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A case study of the digital marketing strategy for *Look Upon Our Lowliness*
#digitaldramaturgy

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Overview/Context

“We live in a moment when two modes of popular culture are vying for supremacy: passivity versus participation,”¹ asserts Frank Rose, in his book outlining the various modes of storytelling using new media. The strange and perhaps most exciting aspect of this quandary concerns that of the live performing arts event. It does not quite fit into either category.

Especially in today’s hectic world, theatre cannot simply be viewed as passive. The act of making theatre is labor intensive, expensive and time consuming. Furthermore, it takes conscious choice to become part of a theatre audience. One must come together as part of a group in a physical space that is reserved especially for that purpose. And then one must remain alert and engaged with the story throughout, usually through quietly listening and watching, and occasionally by following instructions for some sort of participation. The flexibility of stopping and starting the event does not exist as it does in film and television. And there are no commercials. Theatre audiences have made a commitment to participate in an event.

Yet, this participation is lacking by today’s networked and collaborative standards. Other modes of storytelling, such as the plethora of free and low cost social networking platforms and the increasingly elaborate worlds of video game technology provide “the ability to insert yourself directly into the story.”²

Many theatre practitioners and indeed more devout audience members, may argue that theatre is simply not part of this dichotomy - that our art form does not and should not

¹ Rose, Frank. *The Art of Immersion: How the digital generation is remaking Hollywood, Madison Avenue and the way we tell stories*. W.W. Norton and Company, New York. 2011. pg. 98

² Rose, pg. 57

compete with mass media culture. To which I would say – whether or not we like it, we already are. At its most basic function, theatre is a form of storytelling. As are film and television, and - despite people's lack of awareness of the fact – as are social media and video games. So how does theatre prove its worth in the face of these other options? How does the medium remain relevant in today's rapidly changing, media saturated world?

Our “Game”

Since delving into the study of dramaturgy and the 21st Century theatrical landscape, I've found one of the largest disconnects between the live arts and our everyday lives to be the relative absence of new technology in the theatre making process. In the past decades, theatre people have resisted, rather than embraced technological developments in the modern world, preferring instead tried and true methods of storytelling, whether it be onstage or in the outreach and marketing efforts surrounding the production or institution. Now that technological developments are progressing faster than ever, and vast amounts of resources are available to the consumer market, theatre and the performing arts at large must address these phenomena somehow. Even the baby boomer market, which many theatres rely on for their bread and butter, are becoming more tech-savvy and utilizing mobile and web 2.0 technology as part of their everyday lives. Furthermore, younger generations who have little to no background in the arts through the public education system are turning toward social media and online content as their primary source of understanding the world, and do not identify the theatre as a forum for examining their present day realities or the prevalent issues confronting us as humans.

So what do we, as theatre practitioners, do about this? We have to address these tools somehow, whether we choose to utilize them in our work or not. But I find that many

theatre artists continue to work parallel to and yet completely separate from the universe we all live in – one dictated by smart phones, networks, posts and shares. They live in apprehensive ignorance about the costs as well as benefits of utilizing social media not only in their daily lives but also in their work.

A few companies, such as 3LD Art and Technology Center and The Builders Association, are working to push the boundaries of incorporating cutting edge technology into the experience of a show itself, through environments that often involve elaborate video and projections (3LD) and developing mobile device apps to interface directly with the work happening onstage (Builders' Association). The Wooster Group posts "dailies", a series of videos that provide a glimpse into the daily goings on of the company as they prepare for productions. Aside from these examples, the vast majority of theatre practitioners do not allow any form of the latest technology to assist in the technical realization of their shows, or the ancillary tasks to the work itself, often choosing the older, more expensive and less efficient mechanisms because of their familiarity.

Other arts organizations and storytelling forms have begun to imagine new ways to provide people with access to the work and more deeply engage their audiences, in whichever medium they are working. The Columbus Museum of Art in Columbus, Ohio is one such organization that is re-imagining ways to interact with their guests under a new paradigm. Merilee Mostov, Assistant Director of Education for Visitor Engagement at the museum, cites a 2011 report from the James Irvine Foundation:

"We are in the midst of a seismic shift in cultural production, moving from a 'sit-back-and-be-told culture' to a 'making-and-doing-culture.' Active or participatory arts practices are emerging from the fringes of the Western cultural tradition to capture the collective imagination. ...This shift calls for a new equilibrium in the arts ecology and a new generation of arts leaders ready to accept, integrate

and celebrate all forms of cultural practice.”³

Mostov goes on to describe various techniques the museum is incorporating into the visitor experience at The Columbus Museum of art; a variety of learning opportunities her team refers to as connectors. Examples of such connectors include:

- A place that is stocked with nontraditional art-making materials such as paper clips, rubber bands and coffee cup sleeves, with which visitors are encouraged to make their own works of art.
- A setup of a simple table and chairs in the middle of a gallery, encouraging visitors to gather and socialize about the art around them.
- A series of puzzles that are replicas of art on the wall for visitors to assemble together.

Although these methods of engagement are notably unrelated to 21st century technology, they are based on the philosophy on which so much new media is based; participation as the key to engagement.

As one of a few forward-thinking performing arts organizations attempting to fully utilize new technology, Steppenwolf Theatre Company has developed a mobile device app. The app is essentially an extension of their website, acting as a portal for people to purchase tickets, access performance calendars, and watch videos about the latest productions and the Steppenwolf ensemble. Although the content is not necessarily artistic, the existence of an app is a paradigm shift in allowing audiences to access information about theatres via mobile devices. As this sea change in the way people access online material has swept across the nation (that is, via touch-screen enabled tablets and

³ Mostov, Merilee. “Get Your Game On at CMA!” Columbus Museum of Art. 2011. May 4, 2013. www.columbusmuseum.org. Web.

smartphones rather than via computers), theatres have largely been left behind, striving to develop user-friendly websites.

Shaping our Audience

Resistance to new technology and new forms often manifests itself in the expensive, mass media dominated and decreasingly effective audience development strategies used by most commercial and institutional theatres. Such strategies include magazine and newspaper advertisements, posters displayed at the theatre and postcards and brochures that are often mailed to tens of thousands of people with varying degrees of interest in the theatre's activities. Smaller theatres with less marketing money and thus less purchasing power for the same products then poorly imitate these strategies. A small theatre company that cannot afford print advertising may still put a disproportionately large amount of their limited resources toward printing postcards, but are then unable to afford a distribution mechanism, as it costs nearly 50 cents per piece to send postcards via mail. These print materials then sit in stacks on coffee shop counters and in theatre lobbies, hopefully awaiting the attention of an interested eye. Regardless of the size of the institution, season brochures, newspaper ads, postcards and posters are costly products and while some studies assert that they remain slightly more effective than online audience engagement tools, such analysis does not take into account the 'long game'.

Field-wide metrics⁴ often measure how much marketing expense relates to income and other quantitative, income-based information. Yet, there are two other questions that

⁴ Giraud Voss, Zannie and Glenn B. Voss. "Theatre Facts 2011: A report on the fiscal state of the professional not-for-profit American Theatre". Theatre Communications Group. 2011. March 10, 2013. www.tcg.org

must be addressed, and are important and applicable to both institutional theatres and independent productions:

- What is the qualitative effect of your marketing tools (i.e. how many times does and audience member need to engage with the material before attending a performance? How much attention are they paying to the materials when they do engage with them?)
- How do the marketing tools being used dictate the audience that does attend performances? And in the case of institutions, what does it mean to the overall audience demographic at your theatres?

Though these questions do not seem to be related at first glance, the first is inextricably bound up in the second. If print materials are yielding short-term results, the status quo continues. Thanks to the proliferation of affordable email marketing programs four to five years ago (such as Mail Chimp and Constant Contact), theatres of all sizes have finally been able to join the ranks of businesses that are able to reach their audience base via email, and have some semblance of a digital database built within these programs. And yet, this is a method of communication that is already viewed as a “dinosaur” in more tech-savvy industries. Indeed, it is often only when a production needs an additional boost in its marketing efforts that institutional theatres turn their focus to social media.

The question of measuring the qualitative effects of various marketing techniques is not easily answered. But looking at it from the point of view of how theatres can most efficiently allocate their resources, things start to become clearer. For example, a postcard or poster for a certain production or season at an institution is a static image, while digital media are constantly changing and adapting to specific conditions. Even though a very

evocative image or tagline can resonate with audiences in many unique ways, the potential for interaction with a print marketing piece begins and ends with a static visual image.

Since theatres have never had the advertising budgets to break into radio or television, the world of social media suddenly opens up a dynamic, affordable way to consistently provide new information and content, giving audiences limitless ways to interact with the production.

Social media tools are also inherently storytelling tools, and thus have the potential to be marketing engines without labeling themselves as such. Thus the possibilities of this tool are nearly limitless. The concept itself is something the videogame and film industries have been experimenting with for over a decade – as early as 2001 with the release of the movie *Jurassic Park*. During the marketing campaign for this film, Warner Brothers invested significant resources in what they call the “subdural approach”.

“The experiment began in April 2001, 12 weeks before the release of the movie when a credit for something called a ‘sentient machine therapist’ appeared among the myriad other credits listed in trailers and posters for the film. The clue was so tiny, you could easily miss it, but that was the point. Marketers were already encountering a growing problem: how to reach people so media saturated that they block any attempt to get through,” explains Frank Rose. The answer in this case: “Instead of shouting the message, hide it.

Within 24 hours, someone posted the discovery on the movie fan site Ain’t It Cool News. Googling the therapist’s name, people found a maze of bizarre Web sites about robot rights...within days, a 24-year-old computer programmer in Oregon had organized an online discussion forum to investigate.”⁵

Now, a dozen years after these early experiments in film and videogames, theatres that are venturing in to social media seem to be employing the exact opposite strategy.

