

Put a Little Boal in Your Talkback

A playwright offers a new interactive forum that goes beyond the banality of the post-performance discussion



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Take back the talkback: After a performance of *Everyday Heroes* at Dallas Children's Theater.

The last lines are spoken; the theatre goes dark. Applause. When the lights rise, instead of a curtain call, the actors appear—still in character—to engage in a post-performance dialogue with the audience. What seems to be completely improvised is, in fact, a carefully structured, after-play event.

We are in the audience at the Coterie Theatre in Kansas City, Mo., following a performance of my tough young-adult drama, *The Wrestling Season* (*American Theatre*, Nov. 2000), in which eight young people and a referee struggle with the destructive power of rumors and their own identities, a play in which much of the action is wrestling. Matt and Luke, two champion wrestlers, have been accused of being gay, but their sexual identities, like the ending, are left unresolved.

"I'll read a series of statements," says the referee in Part 1: Agree and Disagree. "Stand in support if you agree or remain seated in protest. Even though Matt stands by Luke, he is still homophobic." There is a sea of movement as audience members choose to stand or sit, creating a powerful image of their collective opinions.

"Looks about half and half," observes the referee, who has stepped into the role of facilitator. It is his job to remain neutral throughout, encouraging the audience to express their thoughts without fear of being judged right or wrong.

Now, in Part 2: Reflection, the audience is challenged to rank each character's behavior in the play from most objectionable to least objectionable. As audience members offer differing viewpoints, the eight characters are ranked

and re-ranked along a line of responsibility formed on stage. The facilitator gives the characters a chance to respond to audience opinions regarding their behavior, both positive and negative. At this performance, Willy angrily stands up. "I don't deserve to be ranked like this," he says. "Haven't you ever made a mistake?" At another moment, Melanie quietly responds to an audience member's comment: "I didn't think anyone else was feeling the way I do."

After each character has spoken briefly, the facilitator steps back and, in Part 3: Closure, asks the audience to offer final thoughts of advice or encouragement to the group on stage. As the facilitator thanks the spectators for their participation, one last character steps forward to speak. Kori, a friend of Matt and Luke, offers this thought about the question of whether or not Willy and his friend Jolt took part in the gay-bashing of Luke: "It doesn't matter if Willy and Jolt did or didn't go after Luke. They created an atmosphere of hate that made the attack possible." This remark sparked a whole new series of thoughts.

We have just experienced a different kind of talkback model—part staged event, part improvisation—where the audience creates a dialogue with the characters, freely exchanging ideas about the actions they have seen in the play.

Talkbacks have become ubiquitous at U.S. theatres, an expected perk for audiences, but they are often programmatic and clichéd. As illustrated above, I have fashioned a new interactive model to avoid the typical questions we've

all heard: “How do you learn your lines?” or “How much do you get paid?” Building on the work of Augusto Boal’s forum theatre and Dorothy Heathcote’s process-drama techniques, I threw into the mix strategies to clarify personal values and ethics. This alternative model emerged—and it’s as theatrical as the play itself. Like a dance performance, it has the feel of an improvisation, but is tightly structured to provide a safety net for audience and performers, while encouraging an exploration of ideas, values and ethics. The forum never has a predictable outcome; it is not lesson-driven but allows audience members to reach their own conclusions.

CONSIDERABLE TERROR ACCOMPANIED the first forum at the Coterie Theatre. Without a script, the facilitator briefly panicked about the improvisational nature of his talkback role. He had been instructed to avoid judging or even praising, as in, “Yes, good.” “Keep your focus on the audience,” I told him. “Use neutral responses and turn their comments into questions to spark debate.”

Coterie’s artistic director, Jeff Church, remembers another fear. “The stage manager and I worried about consistency—that the forum might be hit or miss,” he recalls. “On the second day of the run, when I slipped into the light booth, the stage manager madly gestured for me to hurry—I was missing it. The audience was standing up, and they were willing to bust out one idea after another. After that, I was addicted. I watched the forum energize the audience every day for the entire run.”

In forums I later developed for my series of plays for young adults, “The Lies and Deceptions Quartet,” audiences expressed divergent sympathies for and alliances with the play’s characters. After *The Tangled Web*, a retelling of *Faust* in which characters deceive even those they care about most to achieve their goals, the audience argued characters in and out of a literal “box of blame” painted on the stage—an actual part of the set design.

