

## Introduction

As an artist, thinker, and educator, I'm anxious to find balance. I am a director and also a choreographer who is "preoccupied with the placement and geometric position of words on paper," (Adrienne Kennedy) and its importance within a dramatic structure. I understand the importance of Stravinsky's *The Firebird*, but I am still as fascinated by Les Ballet Africains du Guinea's production of *Heritage*, as when I first watched it live onstage in the early 90s. I recognize the parallel in style between August Wilson and Anton Chekhov. I am thrilled by the brilliance and choreographic phraseology of Youssouf Koumbassa, Luam, and Pina Bausch, and excited by the operatic collaboration of Kurt Weill with Bertolt Brecht, Lorenzo Da Ponte with Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Moreover, I am clear about the difference between Osun and Erzulie, and in awe of the cultural significance of Drake being on the new Meek Mills album.

My art is influenced by the ways that rhyme and rhythm traverse movement and visual textures, in addition to sound, generating stand-alone narratives. Blues music, for instance, ritualistically repeats a structure, and progressively, within a set of parameters, serves to re-contextualize its meaning. Hip-hop also relies on a fixed pattern, and through riffing on sonic shapes, intensifies and transforms its original purpose in the same way that blues music does. I draw on these ideas of rhyme and rhythm—and repetition and revision—that are inherent in the work of painters such as Jean-Michel Basquiat and Kehinde Wiley as well as contrasted in the texts of playwrights such as August Wilson, James Baldwin, Bertolt Brecht, and William Shakespeare. My beginnings as a choreographer, too, allow me another language with which I can honor text within the theatrical tradition and more deeply mine its dramatic underpinnings.

I am a person who decided to go back to school in order to continue my own education after nearly 20 years as a professional, away from school. I had reached a place in my professional career, outside of the academic environment, where I felt an urge to pause my career in order to sharpen my skills. While it was difficult for me to readjust within the educational structure of experimentation and a new learning environment, I felt that I was primed to receive information at an older age because I was clearer about the questions I wanted to have answered. As a person

with professional successes and obstacles, I gained a clear understanding of how the information would be most useful to me in advancing my craft of theatre-making. For me, learning was taking place on a strategic and conscious level, because I was learning a tremendous amount about my particular trade. Through the process of practicing, researching and theorizing about my craft, I also became shaped in unconscious ways. Not only did I become excited by the act of acquiring information that allowed me to become a better craftsman, but I gained a profound curiosity about the larger world outside of my trade—which excited me most—through the act of learning in a general sense. It is this journey in becoming curious about learning that has developed my aim to infect others with this same excitement about the wholistic values of education.

### **Purpose of Education**

Education is about gaining true understanding of pre-developed processes and choosing to repurpose, reform, or develop new methodology based on learned information. We are not always encouraged to test our own theories or even to fail by going against the grain. I aim to facilitate a learning structure that awakens the curiosity of students. A space where students are able to dialogue, interrogate and challenge conventional form of thought without fear of judgement and can therefore apply theories with a fresh perspective or develop new systems all together. I believe that the act of learning is most successful when an individual becomes curious and excited by how a specific topic is useful in enlarging their perspective of the world and accomplishing a particular objective within their trade.

The purpose of education is to develop a desire within a student to learn and think about the world around them. Bruno Bettelheim says that “as long as we have not achieved considerable security within ourselves, we cannot engage in difficult psychological struggles...”. Education assists students in achieving the kind of self-security that Bettelheim speaks of, in order to contend with the diverse perspectives of the world, as well as their own ideologies that may seem atypical.

A practicum that encourages reaching, physically, just beyond a presumed ability or prescriptive position, and the kind of learning designed to tilt us out of balance and away from convenience,

will intellectually stretch and fortify not only the student but also the studied material. I am interested in a system that nurtures a person while tilting them away from convenience and comfort. The moment of imbalance forces both a release and deeper engagement of our most essential core, thrusting us into a limbic space. The limbic portion of the brain—or the id— allows for the frontal cortex—or the ego—to disengage, and it is here, at this moment, that we find and connect with our most authentic selves. When we are out of balance the part of our brain that controls reason is sent into a kind of catatonic shock and a mode of basic and essential survival. While in this mode of survival, there is nothing left in us but to fight with every part of our being to survive and return to a state of balance. This fight represents the engagement of our carnal instincts, and this is when the stakes are highest.