“Our show is great! This is how you buy a ticket!” most theatre’s Facebook pages scream to the world, posted repeatedly within a short period of time. It is often baffling that an organization and cohort of people who have dedicated their lives to telling stories can only

⁵ Rose, pg. 21

repeat this same story over again on their Facebook pages, Twitter feeds and websites. But what if the show’s marketing strategy involved telling part of the story of the play? Or even simply introducing people to the themes and ideas on which the play is focused?

One example of the subdural approach being developed is the Theatre Plus Network, an app for smart phones and mobile devices specifically designed to make images in printed materials “come to life.”⁶ The app can be downloaded to mobile devices and placed in front of an image on a program, creating a moving image on the mobile device screen. This certainly a step in the right direction as it provides mobile device owners with an exciting way to apply 21st century technology to a “traditional” theatre-going experience and employs the fundamental logic of the subdural approach – allowing the audience to self-direct their experience and empowering them to be active participants in this experience. Yet, it is still based on the existence of print materials, which are cost-prohibitive for small companies and which most theatres would be wise to phase out over time.

Starting a New Approach

Using social media to bring together the world of the play with the marketing strategy surrounding it also requires closer alignment between an institutional theatre’s artistic and marketing departments. Social media storytelling is a truly hybrid task and has the potential for success when it lives within the realm of both artistic and audience development focused activities. Certain forward thinking institutions are beginning to argue for this approach, among them Theatre Bay Area in the publication “Counting New Beans: intrinsic impact and the value of art” and Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company in

⁶ Stevens Interactive Productions. “About” www.stevensip.com. April 28, 2013.

Washington, DC. Both organizations have made a commitment to taking on the re-definition of audience engagement as it relates to 21st Century audiences.

Clayton Lord of Theatre Bay Area addresses the tension that seems to exist around this topic within institutions:

“We have heard from some of our interviews during this process that there is often a tension between marketing impulses (and departments) and the artistic staff – a feeling that the marketing staff can fall back on reams of data (sales records, audience satisfaction reports, etc) in order to infringe, in a way on the artistic selection process. This either can manifest as a resentment within an organization, if the system functions this way, or as an equally detrimental policy of departmental isolation for fear that the system will function this way, in which the marketing staff is kept out of conversations about the upcoming art and is, essentially, presented with a finished palette and told to ‘figure it out’ – and in which, on the other side, marketing materials and strategy are developed without substantial involvement from the artistic staff.”⁷

Lord seems to present this as an issue on both sides of the institutional structure with each viewpoint needing to expand and adjust to work more closely and effectively together.

Later in the same book, arts researcher and blogger Diane Ragsdale creates a new dichotomy – that of artists and audiences versus institution:

“Artists and communities make up a constantly evolving and changing environment. It’s the institutions that are stuck, holding on to beliefs and practices about what is or is not “legitimate theatre” and denying the changing tastes, habits and demographics of their communities. Perhaps the impulse should be to destroy, not necessarily the institutions themselves, but the need that those institutions have to hold onto the power, to control the conversation. What if, instead, arts institutions evolved in response to the evolution of artists and their communities?”⁸

Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company is taking all of these ideas and feeding them into their goal of “explosive engagement” for its audiences. The process begins with individuals at every level and in all areas of the organization reading the play to be produced and searching for entry points in the piece with which they identify. Everyone attempts to answer the question, “What artistic conversation is the play trying to have?”

⁷ Lord, Clayton, ed. *Counting New Beans: intrinsic impact and the value of art*. Pg. 47. San Francisco. Theatre Bay Area. 2012. Print.

⁸ Lord, Clayton, ed. Pg. 58.

Once answers to this question are identified, the subsequent question becomes, “Who are the stakeholders in this conversation? Why does this play need to be produced right now.” Coming together around these overarching questions serves to align the work of the artistic, marketing and development departments. Additionally, Woolly Mammoth has a Connectivity department, tasked with bringing together the various stakeholders around the play and using those allies to cultivate audiences that are invested in each of the different plays happening throughout the season.

Part of Woolly Mammoth’s explosive engagement strategy is their use of technology to connect the audience with the world of the play. This is currently being realized through three major strategies, which have been funded by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and Theatre Communications Group:

- A technologically-enhanced lobby that supports interactive lobby programming, promoting personalization and understanding of each show’s themes
- A robust communications plan - spearheaded by new Woolly Mammoth Marketing Director and social media expert Alli Houseworth - that encourages audiences to participate in the Wolly Mammoth experience via social media and to broadcast their experience.
- Boosted bandwidth and cell phone reception in the building

Although the short-term potential of social media to engage audiences with a particular production is useful, the long-term potential of these tools is truly profound. Communication via social media about a theatre’s activities is literally the portal to the next generation of audiences. As institutions wring their hands about the “graying” of their audiences, they are simultaneously using the same strategies to engage new audiences that

are effective with their existing ones. A more thoughtful and in-depth use of social media will engage a new generation of potential audiences – a generation that utilizes digital tools to create, communicate and express themselves. Through the use of social media, we can begin to engage potential audiences early and often, thus shifting the tides of who audiences are and how theatres communicate with them.

It seems logical that a social media campaign for a production would begin by attempting to engage that theatre's core audiences, such as previous ticket buyers, subscribers and their guests. And this does not necessarily mean teenagers. Numerous studies in the past few years have shown that the fastest growing demographic on Facebook is adults over the age of 65.⁹ And the demographic in between are robust users of social media as a whole as well. Additionally, over two thirds of Americans who use the Internet at all are Facebook users¹⁰, making this an overwhelmingly effective way to reach people online via a platform they are already using. While it will be necessary for a while longer to continue dual modes of marketing (print and online), existing audiences seem to overwhelmingly have taken to the Internet as a source of information as well for connecting with people and organizations they care about.

Additionally, while print materials and even online browser-based ads primarily reach existing theatre goers, with the aim of enticing them to attend a particular production, social media has the potential to convert individuals who may be passionate about the themes and ideas within a particular production into first-time theatre audiences. Facebook and Twitter have powerful filters for certain key words and content,

⁹ "How to Appeal to Facebook's Fastest Growing Demographic: Seniors" All Facebook. 2011. www.allfacebook.com. May 4, 2013. Web.

¹⁰ "The State of Social Media Users" Pew Internet & American Life Project. 2013. www.pewinternet.org. May 4, 2013. Web.

associating topics and issues that are related to each other and filtering them into a particular user's home page. Similarly to the "suggestions from Amazon" section, or recommendations from Netflix, social media platforms are able to catalogue a user's behavior and make sure that content in which that user is likely to be interested ends up being seen. Particularly with new plays that touch on issues or ideas relevant to our present day realities, a social media user may be encouraged to come together with a group of people who are interested in or identify with an issue about which she feels passionate. Part of Woolly Mammoth's mandate is to reach new audiences based on the subject matter of each production, and social media has the potential to be a key player in such efforts.

Because theatre as a field is in such need of acquiring new audiences, any boost that social media can provide, particularly considering the almost nonexistent hard costs of this strategy, is worth pursuing. In juxtaposition with mass media, theatre practitioners place value on the quality of their audiences, rather than sheer numbers. The intimacy and immediacy of an experience certainly has aspects that cannot be quantified, and yet, the number of people participating in these more intimate experiences is falling sharply, according to nearly every available metric in our field.

The 2008 NEA arts participation survey reported that attendance at non-musical plays had declined throughout the nation to less than 10% of adults attending even one play per year. This places theatre as one of the least attended arts activities in the nation, and compared with previous statistics, puts theatre at a 30-year low.¹¹ Less-frequently attended arts events are classical music and jazz concerts, the ballet and the opera, all of which are genres from which theatres strive to differentiate themselves. Ironically,

¹¹ "2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts." www.arts.gov. pg. 10. April 7, 2013. Web.

historical sites and art museums/galleries, which are often perceived by theatres as less relevant than the performing arts as a whole, enjoyed nearly double the number of attendees nationwide as theatres.

Perhaps more telling than the statistics reported in the survey itself is the relative lack of acknowledgement throughout the report of the changing nature of engagement with the arts. The section devoted to arts participation via media only measured such things as musical recordings and either audio or video recordings of live performances. When the Internet was brought in to the discussion, there was only measurement of how many Americans accessed reading materials online. Though this survey has aged considerably since its release in November 2009, its lack of acknowledgement of even the existence of social media is telling of the way the field as a whole responds to technological innovation. By this point, platforms such as Facebook and YouTube had become ubiquitous, and use of these sites was growing rapidly across a span of age demographics. Indeed, in December 2008, Facebook reported an extreme growth spurt, averaging 600,000 new users per day.¹² And YouTube, acquired by Google in 2006 and one of the first ways to easily and accessibly share video online, was also growing rapidly. Yet, it was not until later that such tools began to become part of the conversation.

In her January - March 2013 series of HowlRound articles, Sylvia Mallory begins to explore how theatres can work to strategically engage audiences using social media. The first step seems to be an obvious one, yet not something that most theatre companies have embraced as yet – hiring a full time position dedicated to managing the theatre’s online presence. Mallory has recently been hired in this capacity at Signature Theatre in

¹² Smith, Justin. “Facebook Now Growing by over 600,000 New Users a Day – And New Engagement Stats”. *Inside Facebook*. 2008. April 7, 2013. www.insideFacebook.com.

Washington, DC, but few institutional theatres across the nation have acknowledged the importance of their online presence in this way. Yet, Mallory describes the investment correctly when she asserts that, “Signature shows great gumption and forward-thinking in hiring for a relatively small niche, but ultimately large impact field.”¹³

The lack of dedicated staff to a theatre’s online presence is one of many indicators that the field as a whole is significantly behind the curve or a late adopter of new technology. Theatre practitioners and institutions, both large and small, are not fully harnessing the potential of existing free social media and web 2.0 tools to augment the conversation surrounding their work, nor are they putting a significant effort toward learning such tools. When it comes to digital media content of any sort, many theatre practitioners become adversarial, viewing web content such as social networking, videos and other interactive media as a distraction from the sanctified work that takes place within the walls of a theatre. But by adjusting their perspective toward digital media and viewing it as a tool for producers and theatres rather than a competitor, theatre practitioners open up possibilities of exponentially growing and strengthening the audience for their work.