Following *Everyday Heroes*, in which a devastating fire catapults a teenager into the role of reluctant media hero, the audience struggled to determine which lies he told caused the greatest damage. And after *Deadly Weapons*, a play about three teens and a dare that goes horribly wrong, the facilitator asked the audience to take on the role of counselors to identify for the play’s protagonists the factors that contributed to their friend’s death.

Rehearsing the actors and facilitator

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prior to the forum is crucial to its success, including a run-through with staff and friends acting as the audience. Everyone involved learned that actors, initially unsure, became so involved that their characters tended to monopolize the discussion, unless they were clearly directed to talk less and keep their focus on the audience. Rather than write the actors’ responses for them, I discovered they took greater ownership when asked to write their own ideas according to what the characters might say. We fine-tuned them together, usually shortening the responses to a single, clear thought. The audience would extend their belief in the talkback role-playing until the end of the forum, when

the facilitator and the performers shed their roles and took their curtain call.

During its 2002 U.S. premiere of *Deadly Weapons*, Dallas Children’s Theater partnered with the city’s district attorney’s office. To jumpstart a forum on consequences, the D.A. representative read a prepared statement about charges the characters might face in real life. Artistic director Robyn Flatt remembers a moment of concern. “On opening night they sent a police officer,” she recalls. “How would the audience, some of them inner-city kids, respond to a cop in uniform? But this buzz-cut officer spoke from his heart about protecting young people, a statement that deepened the pathos in the play and segued perfectly into a discussion of actions that led to fatal choices.” The audience gave him a standing ovation, and the officer returned to speak at most of the performances.

Last year, Philadelphia’s Arden Theatre Company produced *Franklin’s Apprentice*, my comedy/drama about Ben Franklin, his apprentice and their shared pursuit of what the inventor called “electrical fire.” “With *Franklin’s Apprentice* we had a specific prob-



After play: actors David McNamara and Melanna Gray during a talkback for *The Wrestling Season* at the Coterie Theatre in Kansas City, Mo.

lem,” says director Aaron Posner. “The play was fiction. It was art. It was, in other words, historically inaccurate on purpose. We were performing it in the Old City section of Philadelphia, just a stone’s throw from where Franklin lived and worked. We felt the need to address the fact that we were taking liberties

with the truth—not to apologize, but rather to explore and explicate. The Benjamin Franklin Fact & Fiction Forum was a brilliant way of doing just that.”

Once again performed by characters in the play, the forum challenged the audience to decide if statements based on historical

elements were fact or fiction. Posner and I created the imaginative staging required, with 10 chances for the audience to play the game. The forum ended with Franklin’s passionate statement about history: who writes it and who owns it. After one performance, I was introduced to a longtime supporter of the theatre, an elegant lady in her seventies. “That was the most fun I ever had in the theatre,” she said.

Was she speaking about the play, or the 15-minute forum that followed it?

I HAD HOPED THAT THIS HYBRID event would build and transform theatre communities, but as the model was tested, everyone involved discovered that it also did something else: It built a bridge between the performance and the audience, offering a fresh, alternative form of entertainment for audience members of all ages that transported them beyond the role of spectator. On days the forum was not included, applause was appreciative. With the forum, audiences were on their feet, having taken ownership of the experience.

How can theatre be a more vibrant, necessary part of our culture? There are no easy answers to that question, but an after-play event that invites audiences into structured dialogue adds ownership and transformative power to the theatre experience. As Daniel Renner, director of education at the Denver Center for the Performing Arts, says, reflecting on his experience with *The Tangled Web* forum: “So often we lose sight that theatre is a communal event. We might discuss the play on the way home, but we are already removed from the experience we just had with strangers in the dark. What this simple but elegant design provides is an opportunity for strangers to become a true community that wrestles face to face with feelings, values and reactions to the primal issues of a play.”

The buzz of opinion that follows a play is the surest indicator that the audience has been affected. So why not take advantage of that buzz, allowing it to expand and develop in the space where it was given life? In those critical moments—immediately following the play—I dare you to take a risk. Move talkbacks beyond banality to deep engagement. 📌

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