

Jim Lasko

ART IS THE ANTIDOTE

No matter the precise definition, whether it includes beauty and imagination or even the creation of an identifiable artifact, art has long been a measure of the health of any given civilization or epoch.

I fear that we, as artists and arts leaders, have betrayed the general public, depriving the vast majority of an essential social good. We have neglected to share our work widely. Our failure is cause for real concern.

The fine arts have essentially become a conversation between artists and their collectors. The performing arts, though their content is slightly more populist, have similarly isolated themselves. They are clubs. Entry is granted to nonmembers, but structural imperatives necessitate that institutional focus is toward the cultivation of a devoted membership community. That membership is organized in a clear hierarchy (in descending importance): board members, individual donors, subscribers, and single ticket buyers who can be recruited to club membership (in hopes that they may rise through the ranks).

It is more difficult than ever to recruit people to these clubs, and they are, almost without exception, getting smaller and smaller, and more and more institutional time and focus is being committed to their cultivation. The problem is only getting worse. By all accounts, more and more institutional resources are needed to raise similar funds.

This is no accident.

For the better part of recorded history, the performing arts were central to a civilization's self-understanding. Support of the performing arts was practically a cultural imperative. To be current, to participate in the civic discourse, was to be involved in the performing arts. Theatre was a primary source of cultural narrative, the place where politics and culture were being discussed and synthesized into new meaning.

That is no longer the case.

Technology has progressively marginalized theatre's voice. One advancement after another has conspired to decentralize the performing arts as a source of cultural narrative. First the printed manuscript and, in rapid succession, radio,

Jim Lasko is a founder and former executive artistic director of Redmoon Theater in Chicago, a civically engaged theatre company.

film, television, and now digital media have completely altered the cultural landscape and thrust the performing arts to the periphery.

I don't fear for the future of the performing arts institutions. They will survive or they won't. Outside of the clubs, it makes very little difference.

My fear is much more pressing. I truly believe that our failure to find ways to share broadly the output of our great artistic voices has fundamentally disturbed our social ecosystem and undermined our democracy.

I don't think it coincident that our public conversations lack nuance and seem fatally confined to categorical thinking. Nor are the political fervency and jingoism unconnected. In the absence of a genuine and shared cultural conversation, one in which new meaning is regularly being generated and widely shared, a deep hunger for the unconventional and the authentic has manifested, even if it wears the hat of fascism.

Art celebrates nuance. Art is the antidote to fatalism. Art restates the possibility, and inevitability even, of free will. Great art evidences that despite the encompassing and coercive power of systems we have the ability to create new forms of communication and togetherness. Noncommercial art dismantles the overwhelming feeling of powerlessness with its disinterested originality and authenticity. It is essential.

I know I'm preaching to the choir here. If you are reading this journal, you have made substantial sacrifice honoring the importance of art. But it is important to acknowledge that as a group our failure is substantial and significant. No matter what we may tell ourselves, creating art for an elite class of thinkers and collectors does not "work its way down to the people." By the time the new idioms and advances in techniques are popularly available, it is most often in the form of marketing manipulation.

Nearly every performing arts organization has some form of "outreach" as a gesture toward access. Though perhaps sincerely motivated, they are rarely more than symbolic second-tier offerings, appointed limited institutional resources and held to different artistic standards.

Our great artists don't want to concern themselves with reach and access. They want to participate in the vital and exciting and sophisticated conversation going on with other great artists and collectors. As artists and arts leaders, it can seem that we are faced with the choice of creating sophisticated and well-resourced work (albeit for a narrow band of the public) or creating dumbed-down and cheap product for a more general public. It can appear a very unattractive choice.

The truth is that we have no choice. There is no future for theatre in its current form. It will be a slow and painful death of irrelevancy. We will lean further and further into nostalgia in order to maintain our clubs. And we will die the forgettable death of irrelevancy.

Or we can look at it differently.

Can't we find a way to share our enterprise broadly, while maintaining its sophistication and persuasion? Of course we can. We are artists. Invention is our job.