Authenticity

Theatre practitioners and audiences attach a value judgment to the refusal to utilize technology onstage. Theatre is more real because it is less mediated, and therefore better, according to the values that govern our art form. However, our “real” lives are now more

¹³ Mallory, Sylvia. “The Galaxy’s Guide to Digital Media: #SigDMC”. HowlRound. 2013. April 7, 2013. www.howlround.com.

mediated than ever, and immersive storytelling¹⁴ using multiple platforms has become commonplace. Television characters have their own Twitter accounts. Video game avatars are more elaborate and sophisticated than ever before, all with the aim of using technology to blur lines between real life and the stories we enjoy. The theatre community is vastly behind the curve in utilizing social media technology for these purposes. Most performing arts institutions are focused on using Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms to brand their organizations and sell tickets rather than using them as the storytelling and content spreading tools that they naturally are. If producers of theatre – especially new work – used these tools to their full potential, the result would be a dramaturgical exploration of the themes within the work that takes place before, during and after the run of the show. And in its more fully realized form, social media tools could serve as introductions to the voices of specific characters, which can then inform and further flesh out the story seen onstage, as well as give audience members the opportunity to interact with the characters and invest in their personal stories.

The successful use of digital media to augment a live theatrical event is a complex balancing act – one that is not without a certain amount of risk. And yet, when guided thoughtfully and carefully, as well as given some room to grow autonomously, it can serve a new play in capacities far beyond traditional methods of outreach or marketing. Indeed, successful use of social media requires very close alignment of artistic and marketing goals for social media use. Ideally the strategies for these two uses of social media would fuse

¹⁴ Immersive storytelling refers to the desire to blur the line between reality and the story being told. If an individual is immersed deeply enough in a story, it can become “real” to him/her. This typically happens through some form of digital participation.

into one, allowing the successful augmenting of a story online to drive audiences toward purchasing tickets for the live event.

As with most theatrical endeavors, the first step in shifting the paradigm around social media is increased collaboration and buy-in from the playwright. In many ways, theatre as a highly collaborative art form is poised to successfully incorporate new media. Theatres are not major studios that dictate content because multiple millions of dollars at stake – they are designed to be artistic environments within which each unique artistic endeavor can situate itself. The stumbling block for the theatrical mindset, however, is the consumer-driven nature of social media. It is inevitable that at some point, the audience will help shape the story.

“Digital Media have created an authorship crisis,” says Rose. “Once the audience is free to step out into the fiction and start directing events, the entire edifice of twentieth-century mass media begins to crumble...Ad people...being to stop preaching to consumers and start listening to them. That’s what ‘sense and respond’ means. A dialogue.”¹⁵

While theatres do not have nearly as much to lose as mass media by slightly loosening their control of the conversation, the idea of tightly weaving together the theatre’s marketing strategy with the world of the play itself suddenly makes the playwright vulnerable to the audience (read: consumer) dictating the direction of their stories – something the theatre has proudly claimed to avoid for several decades, since the American non-profit theatre was founded.

The paradigm shift is this – the vulnerability of a playwrights’ work being touched by the audience prior to the first preview must be re-framed as an asset. While the fundamental structure and elements of the play can remain the same, social media

¹⁵ Rose, Frank. pg. 83.

essentially opens up the opportunity for audiences to begin “talking” to the playwright’s characters and immersing themselves in the world of the play and its themes long before they ever step into the theatre. The potential of this is huge, and opens up myriad possibilities for engaging with audiences prior to the theatrical event.

Strategies such as this one are an ideal opportunity for a playwright to collaborate with a marketing staff or the producers of a production to further flesh out the world of the play itself. Dialogue that may have been trimmed from the script or ideas that had been explored but removed from the play itself may be re-explored and given life through such efforts. And the right team of collaborators will also reflect back to the playwright what they see in her production, essentially serving as the play’s first audience and giving the playwright a sense of how the work is being received. The earlier this process begins, the better for both playwright and staff – the playwright is able to prepare for audiences and hone in on what resonates with an ideal audience, and the producers and marketing staff are allowed to develop a more meaningful connection to the play itself, likely resulting in more dynamic and developed ideas for how to introduce the play to the world.

Thinking Globally, Acting Locally

One interesting and unexpected aspect of social media technology is that it is now doing an about face from the global trends of the ‘90’s and early two thousands; it is focusing on the local. Much of the function of new sharing sites, including the new site Findery, started by Caterina Fake who also started Flickr, focus on connecting people more closely and meaningfully with their communities, and each other.

“We’ve gone through this really expansive phase and we’re in a state of reunification and refocus on the local,” says Fake. “...We built a lot of tools to make it easier and easier for everybody to get online and do the same thing. I think we’ve reached capacity in that sense – in the sense of the globalization of the individual mind.”

Fake also recognizes a new trend amongst web-based technology that, ironically, she perceives to come from social media exhaustion.

“I think we are gaining a new appreciation for the here and now, for the place we live, for the people in our neighborhood, for groundedness...you see the early indications of a return to the local.”¹⁶

If theatre practitioners did not see the opportunity in social media before, here it is staring them in the face. Theatre is inherently local, and people’s renewed interest in connecting with their immediate surroundings via the web makes the relationship to the live performing arts quite serendipitous. If a social media platform is designed to connect you with your local coffee shop or restaurant, it can just as easily connect you with your preferred cultural enrichment, based on your interests and preferences it already catalogues each time you Google something or type a URL. From this, a theatre or standalone production stands to gain an interested, self-selected audience that likely has been able to find them by virtue of this technology.

Platforms such as Findery not only encourage in-person engagement with a local business or event, they encourage online discourse about it. A user is encouraged to leave a note or photo and “tag” it with a location, so that the next user who finds herself in that place can retrieve the story, photo or piece of information. Platforms such as Findery - or anything that allows users to post unique content - are already fashioned as natural tools for storytelling, and are beginning to define themselves as such. Caterina Fake provides a potent example:

“There was a lot of crime information on Findery for Hunters Point, a poor neighborhood in San Francisco. As a team, we felt an urge to make the place come alive, to say, ‘This is the community, this is the history of the place, there’s the important stuff that’s going on now.’ That can’t happen unless

¹⁶ Madrigal, Alexis. “Look Smarter”. *The Atlantic* March 2013: Pg. 30. Print.

you give people a place to talk. If a newspaper reports on Hunters Point, the 'if it bleeds it leads' attitude dominates. The news doesn't tell you the story of a place as the locals know it."¹⁷

Location-based technology has recently also gained popularity on much more ubiquitous social media sites. The location-based technology used by Foursquare has recently been seamlessly integrated with Facebook and Instagram, encouraging anyone posting from their mobile device to tag the exact location from which he/she is posting. The power to tell hyper-local stories via the World Wide Web is now, literally and figuratively, in our hands.

Participation

Social media has the potential to create participatory artistic experiences that are as spontaneous and democratic as the happenings of 1960's in the U.S. and abroad. It is a new form, with the capability of reaching millions, but the catalysts for "cyber happenings", utilizing the most popular social media outlets as a means of gathering individuals and transmitting their message, remain similar. In her most recent book, the art historian and critic Claire Bishop writes, "In short, the artistic backdrop to participatory art in Paris of the 1960's was the idea of democracy as the leveling equality of consumer capitalism. Everyday culture accessible to all, was at the core of this understanding of democracy..."¹⁸A social or political movement can spur thousands to commune online for the purpose of discussion or action. Recent and potent examples of this, however, have lived decidedly outside the realm of the performing arts. The 2009 movement in Iran and 2011 uprising in Cairo and across North Africa, resulting in the Arab Spring both demonstrated the power

¹⁷ Madrigal, Alexis. "Look Smarter". *The Atlantic* March 2013: Pg. 31. Print.

¹⁸ Bishop, Claire. *Artificial Hells: Participatory art and the politics of spectatorship*. Verso, New York. 2012. Pg. 80.

and potential of social media. While certain activists participating in these movements identified as artists, the movements themselves, unlike those created by The Living Theatre, Groupe Recherche d'art Visuel (GRAV), were not necessarily categorized as artistic.

The LGBTQ civil rights movement that has been gaining steam over the past year to eighteen months, beginning with the legalization of gay marriage in New York State, has merged quite seamlessly with the notion of a cyber happening. Such action seems to draw on the European tradition of happenings, as Bishop mentions that the “references to contemporary political events...represented the strongest dividing line between European and North American Happenings.”¹⁹ Simple, powerful images have gone viral²⁰ and spurred topical discussion and action. The posting of a certain image or sharing of online content has become a means to declare one's allegiance to a movement or cause. Because of the inevitable connection between current events and social media, today's online happenings are not only connected with contemporary political events, but in constant conversation with them. This was most recently evidenced by the viral spread of a simple red and pink graphic meant to symbolize marriage equality, which made its way across the globe in a matter of approximately 24 hours, on the day the U.S. Supreme Court was scheduled to hear arguments for and against the constitutionality of same sex marriage.

Through the use of social media, theatre has the potential to fuse the global with the local, cyber happenings with community-based art to spur deeper examination of such current political issues. Once ancillary to our culture, social media platforms - particularly

¹⁹ Bishop, pg. 94

²⁰ An image, video, or link that spreads rapidly through a population by being frequently shared with a number of individuals. Source: Urban Dictionary. Web. March 31, 2013

Facebook and Twitter, being by far the most ubiquitous – have now become a fundamental touchstone of our culture. The tools we now use to communicate with each other, share information and build relationships have in turn shaped the way information is consumed and how relationships are built.