### **Understanding the Dramatic Structure**

Dramatic art is the physical manifestation of this internalized "fight" and the incurred change from imbalance to balance, in either the most profound or straightforward ways. Whether the assailant, the sufferer, or the spectator, all humans gain a sense of cathartic and liberating thrill to experience this occurrence of "change." Ideas of being authentic and inauthentic are tossed around so quickly that I believe we are becoming desensitized as to what it means to be inauthentic. Inauthenticity occurs when we are so well-reasoned and perfectly balanced that the idea of reason becomes louder than our inherent carnal motivations. In a quest to find the truth of self and the zest of life, I find that it is crucial to embrace this state of imbalance, along with an impending fight to attain balance that follows. Consider a boxing match or a basketball game, and our meaning behind the moments that we say: "that was a good fight" or "that was a really good game." In the 1986 boxing match between Mike Tyson and Marvis Frazier, for instance, I was a young child but remembered that people were excited about this particular fight since Marvis Frazier was the son of boxing legend, Joe Frazier. Spectators paid a hefty fee to watch this fight on pay-per-view and other platforms, and the knockout occurred when Mike Tyson bested Marvis Frazier in under 20 seconds. For the most part, people were upset, not because of Mike Tyson's win, but because everyone wanted to watch two humans contending with each other at the very

edge of their existence, dangerously ebbing and flowing, while exerting tremendous amounts of energy and strategy until a bitter end.

Similarly, a basketball game where one team easily handles the other side makes for an uninteresting and disappointing game. In both of the examples as mentioned earlier, Mike Tyson and the overpowering basketball team, have not given any indication that there is a formidable obstacle that impedes them from attaining victory. There is no incurred risk, no high stakes, and therefore nothing to lose for Mike Tyson and the undefeatable basketball team. Moreover, because the winning sides put forth no struggle, there was no illustration of imbalance, both winning sides walked away from this match unchanged, which means, ultimately, here, there is no dramatic impulse.

I believe that the spectators in the above examples are unsatisfied because what they are searching for, and what is most cathartic, is the idea of human beings in a perilous state of danger becoming unhinged, and striving to recover from that imbalance, allowing us to reckon with a delicate truth that is present within each of us. Drama is the art of change, capturing a human being within this state of imbalance and contending with self to recover. This "change" that I speak of is the "change" returning from a state of off-balance into a state of balance.

Drama is that external and internal "fight," and is present, palpable, and exhibited within the actor, the dancer, and the singer. This occurrence warms the blood, races the heart, and reminds us of the magic of our existence and our shared collective unconscious as human beings. The dissonance of discordant musical notes like the sweet, spicy, and salty harmony of spices that formidably dance together, just right, titillate the mind and lure us in closer. The way the depth of flavor continuously evolves and captivates our attention. Life is about continuous and progressive change (the fight), and we naturally grow into a new set of struggles because we overcome a previous set—that's life—and when our battles languish, life loses its fervor.

## Components Of A Dramatic Narrative

The manifestation of a narrative is similar to that of an orchestra full of various instruments and parts attempting to attain a unified mood. Each music instrument has a particular quality of sound, along with a subdivision into two or more sections within one set of musical instruments, of the orchestra. The goal of the conductor is for all of the parts and subdivided instrumentations to find agreement and a quality that makes for a single complex piece of music. The conductor is not there to teach a particular musician how to play their instrument but is there to provide signages and a clear trajectory so that the sound is hearable. At times the many parts contrast with one another and veer from a set target for an idea to be illuminated. Whether harmonious or in perfect unison, I believe that non-linear or linear story is transmittable and made intelligible through the simultaneous assertion of 4 distinctly different tracks working in tandem:

### i. *Physical Action*

The physical body moves through space and interacts with other physical elements, producing, in the audience, a feeling. The body is postured from moment to moment in a particular way to reveal particularities that changes an audience and shapes its relationship to the overall experience. This physical action track provides an audience with new information that both contrasts and compliment a set of assumptions, concerning the unified story. The way that the human body dances, whether heightened (as “dance”) or naturalistic (as a pedestrian)—interacting with time and space—with other elements (and people) on the stage gives the audience information about the quality of mood.

