminate. We can provoke or calm. Theatre has, historically, played a big role in our civic lives. It can play an even bigger role if we can all collectively agree to allow it to. If we ascribe that value to it.

In the face of current struggles of which we are all very much aware, I maintain a steadfast belief in the power of my profession; in the power of theatre and its vitality to all of us humans. It is so clear that our job as theatre artists is nowhere near done.

Whether it's an audience of 10 or 100 or 10,000... we can, and we will, change the world.

Nina Lee Aquino is an award-winning director and dramaturge. She is the current Artistic Director of Factory Theatre.