Bishop notes that a similar phenomenon occurred with the “launch of *Time Out* Magazine [in London] in 1969 (which listed all cultural productions in London indiscriminately of status or quality)...[Such a platform helped with] broadening audience participation, rather than the consumption of high art as a part of a profit-making system.”²¹ Social media adds another layer of potential participatory activity. In addition to providing a platform in which all live performance events are represented equally, regardless of budgetary limitations or the size of the institution producing them, social media provides the opportunity to begin a conversation with one’s audiences before they set foot in the theatre.

Project Description

In an effort to test the theories I had been developing around theatre and social media, I began working with The Movement Theatre Company (TMTC), a small Harlem-based theatre company that produces new work by emerging artists of color. In Spring 2012 I learned that the new play they had in development was also part of a project called the Cyber Narrative Project, a program spearheaded by Black Women’s Playwrights Group and the Carnegie Mellon Entertainment Technology Center. As part of this project, TMTC would receive funding to explore new and innovative ways to use technology to engage the audience surrounding their upcoming production of a new play.

²¹ Bishop, pg 183 – 184.

The Movement Theatre Company's project was one of many participants in the cyber narrative project. Most notable participants included Lynn Nottage, who worked with the Cyber Narrative Project to create a website that was intended to function as the third act of her play, *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark*. And Kristoffer Diaz, worked with the project to develop a video game based on his hit play, *The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Diety*. Other theatres participating in the project included About Face Theatre, Dallas Theater Center, Victory Gardens Theatre, and Woolly Mammoth.

The Movement Theatre Company's play, called *Look Upon Our Lowliness, a spoken word elegy for a chorus of male voices*, was conceived more than two years ago by David Mendizábal, who was yearning to see more stories about gay men of color on New York's stages. He commissioned playwright Harrison David Rivers to write something, based on this idea and inspired by a piece of music, *Spem in Alium*. The result was a haunting and fascinating script about a charismatic young man who suddenly and mysteriously dies, and how his closest friends cope in the wake of this strange tragedy. The play interwove nicely with the idea of using Cyber Narrative, since a large aspect of the characters' relationships in the play were built through their digital communications. Though I had been to a few developmental readings of the play and found it to be a strong script, it was the Cyber Narrative element that prompted me to join the producing team for this production.

The Movement Theatre Company also has an egalitarian and collaborative leadership model, which prompted me to join the team. Four Producing Artistic Leaders, collectively spearhead the company, sharing all artistic and administrative duties. As a producer on this project, I am essentially the fifth leader of the company for the time that this project is in production. I have provided input on artistic development of the script,

fundraising, selection of a venue for the production, branding and advertising the company and the production, building strategic relationships, hiring a design and stage management team and casting. Because of the company's collaborative approach my opinions and advice have carried equal weight to those of TMTC's leadership. Such an opportunity has been invaluable in allowing me to try and implement the theories and strategies I have been exploring around theatre and social media.

I was present at the first reading of this play in May 2011. Even at the time, when only the first act of the play existed, it was an electrifying piece of work that felt real and urgent and of the moment, and I was eager to be a part of it. The potential for using 21st century technology was also a natural fit with the piece. Each character heavily utilized his mobile devices, to the point where the majority of the first act of the play relies on such technology to move the story forward. As is so often the case in our present-day lives, these characters spend several key moments of the play alone but in communication through the digital world. While the idea of Cyber Narratives had not yet come into play, it seemed clear that a key aspect of the dramaturgy of this piece was technology and connectivity.

In addition to Harrison's openness about creating an ancillary narrative through the Cyber Narrative Project, the content of the play itself lent itself quite well to an online platform. The first act of the play consists primarily of characters communicating with each other via text message, cell phone or social media. Additionally, Tyler's online presence receives a large amount of attention within the context of the play, as the community of which he was a part takes to his Facebook page to speculate about the cause of his mysterious death. Finally, a series of videos that Tyler made of himself haunt a few of the characters in the play – particularly one excruciating video of the moments leading up to

his death. The fact that all of these elements played a key part in the world of the play rendered the Cyber Narrative meaningful from the start.

The two subsequent readings of the play focused on completing the script and clarifying story. As part of the scripts completion was added another dimension of digital storytelling. Tyler Davidson, the character that mysteriously dies just prior to the start of the play had first appeared onstage in direct address to the audience. He never interacted with the other cast members, but was seen in the flesh, never quite defined as a ghost but also clearly not of this world. In July 2012, Harrison completed a new draft in which Tyler appears in video sequences only. Sometimes he is on a projection onstage – part of the theatrical world – sometimes he is in a “practical” video that a character watches on his phone or computer. One of the characters in the play has developed a habit of calling Tyler’s cell phone and listening to his outgoing voicemail, then leaving messages as a means of comforting himself. At various moments in the play Tyler’s persona enters the world via digital communication. This further encouraged the producing team to explore the possibilities of an online life for the characters in this production – particularly Tyler.

Tyler’s character trait of taking video of himself opened up an exciting storytelling possibility. If certain videos of Tyler lived online in advance of the production, this could give audiences the opportunity to get to know this character prior to ever entering the theatre. Given that the first event in the play is Tyler’s friends learning of his death, we thought that these videos could potentially connect audiences to Tyler, and thus to the loss his friends feel, in a dark but also intriguing way. Within the course of the story, Tyler’s close friend Darius discovers a series of videos on Tyler’s personal video camera after he finds his body, which provides a connection to videos posted online.

In addition to incorporating elements of digital media within the piece, the playwright, director and producing team began to formulate a plan for extending the lives of these characters into the realm of social media. Prior to this workshop, the playwright and director had developed an elaborate proposal for TMTC creating their own social network that would mimic existing networks, but would be exclusive to those who sign up specifically to participate in it. This seemed like a way to build an online audience and “brand loyalty” – investment in the characters and world of the play in advance of the production. The scale of the project was envisioned with the considerable financial support assured by the Cyber Narrative Project.

We initially had the idea of each character in the play having their own profile and interacting with potential audience via this platform. We would use this social network as a sort of character study – deciding the particular nuances of each character’s preferences and speech patterns, thinking this would help both artists and audiences to differentiate this closely-knit group of gay men of color from each other. We liked the mystery and exclusivity of TMTC creating their own social network.

In thinking about media strategy, certain members of our team began reaching out to experts in the media world who could help us shape and hone our idea of our own social network. Interestingly, our biggest and most elaborate idea for this – creating something completely new that TMTC owns and runs – was considered completely ineffectual. In a meeting with a Showtime executive, someone pointed out what we as a team hadn’t yet seen – that using the already existing and ubiquitous network that is Facebook would be just as easy (probably easier, because millions of people were already part of the network).

While we liked the idea of TMTC creating its own network (an online counterpart to what the company is striving to do with their actual community), we realized that Facebook was actually a much more efficient way of going about what we wanted to do which was create a way for audiences to meet our characters online. So we sacrificed the idea of our unique network in favor of efficiency. Additionally, at this time, the Cyber Narrative Project had still not put their commitment to TMTC in writing and we were unsure of how much support we would actually receive from them.

In September 2012 we came together to reevaluate the Cyber Narrative, with a basic understanding of the amount of human and financial resources we would have for this aspect of the production. At this point we were still assured \$5,000 by the Cyber Narrative Project, and we had established a core group of producers for the production, all of whom were extremely busy but also committed to making *Look Upon Our Lowliness* happen. We became aware of the reality that maintaining nine unique Facebook pages for each of the characters in the play was not feasible.

Because of the level of engagement we were attempting on our Facebook page, we were also concerned about potentially locking in certain aspects of the script itself by developing a specific story about each character (or any character) on Facebook. For a while, the idea had been to create a profile only for Tyler and find a way to use this as a way to engage potential audiences in the story. But if this was Tyler's story, how would we continue it past the first performance? Would people feel duped that they were friends with Tyler on Facebook only to realize that he was a character they would never get to meet in the production?

Other questions quickly began to crop up around this concept. How would we maintain the secret of Tyler's death when it would be on social media right after the first performance? Because the realm of his character is the digital, how far will this actor be expected to take his persona, both online and in life? This aspect of the concept started to get very opaque and problematic. While we wanted to experiment with an online persona, we knew we could not do so to the detriment of the play itself or our relationship with our audience.

At this point, we decided the cyber narrative could be thematically tied to the play, but does not have to be concerned with the events immediately preceding the piece. The idea is not necessarily to have begun the story by the time the audience walks into the theatre, but rather to give a sort of preface, introducing them to the themes of the piece, piquing their curiosity and mentioning Tyler Davidson a few times, hopefully enough to have people wondering who he is.

In the midst of the various techniques being discussed of how to engage with potential audiences, we also came to an agreement on the primary message fuelling the campaign – the creation of a community. This stemmed directly from Harrison's belief that the play is, above all else, about a community, as well as the fact that this message was obviously helpful to the building of another layer of community in the form of an audience. An essential aspect of this community was intended to be discussion of key issues and ideas permeating the world of the play and the world around us. We decided that we would set up the production's Facebook page as a community page, with the tagline, "A forum to discuss identity, community, culture, loss and life - and the connections they all share."

Even within the context of the Facebook page, we were crafting a message around the notion of participation, inclusion and thoughtful community building.

We decided that our users would have to be generating the majority of the content in order for this experiment to work. This is how we will grow our network beyond our immediate friends and be able to keep the constant conversation going. In order to spearhead the conversation, we decided to come up with specific directives to post online on our three main platforms (Facebook, Twitter and Instagram), and ask people to respond to those prompts. We took our inspiration from the social media explosion around Trayvon Martin, the Florida teenager who was murdered outside his friend's home when returning from buying candy at the store. At a certain point in this story, it seemed that 90% of my Facebook friends had a picture of themselves in a hoodie posted on their Facebook profile. This simple but powerful unifying image activated the nation and spearheaded marches, advocacy groups, and impassioned conversation until the indictment of Martin's alleged killer. Though the circumstances surrounding this movement were extremely tragic, the unifying visual symbols as well as messages reverberating across the world on social media proved to be a strong example of the powerful potential of social media.