### ii. *Rhythm, Tonality, and The Architecture of the Voice*

The musicality within the speaking or silent voice tells another story that is not necessarily apparent within the structure of the text. An example of this would be me going out to eat, and I ask the waiter, after reading over the menu, if the specials are any good. I then wait for a response. The response that I am looking for is not necessarily in what words he chooses to say to me, because the waiter is being paid to be a good advocate for the restaurant, and it could, therefore, cost him his job to say that he hates all the specials and that I would be best getting up to leave.

He would certainly lose out on the amount of tip that would line his pockets, and he could also jeopardize his positioning at the establishment. Instead, what I am seeking are pauses within his speech. Does his or her reply feel forced or scripted? Alternatively, does the melody and rhythm make me think that he excited to share something new with me that I hadn't before considered on the menu? In a sense, I presume that all the words he chooses to communicate to me will be forced, perhaps even untruths, so I, therefore, look for other indicators that help me find the truth of where my money would be best spent and how my taste buds would be best appeased. The shape of words and the musicality of phrases are all fundamental in communicating a narrative that both contrast and compliment the intended objective that is being conveyed.

### iii. *Text*

The etymology of the word *text* comes from the Latin word *textus* "style or texture of a work," literally "thing woven," from past participle stem of *texere* "to weave, to join, fit together, braid, interweave, construct, fabricate, build," from Proto-Indo-European root meaning "to weave," also "to fabricate." Walter J. Ong says that the English word *text* is, "in absolute terms, more compatible etymologically with oral utterance than is 'literature,' which refers to the letters etymologically/(literae) of the alphabet." Henry Louis Gater, Jr. says that when we "literates" use the term, we conceive of text by analogy, as a writing, and a written text is "fixed, boxed-off, isolated," unscoring "the chirographic base of logic." Gates, here, opens up the general understanding of the word *text* by saying: "The *text*, in other words, is not fixed in any determinate sense; in one sense, it consists of the dynamic and indeterminate relationship between truth on one hand and understanding on the other. [...] The relationship between truth and understanding yields our sense of meaning."

In other words, *texts* are figurations that have come to be actual words that are to be spoken, the notes that are to be played, the set of choreographed movements and formations to be danced, the definitive ingredients to be used within the recipe. Note here that I have indicated "to be" meaning that *text* is a set of objectives in the process of being. These *texts* are awaiting further execution to attain maturation, and still need to be read (ingested), spoken, danced, played, sung,

and cooked. The space between the figuration of *text* and its impending execution is a territory full of extraordinary interpretive possibilities that can rearrange, distort and open up an original intended meaning. Miles Davis, the jazz musician, says "I don't play what's there, I play what's not there." The *text* most certainly tells a particular story, sometimes the story told by the *text* is gospel truth but most often the *text* acts only as a signifier or a mask for something much more extensive and crucial. It is, therefore, vital for me that these benchmarks that we have come to know as "text" are only part of the overall contour of the linear and non-linear story within dramatic devising and theatrical gesturing.

iv. *Mise En Scène*

The way that a design shapes and informs the scene and the symbiotic relationship at play within the scene tells a story of its own. If you walk into my apartment right now, there are books and papers all over the place, a little food in the refrigerator. There are a few pieces of art hanging on the walls and inspiring books on the shelves, and while my apartment is undoubtedly not trashy, it has the feeling of being very lived-in. One might assume that it is the abode of a very busy and overworked student or artist type.

### The Learning Environment

There is a tremendous benefit to learning canonical theories and philosophical points of view for the usage and the increase of one's own craft. Although, systems of hierarchy within the classroom setting can sometimes result in a rote learning environment for the student, which often, does not engender the unique sensibilities and perspectives of the student. I am, therefore, interested in a learning environment that functions as a safe space where the student can question theories and ideas that are self-generated as well as those offered within delivered lessons. I also strongly believe that there is a benefit to the process of students being able to fully interrogate such theories, perhaps finding new uses for them as well as being empowered enough to recreate and invite new ideas.

I teach because I have a perspective that is at times considered unorthodox, and I believe that sharing my perspective and research with students is one of the ways that I bring cultures and ideas, within the ever-expanding craft of dramatic arts, closer together. Therefore, the most important aspects of my approach when facilitating a learning environment with students are:

- comparative analysis and the application of the distancing effect, in order to animate curiosity;
- allowing students the experience to apply various theories, in order to make ideas both relatable and “lived;”
- creating and maintaining a safe space, where students can poke at things, take big risks, dialogue, and interrogate new and old ideas.

