**Artistic Statement**

I sit here twenty-seven years from when I wrote my original “Artistic Statement/Letter of Intent” for Towson University’s MFA in Theatre program, and it is abruptly evident to me how much I have matured as a human as I reflect on my blended teaching and artistic career spanning the past two plus decades. This development is not apparent in some drastic change in my personal aesthetic or the revelation of some hybrid style that I have now hitched my artistic wagon to, but in fact this maturity is apparent in my own comfort with who I am and what I do as a theatre practitioner and educator. Gone is the closeted affinity for the American Musical Theatre now replaced by a bolder understanding of why this interdisciplinary, multi-sensory genre is a theatre form of value and something that I am proud to explore along my own trajectory as a twenty-first century, theatre-teaching artist.

My love of the American musical comes to me honestly.  Original Broadway cast recordings crowded the shelves of my childhood. My fear as an adult artist was that because this had been my entree into the world of theatre that somehow, I had never evolved beyond my initial introduction.  Ben Cameron, the former executive director of TCG, writes in his American Theatre article, “Do I Hear a Waltz?,” that “indeed, the delightful truth is that works that originally demanded our attention over time become those works that compel our affection,” (Cameron 4). My own affinity for the form of music theatre is the fuel that still feeds me as an artist today.

I must admit to a bit of a chip on my shoulder when it comes to the tapestry of work that has outpoured from our mongrel culture over the past one hundred and twenty-five years.  A chip in essence because, like many lovers of musical theatre, I have felt the burden to prove that musicals can be “art” and not merely glorified “entertainment.” With my continued evolution as a theatre maker, I have come to realize that there is no viable distinction between “art” and “entertainment.”  While many would claim this to be false, I would venture that there is no way to bring together the myriad of disparate subjective opinions over every different undefinable genre that makes up the quilt that is world theatre today and the pursuit is futile. Cameron agrees, stating in the same article that “frankly, I am finding the assumed distinction between ‘art’ and ‘entertainment’ less and less useful.  Adherents of ‘art’ are perceived as elitist, remote, out of touch; those who extol the virtues of ‘entertainment’ are reduced to philistines, simpletons, panderers to the marketplace. Discussions of musicals especially tend to reinforce this dichotomy, the art camp claiming certain composers while all others are relegated to the entertainment camp. It is little wonder that tempers fly, and scant common ground can be found,” (Cameron 4).   I have concluded that it is of no consequence to me as an individual artist how bits and pieces of theatre are defined within our contemporary culture. What is more important is my belief that the benchmark of merit or the value of any theatre piece is its effect on the community that experiences it. If this is true, then the measurement cannot be defined within my own generation. Theatre that has survived the test of generational selection can then claim success on many different levels but can still not categorize itself as “art” or “entertainment.”  With this revelation, I am no longer responsible for creating something that a select group can define as “art,” but for purely creating theatre that I am connected to and feel that my community will connect too. This personal eye-opener has bolstered my resolve to continue to endeavor to create art that feels personal.

Kismet fortunately took place when I was still a brash youth when my contemporaries committed to creating new musical theatre that I connected with deeply. Music theatre composers like Adam Guettel, Jeanine Tesori, Michael John LaChiusa, Jason Robert Brown, and Ricky Ian Gordon have all explored pushing the form in new directions over the course of their careers, crossing genres with fluidity.  All have their own aesthetic and sound, but they share the desire to use music and movement to create a multi-sensory experience that impacts their audience viscerally. None of them seem to shy away from commercial projects like *Shrek* or *Honeymoon in Vegas*, but at the same time risk financial burden with more personally fulfilling projects like *Marie Christine* or *Fun Home*.  I find their relentless pursuit of exploding the genre exciting. As a director I continue to try to find a way to facilitate their lesser-known works into becoming part of our common theatrical vocabulary.

All this time spent in discussion of my generation’s musical writers is not meant to give the illusion that I don’t feel it is just as important to revisit classic and contemporary works of musical theatre.  I feel that it is eminently important that we look at the already rich legacy that this infant genre has produced. As I continue to study and teach, the list of important works that I feel a need to personally explore becomes longer than it is possible to do in a single lifetime.  Directing *The Pajama Game* for Towson University was the genesis of what has been a lengthy career filled with exploration of classic works by American writers. As a theatre maker, I have discovered the deepest connection I feel right now is to the exploration of our American mythology.  Much of the music theatre that I am drawn to considers our iconic personae, the iconic images that make up our modern American mythology.  Both *The Pajama Game* and my thesis production of *Lindbergh Baby Kidnapped!* are examples of the genius of this aesthetic. My work in Denmark, including *Dogfight*, *Bonnie & Clyde*, and *Catch Me If You Can* as well as IWU productions of *Carrie*, *Violet*, *Giant*, and *Hello Again* is evidence of my continued pull in this direction. Our shared human experience and history hooked me in immediately.  I must share a quote by Jorge Cortinas that really speaks to where I am as I explore my theatre obsessions.

“I want to honor the past, but not let it write my future for me.  I want a hand in that. I want to push it. I want to fuck with the future, and I’m going to raid my photo album to do it.  I’m going to raid ghost stories, my nightmares, movies I saw when I was a kid, stuff I drove past, and things my grandmother told me before she passed away. -” (Iizuka 80)

I feel a real connection to this kind of source work in my own process.  It is the flash of the familiar that helps to springboard me into the unknown and to conquer the terror of beginning.  In the same article “What Myths May Come,” Naomi Iizuka quotes Anne Bogart as saying, “If the theatre were a verb, it would be to remember...We are the living conduits of something humanity is trying to remember.” (Iizuka 80)

As I continue to investigate what makes us uniquely Americans on stage, I recognize how passionate I still am to make theatre and to train those who will make theatre in the future.  Working with my students and colleagues on our production of *Sunday in the Park with George* was a keen reminder of how the deep personal relationship that is forged between student and trainer fills a hole that can eradicate the distance frequently placed between audience and artist.  The idea that I can help to keep young theatre makers’ eyes open to all the things that make up the living art of the theatre is exhilarating.

Cameron, Ben. “Do I Hear A Watz?” American Theatre Feb. 2000: 3-4. Print.

Iizuka, Naomi. “What Myths May Come.” American Theatre Sept. 1999: 18-19, 78-80. Print.