We also discussed the marriage equality advocates who encouraged any supporters of gay marriage to take a picture with the sign "This is what my family looks like." A simple request for such an image proved to be a powerful tool for activating not only the LGBTQ community around this issue, but their allies, who proudly posed with their loved ones to stand equal to any same sex couple in America.

Examples of prompts/topics we came up with ranged from the very broad to the very specific:

- Post a picture of your NYC family
- What is your favorite quote about (insert topic here)
- The history/culture of Harlem and the arts in Harlem
- High profile LGBTQ New Yorkers who are working in the cultural sector

Surrounding these prompts, we decided we would hold live events. The Cyber Narrative would act as the trail that would hopefully lead people to various live events, and the final live event will be the play itself. Before that, there will be cocktail parties, special nights at bars and clubs, and perhaps a New Year's Eve party.

We decided that the Facebook page which is the home base for the cyber narrative will not just be a “show page” (i.e. come see our show! It's going to be so good!) but would also be a forum for discussing some of the themes and ideas within the piece. The hope is that, after the run of *Look Upon Our Lowliness*, this page continues as an online community and forum for dynamic and progressive discussion around LGBTQ issues, love, loss and other themes. It can also act as a hub for disseminating information about events happening in the community that would once again bring together the *Look Upon Our Lowliness* audience.

It was agreed that everyone was going to generate prompts for the Cyber Narrative and that we would come back together and discuss and select them. Harrison would also write some select pieces of dialogue that will be said to come “from” Tyler through Facebook or Twitter. This more thematic approach to the cyber narrative freed the playwright from having to write all of the text for this aspect of the project. Rather than

needing to establish what is essentially dialogue for each character's page or only Tyler's page, this thematic approach would allow the entire producing team to contribute to shaping a "voice" for the production on social media.

In October and November, 2012, The Movement Theatre Company made a focused effort toward building its online audience and starting a conversation around the themes of *Look Upon Our Lowliness*. On September 29, we began the campaign called "40 reasons". The number 40 is a reference to the 40-part renaissance motet, *Spem in Alium*, from which the title of the play is taken. The producing team came together with the playwright and brainstormed different content to post, each in the form of a reason for audiences to attend the show. These once-a-day posts marked a significant increase in TMTC's online activity, and increased the company's "likes" to over 1,000 people.

Around the same time, I attended a seminar on social media with representatives from Vayner Media, an online branding and marketing consulting firm. I learned at this point that Facebook has elaborate formulas, designed to increase the visibility of users that post more frequently than those who post occasionally. This proved that our efforts to post regularly about the production several months before it's opening could only benefit us as we attempted to raise the visibility of the production and begin the conversation around this play. At the end of October 2012, near the end of our "40 reasons" campaign, we created a Facebook page specific to the workshop production of *Look Upon Our Lowliness*, which was scheduled to happen in April 2013. As part of our campaign in which we posted daily to The Movement Theatre Company's page, we encouraged audiences to "like" the page for the production. The strategy in launching the production page early was to slowly but steadily gather audiences for the production through "likes" on the page, as well as

create a forum for discussion around the topics in the play. We categorized the page as a “community page”, rather than an event page or an arts and entertainment focused page, with the aim of elevating the discussion on the page beyond solely a transaction. The producing team believed that if we could engage people through the lens of politics, culture and community that the notion of purchasing a ticket to the spring production would come naturally as a means of continuing this conversation.

As we moved this project closer toward production, we realized its potential to bring together a niche community that was still working to define itself, and as such, had very few physical gathering spaces. In addition to posting about characters and their interests, we began to expand thematically to talk about the largely underground but vibrant LGBTQ community in Harlem. We began to use the Facebook page for the show as a way to aggregate events happening in Harlem and began to focus on branding this show as an Uptown social event. Local businesses began to lend their support to the production by offering food and drink specials, encouraging our audiences to use nearby venues as post-performance gathering places. As many of the cast and creative team also live in Harlem, this became a way for the artists to participate in the civic life of their neighborhood as well as in the promotional activities surrounding the production.

Although the producing team never fully fleshed out the notion of the ideal audience for this piece, we all had a distinct sense of who we were speaking to through social media. The ideal audience for *Look Upon Our Lowliness* was anyone who could see themselves or parts of themselves in the characters being represented. While this included people of color, people who identify as LGBT, and their allies, the play represents a community above all else. We hoped that anyone who could identify with this community of friends who are

so close that they function as a family, could find their way into the world of the play. Additionally, anyone who had experienced the loss of someone close to them would likely identify with the struggles many of these characters were facing. While the form of the play was not particularly naturalistic, it was also accessible enough to function as someone's first theatrical experience, so we attempted to utilize social media to reach beyond the New York theatre-going community and convert other potential audience members from the LGBTQ community and the local Harlem community.

We continued to talk constantly at the individuals we hoped would turn into our audience. While the *Look Upon Our Lowliness* page looked as if it was gaining some traction in the fall, things slowed down around the holidays and we entered the New Year with less than 100 people who had "liked" the page. This was surprising only because of the vast networks each producer individually had on Facebook. I speculated that this had to do with the saturation of information people receive via social media. It also became clear that, while we were making a concerted effort to post about topics and events of substance on our page, this was not gaining traction with our audience. LGBTQ issues such as marriage equality were at the forefront of our posts, and this was not working for us. At this point, another takeaway from my fall social media seminar resonated loudly – it doesn't actually matter what you post, only the fact that you do post. Furthermore, actual engagement with your audience is just as important, if not more important than posting. If someone comments on a post, you must acknowledge it in some way. If someone asks a question, it must be answered. This is the key to growing a social media audience.

The cyber narrative underwent a considerable financial setback at the top of December. The company learned that Black Women Playwrights' Group, which had long

promised funding to the cyber narrative, was no longer going to support the project. This was disappointing and frustrating, especially for members of the company who had been in communication with BWPG over the long term and who had heard nothing else than explicit promises of funding from this organization since the beginning.

It was clear from the letter from BWPG that our contact had many reasons for terminating her involvement in the Cyber Narrative, and that we did not see eye to eye on many of these reasons.

The team pulled together to meet within a day after receiving this letter, and strategized how to move forward. We had lost a significant amount of both human and financial resources. BWPG had been promising to find us a “team”, as well as a cash sum of \$5,000, one of the largest grants that we anticipated receiving for this project. As a team with considerable experience on independent productions, we had confidence in our collective nimbleness and flexibility, and began to strategize a new approach. We decided on the following course of action:

- Simplify the project in its infancy, and keep more elaborate ideas on the back burner in case a funder is interested in supporting more infrastructure for the project
- Search for someone who may be willing to manage our various social media platforms as an in-kind donation or favor to the project, in exchange for recognition and experience, thereby alleviating the producing team of day to day tasks associated with the cyber narrative
- Search for other partner organizations that may be willing to partner with us on the project at this late date in the form of contributing approximately \$1,000 -

\$2,000 in exchange for prominent recognition on the project. This would allow us to recoup the \$5,000 lost with a few new partners on the project.

- Host an event between now and the production geared toward making money. TMTC has a history of successful fundraising events, but on a small enough scale that this may not make a large dent in our deficit.
- Search for other forms of funding such as corporate giving and other grass roots, small scale grants that may have a quicker turnaround time between submitting an application and receiving funds.

Though this changed the budget and planning for this project considerably, we were confident and optimistic that we could still create an effective cyber narrative, albeit on a greatly reduced scale. If we could produce this smaller scale online activity well, it should still have a major impact on the community it was intended to serve, and on audience development for the production.

At this point, we also made the decision to change the name of this aspect of the production, as we did not want to create confusion between our work and that of Black Women Playwrights' Group. We chose to call it a digital marketing strategy, although the outward appearance of what we were actually doing remained the same. It was always understood that we were not necessarily going to show our hand by calling attention to the type of outreach we were doing on social media. Thus, the biggest setback to the project was a financial one, which would eventually have a ripple effect throughout the remainder of the production.

The activity on both the company and production pages began to stagnate in the beginning of 2013. When we had launched the *Look Upon Our Lowliness* page, we had set

benchmarks for the number of “likes” we would try to gather by certain points. We were several hundred “likes” behind. However, at this point we had begun to grow the team of individuals involved with the production. Casting was in process and we had begun to speak with local businesses and organizations in the community to determine how we might support each other in the coming months. Erich McCall, the founder of Project 1Voice, an organization dedicated to “sparking renewed interest in the arts, the artists and organizations that nurture them”, joined the marketing team to lead the outreach efforts in Harlem.

The cast announcement for the show, which we released on social media at the beginning of February, made a rather big splash, considering how slow things had been in recent weeks. This was encouraging and also directed the producing team toward creating more production-related content that would draw the attention of our online audience. To put it bluntly, our exceptionally attractive cast was getting a lot of attention online, and we decided to capitalize on this.

Toward the end of February, we organized a photo shoot with the entire cast, with the aim of creating substantial online content to carry us through the April production. The director and producers realized that this was the point at which the story of the play could begin to be told online. Since the play is about a group of friends and thematically focuses on community, we spent the majority of the photo shoot taking group shots, but also set up a faux photo booth in which smaller subsets of the group could take candid shots. This allowed us to begin to develop the relationship between specific characters, with the aim of “introducing” them to our audiences via our Facebook page. This photo shoot was a key component of our social media campaign, as it allowed us to visually represent the show at

it's best. It was important to the team to visually convey that this was a play about gay men of color, and that it was about them as a group and a community. Group photos were carefully composed to tell the stories of individual relationships within the play as well as of the group. We also planned the photo shoot with social media in mind. We took a few different group photos that could be rotated out as a Facebook cover photo, or a banner at the top of an e-blast. We then took some simple shots that could still be deciphered when placed in smaller profile pictures and on other social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram and others.