I bring to the classroom a diverse and interdisciplinary approach that traverses opera, theatre, concert, dance theatre, television and film, as well as, new plays, classical work, musicals, opera, and multimedia. It is important that, as educators, we properly equip students to be leaders and continue reaching outside of normative assumptions in order to train innovators and forward thinkers.

I employ Bertolt Brecht’s theory of the Distancing Effect, as a tool of making the familiar strange and the strange familiar in order to stimulate curiosity and provide a rich experience for students. Students learn best when they have become puzzled by something that they initially assumed great knowledge over, or by something strange that suddenly appears familiar. Additionally, ideas are solidified when students experientially participate in the application of theories. I have come to this conclusion through my personal experience in entering back into an educational environment, in addition to my years of working with and mentoring students during my professional practice.

### **My Vision for Developing Artists**

After working intimately with music artists such as Maria Carey, Jazmine Sullivan, and Beyoncé, as well as several productions on Broadway—as onstage talent and behind the scenes as part of the



creative team—I had the great pleasure of being awarded the 2018-2019 Opera Directing Fellowship from The Juilliard School. For a full year, through the Opera Directing Fellowship, I worked with world-class opera singers. I helped these advanced-level artists discover a more significant truth within themselves and the material. My work with these artists involved nurturing them into a position of in-depth exploration and mastering the craft of telling a real story to draw-in and shape the experience of an audience. The musicianship of these artists played an important role; however, their ability to affect and touch an audience lays squarely in the crafting together of the four tracks that I mentioned above: (1) Physical Action; (2) Rhythm, Tonality, and The Architecture of the Voice; (3) Text, and (4) Mise En Scène. This crafting together becomes the difference between a musician only showcasing their technical dexterity and the exploratory fight of an artist impacting an audience profoundly, through music, with a well-wrought and intensely wrestled-with trajectory: the story. The stillness or sharpness of movement; the bending, elongation, and syncopation of the voice; the shape, indeterminacy, and double-voiced innuendo of the text; and the placement and juxtaposition of how the various design factors meet each other to impart the qualities that carve an artful and thrilling event—that is the sharing of a story.

I am inspired by facilitating the sharing of research, perspectives and experiences that will provide students with interpersonal skills and a broader understanding of the world. Art has the ability to communicate and effect change within society. I am passionate about helping students to develop problem-solving tools by a close reading of heightened *text*. It is my hope that these tools will provide students with another way of working out unconscious problems with which they may be wrestling. I enjoy bringing seemingly disparate worlds together to help deepen disciplinary knowledge and expand the perspective of the student. For instance, thinking through the differences and similarities between the lyricism of Tupac Shakur and William Shakespeare, or Suzan-Lori Parks and Wole Soyinka as compared with Samuel Beckett are intriguing ways of gaining a deeper appreciation for heightened text and script analysis. While understanding the Greeks and Aristotle's *Poetics* is important, I think it is essential to also consider other theories of theatre practice such as African-American literary criticism. Lessons on the analytical comparison between Anton Chekhov and August Wilson may promote conversations about genre and the style of

various dramaturgy and staging techniques. This closer proximity allows for specific questions and deeper understanding.

## Conclusion

We are all incredibly simple—and imperfectly complicated—human beings behind these big, swooping, dizzying, and perfectly specific ideas, contracts, and words. Most of the time, you can find and receive the exact thing that you seek by speaking directly and plainly to a person. I have learned that listening with a willing, generous and open mind will change you for the better while engendering exciting work amongst students and collaborators. It is ineffective to be hell-bent on proving a point, as the more critical lesson has nothing to do with the point that a person is so hard-pressed to prove.

I believe in a non-hierarchical learning environment where we can discuss and relate to each other not to have our thoughts replicate themselves, but to learn and grow from each other. In remaining vulnerable and open to change, we are also humbled and discover new things about ourselves that we have yet to adequately challenge, attend to and analyze while in the seclusion and unprovoked vacuum of our solitude. Learning is a journey, not a resolute destination, and we owe it to ourselves and our communities that we remain open to the process of learning. The classroom is a safe space to promote continuous growth and an unending thirst for knowledge. The information that we transmit within the class structure is not without diligent and backbreaking work, work to be proud of—work that is “fought” for and has cost something more substantial than what money can afford—and therefore my intentions, as it pertains to learning, are far from static or one-note. Education is delectable and thrilling.