The distinguishing characteristic of theatre is that it is a living form. As such it has two unique sources of appeal and relevancy: it can respond in real time to the

social dynamics of a given site; and it provokes the immediate and genuine appreciation of unmediated human virtuosity.

We need to build a new theatre that leans into these strengths.

In a digital age, theatre stands ready to provide a needed release from the pandemic feeling of disconnectedness. More than ever what people want and need to experience is the living dynamic that develops between an audience and the theatrical event. The polish and gloss that preoccupy many theatrical productions only serve to distance the audience. They cover the living nature of the event. We need to find forms that promote a living conversation with our audience—not before and after the show, as is the current desperate and ill-founded attempt through postshow discussions and social media initiatives, but within the theatrical event itself.

And we need to prioritize the experience of the virtuosity of our performing artists. Though clearly an elitist artistic enterprise, at a world-class museum with tremendously limited access for a host of structural reasons, there is something very instructive in the form of Marina Abramović's *The Artist Is Present*. It crystallizes an important shift.

Presented in the spring of 2010, the piece featured Ms. Abramović seated on a chair in the center of a taped-off square at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. It was tremendously popular. People lined up for admission like a rock concert, for hours and even overnight. They ran up the museum steps and generally behaved a bit like children on Christmas morning.

For forty-two straight days, ten hours a day, Ms. Abramović sat in a wooden chair and made herself eminently available, emotionally and spiritually and physically, to whomever sat across from her. Oftentimes the seated participant was moved to tears by Ms. Abramović's openness. Sometimes that weeping was mirrored in the artist. Almost always a beautiful and inspiring and visible dynamic developed between the two.

Something shifted.

After decades of confronting her audience with the limits of her own physical body and emotional truthfulness, her "breakthrough" (to popular consciousness) came when she allowed her audience to affect her. They worked together to create an unpredictable and vibrant emotional spectacle, and people were enthralled and moved. The audience participated in creating the piece. They shared in the artistic experience.

Her virtuosity empowered them. Her immense training, her disciplined openness and access, made them feel their own power and vitality and consequence. It was an exciting display of artistic virtuosity on the part of an evidently disciplined and brilliant artist.

People were excited to see and feel art matter. They witnessed the power of the artist's attention. They experienced a vibrant and shared silent conversation that mattered, that changed and altered both the artist and the "spectator." New meaning was created between the two of them, silently and beautifully. Those fortunate enough to behold it felt a renewed faith in the possible. They were inspired.

To me, it was tremendously validating, if humbling. I had similar aspirations. I wanted to create a participatory form that could work on a communal

scale. It was a much more difficult proposition than I had expected. Each event revealed as many limitations as successes. In the end, though, the form advanced and our audience continued to build. When we, Redmoon, were at our best, it was as in *The Artist Is Present*. The participants availed themselves of us and we of them and, together, something beautiful was made. It was a spectacle of interpersonal transformation, but on a communal level.

In the public sphere, art stands as an urgent symbol of the endless human capacity to reinvent. It embraces contradiction and manifests unexpected alternatives. It punctures mundane reality and opens, if only for a moment, a world of possibility. Public performance creates a new understanding of shared space. Empowered by participation, events like these have the power to create new visions of what is possible among groups of people working together.

That's exciting stuff! It's not easy. It's not a direct line from the theatrical practices of the past two hundred or so years. It's not immediately referential to the most recently canonized traditions. But it is hardly without precedent. It is part of a wonderful history of public performance, one that embraces many of our most lauded practitioners, including the ancient Greeks, Molière, and Shakespeare.

If we are willing to move outside the comfort of our theatres and test the parameters of our clubs, we may find ourselves once again central to the cultural narrative. We will stumble and fall, but if we can find our footing, we may help to rebalance the social ecosystem and build an invested citizenry. Working together with our audience, we can discover and demonstrate new ways of being together and, in so doing, serve our art, our audience, and our world. Nothing less than that.