A small but significant victory in our social media campaign was the moment in which someone posted congratulations on the *Look Upon Our Lowliness* page the morning after one of our community events. The message simply said, "Great job last night, I'm excited to see the show." This was near the end of March, and it was finally becoming clear that people were beginning to connect this page to the production and understand that this was a forum for having a conversation with others connected with the play. It was also an indication that people who were seeing the information on our Facebook page were attending live events in Harlem. At this point, I knew a critical link had been made between the online conversation being had on the Facebook page, the live event she attended, and the themes and content of the play.

This reaction showed that one of our audience members had completed the final step in the Arc of Engagement²², a means of tracking an individual's participation in an artistic exchange leading up to, during and after the event itself. Leaving a comment on Facebook following the event is characterized as the impact echo – a manifestation of that

²² Brown, Alan S and Rebecca Ratzkin. "Making Sense of Audience Engagement." 2011. www.wolfbrown.com. April 28, 2013. Web.

individual's continuing participation after the event itself ends. The Arc of Engagement looks different for each individual audience member, and this was the first piece of tangible evidence of impact echo during the course of this production process. We hoped it indicated that this was beginning to happen for other audience members as well.

One key aspect of our social media strategy that was particularly challenging to realize were the ancillary videos that we wanted to post in the weeks leading up to the show's opening. The challenges associated with these were primarily logistical, involving getting cast members together to shoot outside rehearsal time, as well as finding a video producer who could take on the administrative tasks of actually making these videos happen. The original vision behind this idea came from the playwright and director, who teamed up to create a script for a series of extremely short videos that would provide glimpses into the lives of the characters when they weren't onstage. These videos were intended to be extremely simple, last for 30 – 60, and involve only one camera and one shot. They were also intended to showcase life in Harlem, taking place at a variety of Harlem businesses and locations.

All together, there were 10 videos in the script. They began with a monologue from Tyler Davidson, the mysterious and magnetic character who appears only through video in the play itself. Although he never appears onstage, we had made the decision to cast Tyler at the same time as the rest of the cast that does appear onstage, thinking that we would want him to be available to film several videos and clips (we were unsure exactly what these would be at that point), as well as appear at events surrounding the show. We were looking for someone charismatic and magnetic, someone who would draw the eye and ear of everyone around. As was to be expected, everyone seemed to have a very strong image

in their head of who Tyler was, and we were having trouble finding an actor who seemed right, was not already in the show and who was interested/available to take on a project such as this. After all, it was not so much a role in a play as a persona one would adopt for a few months.

After much searching, the team came to the decision to hire a non-actor for this role, as he never appears onstage. However he was a dynamic and charismatic personality who was willing to jump into this experiment with both feet. He was also integral to the still photo shoot, as many of the group shots centered around him, which meant we had a deadline to make a choice and stick with it through this incarnation of the production. Jared Paul Schuler, a magnetic New Yorker who already lived Harlem, would appear as our Tyler Davidson.

The initial idea behind creating this video content was to provide a brief but enticing storyline that would give viewers some insight into Tyler's life before they learn of his mysterious death at the top of the show. We also thought this might serve as interesting ancillary material for people after they attend the show, who may want to trace Tyler's character back through these videos and other online appearances. We were interested in creating content from Tyler's point of view, even if he didn't appear in the video itself. To begin this video experiment, we equipped Jared with a flip camera at the initial photo shoot where everyone came together for the first time and asked him to walk around and interview the rest of the cast while they weren't being photographed. This footage, though it was not of great objective quality, was incredibly valuable to our marketing efforts, as it provided us with the "behind the scenes" material that seems to be so popular today across the industry. We used this footage to introduce each actor and character, as well as

establish the vocabulary of seeing things through Tyler's point of view. Once we had the promotional videos in place, we set out to realize the idea of creating more content that was truly focused on the story and creating the world of the play.

The first major challenge we encountered was with Jared's lack of comfort with scripted text. We had taken for granted that because he is intelligent, charismatic and willing to take risks, he would be able to accomplish the very specific task of performing a scripted monologue on camera. After a few hours of work it became clear that this was not the case. This brought us back to the drawing board, wondering how to introduce Tyler on video. The rest of the videos could mostly be improvised, but it was essential to establish Tyler's character first.

A few days later, the playwright had the idea of helping Jared improvise his way through a few monologues using Tyler as his persona. This method was far more successful than scripted text, and they created several one to two minute videos to be posted online. In addition to videos of Tyler addressing the camera, there were also videos of Tyler going about his everyday life at home, doing mundane things, such as brushing his teeth, eating, and smoking. The videos with dialogue added a strangely intimate layer to the project, and also established Tyler as a sort of performer in his everyday life. Not only was he comfortable with always being watched, he actively facilitated his constantly being watched. This added an interesting and complex layer for a character that appears only through media in the piece itself, and allowed us to greatly expand his virtual "stage time", giving any interested parties the opportunity to get to know Tyler much better.

Once we had this group of videos, we realized we needed to establish a way to frame the videos before releasing them to our potential audience for the play. Thus far, the video

content we had released had been promotional in nature and were posted directly on our Facebook page and website. We realized that these much more rough, raw and dark videos of Tyler needed to be established as part of the world of the play. We did this by creating a basic blog, called The Tyler Project, on which we released these videos. Although this created another link that needed to be shared around, we felt it was an important part of differentiating these videos from our promotional material and establishing an online narrative as a part of the play.

The benefit of having the playwright as the agent of creating these videos in collaboration with the actor was enormous. Initially, we had been concerned about such videos not coming from the playwright's perspective, and the possible confusion and contradictions between the Tyler that was described as part of the play and the Tyler in the videos. This was no longer a concern. Once the content was created, I was able to manage the trimming of clips and posting on the blog, which created an interesting opportunity and a large amount of work. For the duration of the video blog (about 1 month) I was essentially living Tyler's life for him online. I spent a large amount of time thinking about the content and tone of the video blog and the order in which the videos should be released, as well as any text that needed to accompany the videos on the blog. The type of thought process was similar to the structuring of another play that was to happen online, thinking through the order of events and how those build the story.

Approximately two weeks before the first performance, the lead producer called on me to take the lead on the marketing efforts leading up to first preview. Given that this piece was taking place at a relatively unknown venue in northern Harlem, I realized immediately that a considerable marketing effort in these final 10 days was key to the

success of the run – particularly the first weekend. Though our efforts on Facebook had been relatively constant, our presence in other aspects of digital marketing were lacking, simply because of the lack of resources and experience we had with maintaining a conversation across multiple platforms.

At this point, we brought on board friend of one of the producers, who was experienced with Twitter and better understood the platform than anyone on the producing team, to tweet on behalf of the production. Because of how frequently a platform such as Twitter demands attention, we agreed that naming a Social Media Manager only for this platform was a potentially beneficial idea. The risk of outsourcing this task to someone who had not been working on the show was apparent – we were entrusting the voice of the production as a whole to someone who was not extremely familiar with it. However, given that the piece was very close to production (at which point the social media manager would be able to see the production and accurately represent it) and nobody else had the capacity to take the lead on this task, we gave our new social media manager very specific instructions and had him begin.

As performances grew closer, I brought on board another team member to assist in creative thinking around marketing the show – specifically e-blasts and other types of digital media. Kimille Howard had recently completed her undergraduate degree and was new to the City, and eager to be involved with new work that involved artists of color. In addition to having an extra person on the team, the hidden benefit of bringing this person in so late in the process was having a completely fresh perspective on all things marketing related. We invited Kimille to attend rehearsals whenever she wished, and she skillfully used her time in the room to more deeply understand the characters being portrayed

onstage. Soon before performances began, she came up with a great new marketing idea – creating email blasts from the point of view and in the style of individual characters.

This innovative, story-driven marketing technique was exactly what was needed to revitalize the marketing efforts around the show. This automatically differentiated the style and messaging of all subsequent email blasts, while allowing us to reiterate the same key information. Thanks to the photo shoot we had completed in February, we already had photos of each actor in character, which fit seamlessly with the idea of messages from each character coming out every few days to a week.

In addition to adding a motivated, skilled team member, the addition of Kimille to the team introduced the idea of mentorship to the producing structure of this show. As is the case with all successful mentorship, I was providing Kimille with guidance and advice while she was providing me and the other producers with a fresh perspective, a more inherent understanding of social media and online content as a whole, and an energy and excitement that was much needed at this late and exhausting phase in the process.

On the opening night of *Look Upon Our Lowliness*, our Facebook page had 443 likes and our Twitter handle had 127 followers. Though these numbers cannot be considered “viral”, the growth of our online audience in the weeks leading up to the production was rapid and steady. Additionally, it was clear that we had established our Facebook and Twitter pages as a hub of communication for the production. The page received several congratulations on opening, and numerous members of the team were posting live updates and photos in real time throughout the evening.

Analysis

The robust social media and story-driven digital marketing efforts that we employed for this production yielded unquestionable results. This was manifested in the robust attendance numbers at each performance. Because of the production's geographic location, we were unable to attract any mainstream media, and thus relied heavily on word of mouth and information sharing from our Facebook page and Twitter accounts.

Audiences ranged between 30 – 50 people per show during our two preview performances, which was much higher than anticipated. Our first weekend ended with opening night, which was a sold-out performance.

The activity on our social media outlets immediately increased when performances began. Our “likes” on Facebook increased by 70 to 90 people each week (approximately 30% growth) that we were in production, and our Twitter feed, which was comparatively new, was gathering 20 – 30 followers per week. Additionally, the comments grew more frequent, creating a feedback loop for audiences who had seen the production in previous days. The producing team all remained logged in to the *Look Upon Our Lowliness* Facebook page on our computers and mobile devices, in an effort to respond to our audiences in a timely fashion and turn each individual's point of interaction with our Facebook page into a conversation with the collective voice of the production.

While the social media conversations did not necessarily provide a place for depth of discussion, they were successful in expanding our digital reach. According to Facebook analytics, the page's weekly total reach²³ during the weeks of the production ranged between approximately 30,000 and 33,800. Such numbers lead to the question of what

²³ Facebook defines weekly total reach as “The number of unique people who have seen any content associated with your page in the last 7 days...”

defines the audience for this production. As well as the varying depth of experience and insight into the world of the play one is able to achieve using such social media tools. If upwards of 30,000 people were seeing the content of the *Look Upon Our Lowliness* page, I began to wonder whether one could make an argument that the audience for this production was indeed tens of thousands of people, and not just the people that actually attend a performance.

Tyler Davidson's online video blog added another layer of complexity to this question. With these videos, we were actually funneling bits of the story to an audience that was potentially much larger than the total number of people experiencing the production itself. One could argue that the video blog and myriad of other content that was posted online in the weeks leading up to the production was a performance within itself, related to, but different from the live production. Indeed, it was people "writing" dialogue on the Facebook page and monologues via Tyler's videos, and was seen by a total of over 30,000 people. Such measures would make this a performance using social networking and video as media that had a much wider reach than the theatrical event.

Although both online and live audiences were engaging with the *Look Upon Our Lowliness* Facebook page and Twitter feeds, they still remained decidedly in the category of audience (rather than participants). The comments and questions posted encompassed praise and congratulations for the show as well as logistical questions such as how to obtain tickets and whether the show was sold out that evening. But more in-depth, qualitative discussions inevitably still happened offline. These media outlets, rather than acting as a discussion forum, acted as resources and points of access for interested

individuals to deepen their relationship to the production, but were not the tool that was used for in-depth communication.

The producing team's hope that our audiences would begin to generate the majority of the content on our Facebook page proved to be inaccurate and unrealistic. Unlike political campaigns and other larger scale media platforms, we were unable to crowdsource the content for this page. Perhaps it was because the world of the play encompassed many social and cultural topics and the content we posted was not necessarily easy to categorize, individuals outside the producing team for the show rarely if ever posted their own content on the page. Although we were using a highly interactive platform, our Facebook page still functioned primarily in broadcast mode.

There are certain settings on Facebook that skew pages (versus individual Facebook profiles) toward a broadcast mode. When posting on a page, for example, one is unable to "tag" individuals in a post – only other pages. Tagging an individual in a post would cause the post to appear on that individual's profile, for viewing by all the people with which they were connected on Facebook. Since connections between individuals is such a key part of the way social media functions, the inability to tag individuals was a significant handicap toward the "official" *Look Upon Our Lowliness* posts being seen by a larger audience further in advance of the production. To circumvent this, individuals on the producing team began posting from their personal Facebook accounts and attempting to tag everyone involved with the production in about one post per week. This helped to spread the word about what was happening with the production.

The digital marketing strategy surrounding the play and the use of social media did not necessarily decrease the workload on the producing team. Because social media is so

reflective of human attention, it still required a significant amount of time, focus and creativity to fully utilize these tools. However, use of social media dramatically increased the impact of our marketing efforts, with little to no hard cost attached. The notion of attempting to reach 30,000 people using our postcards or posters is almost unfathomable, and our budget was so miniscule that we had almost no marketing budget at all. What we did have, we used for stipends to bring on board social media managers who could stay focused on our social media outlets even as the producing team was embroiled in larger, more production-specific issues.

The impact of social media measured in numbers also greatly outweighed that of our email marketing campaign. Although email proved a good way to expand on the messages we shared via social media and introduce the play's characters to our most interested audiences, The Movement Theatre Company's entire email database amounted to approximately 1,700 addresses – a small fraction of the numbers we were reaching on social media.

Of course the tried and true method marketing method of Off-Off Broadway theatre has always been word of mouth, beginning with friends and supporters of the artists involved and ideally radiating outward with positive and enthusiastic news about the quality of the work. Social media allows that word of mouth to extend into the realm of the digital. And the social media-driven word of mouth has the potential to be even more effective; when an audience member posts a status update about their experience at the production and urges their friends to see it, this opens up the conversation from one-on-one or a small group to one-on-several hundred.

At closing night of the production, the *Look Upon Our Lowliness* Facebook page had 622 “likes” and the Twitter account had 268 followers. Although these numbers cannot necessarily be described as viral, their steady growth throughout the production’s short run was encouraging.

The success of our digital marketing strategy was manifested in not only audience numbers, but in the fact that by the second weekend of performances, our audiences consisted of people that nobody on the producing or creative team knew. At this point, we realized that our marketing strategies had helped us reach beyond our immediate circle of friends in a matter of a few performances. As is the case for nearly every Off-Of Broadway show, we were subjected to an extremely short run of 11 performances over three weeks. Although we were thrilled with how quickly the general public began paying attention to the production, we also believed that the potential for expanding our audiences further would have been able to be realized if we had been able to afford a longer run.

Process

The most successful aspect of the process of creating a digital marketing strategy around *Look Upon Our Lowliness* was its nimbleness and flexibility, and our ability to successfully incorporate new ideas as they arose with relative ease. We were able to adjust for both positive and negative changes to the project. While we had initially begun with the idea of creating something that was separate from existing social media platforms and uniquely of The Movement Theatre Company, we ended with a robust social media strategy that made use of Facebook, Twitter and Instagram as its primary tools. We had also begun with the idea of creating a website specifically for the project, but then chose to incorporate it into the existing website of The Movement Theatre Company. Because of the immediacy

of results that social media yields, we were able to adjust our strategy with each point of interaction with our audience, observing how many “likes” or “shares” a certain post received and acting accordingly. The opportunity to constantly re-evaluate and adjust our strategy fit well with the open and curious nature of the producing team, all of whom were trying this experiment for the first time.

Conversely, one of the primary challenges that we encountered while implementing this strategy was a lack of advance planning. Although we had written out and discussed a big picture strategy for our digital marketing campaign in the fall of 2012, the constantly changing nature of the campaign often left us in the position of strategizing our next steps as they needed to happen, rather than having been prepared for a number of different outcomes at each step. Some of the changes to which we had to adjust were small and some were seismic. For example, the realization that production-specific content within our posts was what got the most attention was a challenge, because we had to create more content that directly related to the production that we had initially anticipated. Additionally, the lack of crowd sourcing to generate content on both Facebook and Twitter placed a substantial workload on the producing team at a time when it was particularly difficult to continue with this work – specifically during tech and previews.

Although our altered digital marketing strategy ended up integrating *Look Upon Our Lowliness*' marketing efforts further into the organizational brand of The Movement Theatre Company, we made some key decisions to create production specific marketing materials that may be detrimental to our long-term efforts. For example, around the time we decided to create a unique Facebook page for *Look Upon Our Lowliness*, dedicated to the themes and ideas surrounding the show, The Movement Theatre Company's page already

had close to 1,000 “likes”. We realized much later in our marketing efforts that having to keep both The Movement Theatre Company’s page and *Look Upon Our Lowliness*’ page active was creating double the work and diluting our efforts to reach The Movement Theatre Company’s existing audience. Additionally, my fledgling company, Radical Evolution, which functioned as the associate producing entity for *Look Upon Our Lowliness*, had a newly created Facebook page at the same time as the page for *Look Upon Our Lowliness* was created. Despite being tagged in posts about the production, the page is still almost completely inactive.

An additional challenge associated with our production specific social media outlets (most crucially our Facebook page and Twitter handle) did not truly occur to us until near closing night; what to do with these followers and likes the production has amassed? They are only connected to the production, rather than the entities producing it, and thus it will be a challenge to let them know about future projects produced by either entity behind this show. Alternatively, if the production is moved and receives another run in the not too distant future, our existing social media outlets allow direct access to the audience base for this piece.

Reflected in these challenges seems to be a tension between nonprofit/institutional theatre marketing strategies and the marketing strategies surrounding commercial or standalone productions. Ironically, very small companies seem to have more in common with the latter. Unlike a larger nonprofit institution, which has likely spent years building up a brand and has a relatively constant production history, The Movement Theatre Company’s previous mainstage production was in summer 2010. Radical Evolution’s first work in development was presented in August, 2012, and the company is just now in the

process of building up a core audience. Additionally, smaller theatre companies tend to rely more on the content of the production and response to the work than on a reputation as a producer of quality, because they do not necessarily have such a track record. The social media outlets for *Look Upon Our Lowliness* reflected a production-centric approach and also prevented the production's brand from living solely within the auspices of one company. But from the perspective of building a brand for either producing entity, this may also have been a rather large missed opportunity.

The decisions made regarding the *Look Upon Our Lowliness* website did reflect a more company-focused approach, with *Look Upon Our Lowliness* having a network of web pages within the website of The Movement Theatre Company. This worked relatively well for the sake of the production, but also made it difficult to drive any traffic toward the Radical Evolution website, which was rather neglected during the production process, as nobody had the time and capacity to make regular updates.

After the production closed, as an attempt to stay connected with the audiences who had engaged with the *Look Upon Our Lowliness* social media outlets, we posted messages on Facebook and Twitter encouraging our audiences to “like” and follow The Movement Theatre Company and Radical Evolution on these platforms, with little success. There was no immediate reason or incentive for someone who had “liked” the production page to do the same for the producing entities, particularly if that individual does not have a working knowledge of how theatre is made.

The social media platform that we attempted to activate as part of the social media strategy but was underutilized in our marketing efforts was Instagram. This can be at least partially attributed to the success of our photo shoot and the plethora of existing images we

had to use when posting online content. However, the spontaneity and look of Instagram was largely absent from our social media campaign – a look that has become ubiquitous in social media over the past year or so. One may even argue that Instagram and other, newer social media platforms that function largely within Facebook, can now be seen as trends within certain subgroups of Facebook users. A little over a year ago, the platform Pinterest gained this type of attention and was trumpeted as the next big social media platform. It has since stagnated, and use of Instagram has skyrocketed in its place.

Indeed, it seems that a social media platform's measure of success is now based on how seamlessly and automatically it can integrate with the "parent" social media networks of Facebook and Twitter. Instagram is easily connected to an individual Facebook profile and allows users to share snapshots of goings on in the world instantly. It is also inherently tied to an individual's point of view (rather than that of an organization or brand) and began its life as an app for individual mobile devices. It was these characteristics that prompted the decision to create an Instagram account for Tyler specifically (rather than the production). The challenge then became integrating this platform with Facebook and Twitter, where we were already developing online audiences. We had attempted to utilize this platform by creating an Instagram account for Tyler Davidson, the character who never appears onstage, and using it to post photos from his fictitious perspective.

However, unlike Facebook and Twitter where it can be relatively easy to schedule and plan content, use of Instagram relies entirely on the spontaneity of a photo taken as one is going about her day and immediately posting it. Although every member of the producing team was able to login to Tyler's Instagram account using her phone, this structure of creating content proved to be unsustainable for the producing team, as we

were too focused on mounting the show to also handle a separate platform that needed completely unique content. Additionally, while Instagram has the ability to integrate with individual Facebook profiles, it did not integrate with the *Look Upon Our Lowliness* Facebook page, which had turned into our audience's home base.

Of all the aspects of our digital marketing campaign, our use of Instagram is where we lacked the time and human resources to successfully utilize this resource. In the future, a more carefully planned and supported strategy could potentially be successful, after carefully thinking through the storytelling implications of posting images from one particular character's (rather than the production's) point of view.

Although the focus of this discussion is on the aspects of our production strategy within the digital realm, I would be remiss to not mention that the geographical location of the production itself undeniably contributed to the success of our marketing strategies. The comparative lack of performing arts events uptown along with the characters, themes and ideas that *Look Upon Our Lowliness* takes on attracted an audience from the neighborhood that was eager and enthusiastic about the work and to whom it meant a lot to see this type and quality of artistic work happening in Harlem. After each performance, audience members would come up to members of the producing team unsolicited and share how glad they were to have this play in their neighborhood. Through conversations with numerous audiences, the producing team was able to ascertain that the majority of audiences who did not have a direct connection to the production were residents of Harlem or attended the performance with a Harlem resident. I firmly believe that the same production with the same marketing strategy would not have been nearly as successful if produced elsewhere in the city.

Infrastructure

The digital marketing strategy for *Look Upon Our Lowliness* was executed primarily by a hardworking team of 5-6 producers and social media managers who were all juggling the overall responsibilities of producing the work itself and balancing their paid employment with the work they were doing on the production for a small stipend. Despite our efforts to create an infrastructure around our digital marketing ideas, the producing team primarily executed the important responsibility of engaging with audience through the production's Facebook page. While this was not necessarily a sustainable working structure, the tight-knit nature of the team allowed us all to merge our efforts as one voice of the production. Each of us had an intimate enough knowledge of the piece and had absorbed enough about its tone, characters and style to speak on behalf of *Look Upon Our Lowliness* as an entity.

Within a larger infrastructure, the social media strategy surrounding a production would most likely fall to a marketing team who was not nearly as entwined with the piece itself. Additionally, when creating a social media strategy within the context of an institution, one must consider the need to balance information on multiple productions and time the release of information as it relates to each production calendar – a complexity we did not have to worry about with *Look Upon Our Lowliness*.

Additionally, it seems that the overwhelming perception within larger institutions is that the marketing of a production is an administrative task, to be handled by the institution with little if any input from the artists. While this makes sense on the level that the institutional marketing team has a much stronger working knowledge of their institutions audiences, they do not necessarily know the various access points that the work provides for its audience. This missing piece of the puzzle requires a dramaturgical

point of view. And arming a dramaturgical mind with the organization's digital storytelling outlets – that is, Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms – may be the most efficient way to let audiences in to the world of the play itself.

Financial resources permitting, I would argue that the importance of having a robust digital media strategy around each production would necessitate some sort of digital dramaturg – an individual who is incredibly hands-on with each production and who gathers ideas from the creative team (as well as generating his/her own) about the best way of introducing the play or theatrical event to the digital world. Part of this conversation would also be the potential of specific characters having online lives and how those can be manifested. This individual could then act as a liaison between the creative team and the institutional marketing team, who would then work to integrate production specific ideas and materials into the organization's overall marketing strategy.

Even if the organization's resources did not permit a dedicated dramaturg to craft its own marketing strategy, I would argue that a dramaturgical skill set is essential to effectively integrating a social media strategy with a play. Throughout my time with *Look Upon Our Lowliness*, I and the rest of the producing team thought deeply about how each step taken in our social media strategy could potentially affect the story itself, in the long and short term. Though our desire was to expose as many individuals as possible to the world of the play, we understood the delicate balance between closely integrating the marketing strategy with the story itself and preserving the integrity of the story. I found myself using many of the dramaturgical skills that I typically apply to working on a new script when conceiving of the digital marketing strategy. I asked myself and the group such questions as:

- Would this character have a robust social media presence, or would he have less of one? How does this manifest in the play itself? How does this character behave on social media and how does that fit with his attributes within the play?
- How will the decisions currently being made around the social media strategy ensure that the playwright is free to continue to make changes and choices until the production is frozen? If we are indeed making a decision that will necessitate a particular aspect of the production to remain as it is in this moment, are we ready to make that decision?
- What is gained from a particular digital media strategy? How does it move the social media narrative forward? What new information or idea does it reveal or bring in to the conversation? If it does not bring something new to the table, how important is it to broadcast this information?

So, as institutions work to modernize their marketing efforts and hire staff to oversee their digital media, they would be well advised to seek candidates with a dramaturgical background, who can work directly with playwrights and directors to craft marketing strategies, but who can also understand and help to mitigate some of the trepidation these artists may have when beginning to loosen the reins of storytelling control around their play or production. Such skills require years of training, while learning the latest social media platform may take weeks or months. The entire producing team of *Look Upon Our Lowliness* greatly improved their social media skills and strategies in a matter of weeks, thanks to the variety of statistics that are immediately available around each piece of information shared. As long as one is attentive and open to adjusting her approach, social media (particularly Facebook) can very feasibly be a self-taught endeavor.

Small to mid-size theatre companies that may not have distinct marketing departments can and should encourage all members of their staff to begin utilizing social media on behalf of the organization. The collaborative and egalitarian structure of social media outlets can allow companies with small numbers of staff to equally share the responsibility and visibility of speaking on behalf of the organization. In addition to introducing audiences to the world of the play, staff can also tell their own stories of the work involved in each production.

Lessons Learned

Much was learned during the process of *Look Upon Our Lowliness* about the use of social media to augment a story being told onstage. The primary takeaway from the process was the necessity of flexibility and constantly evaluating the effectiveness of the strategy and making adjustments at a moment's notice. Oftentimes, once the marketing strategy for a particular production is set, it is carried out exactly according to plan and evaluated afterward. In this particular case, we did not have a second opportunity to test our strategies, which is why we continued to make changes throughout. Fortunately, the immediacy of social media made this an effective and productive way of working.

Based on the outcomes of this campaign, a few best practices surrounding the use of social media include:

- If the production is being produced by a company or ongoing artists' collective, do not create a separate Facebook page for the production, but broadcast all content from the organization's Facebook page.

- Begin posting production-specific content approximately four months prior to opening, when possible. This can include content relating to the themes of the play.
- Begin tweeting about the play approximately two months in advance of the first performance
- Make sure Twitter and Facebook are not linked to each other. They are different platforms and require different types of posts.
- If desired, select one additional social media platform aside from Facebook and Twitter, and develop a strategy for how it will be used.
- When possible, integrate this third platform with Facebook and Twitter, to grow audiences for all three platforms.
- Connect all social media platforms to the production or organization's website.
- Use posts and tweets to introduce audiences to the world of the play. Begin with broad themes, then introduce characters, and lastly, if possible and applicable, include elements of story.

Of these best practices, the last one requires considerable planning and thought for each production. Particularly for a new play one must be careful not to reveal aspects of character or story that would not allow the playwright to make any changes she desired in the days leading up to the first performance.

And yet, social media also stands to have the most impact on the promotion and production of new plays. Studies have proven that an audience's level of familiarity with a work increases their level of anticipation prior to seeing the work and is one of the primary

motivators of attending the theatre²⁴. Therefore, by giving the audience a bit of the story of a new play in advance, one is objectively making it a more attractive proposition to an audience member who may be considering seeing the work. Additionally, plays that take place in the present day are far more likely to integrate smoothly with digital storytelling tools than those that are set in the past.

Not only was it worthwhile to create a digital marketing strategy for *Look Upon Our Lowliness*, it was the only way a production of this scale could have any sort of overall marketing strategy. With the flood of information that people wade through every day, postcards and posters simply aren't enough anymore and mass media is completely cost prohibitive for most theatres except the very largest institutions. Because of a lack of all other marketing and outreach resources, very small theatre companies and standalone productions have done some exciting and creative work by harnessing these and other resources.

Conclusion

Based on this case study, it is clear that small-scale, independent productions have much to gain from fully utilizing social media tools. Social media allowed us to introduce the play to thousands of people who never set foot in the theatre, but who knew it was happening and understood a bit about the themes and ideas of the piece. And despite the short run of the production itself, social media provides an automatic archive of what was taking place in real time throughout the course of the production. Although social media is not typically used as an archive, the carefully crafted story that was told about *Look Upon Our Lowliness* online, particularly on Facebook, does a lot to introduce people to the play

²⁴ Lord, pg. 103.

itself as well as holds numerical information (based on number of “likes” and “shares”) of which types of posts and communications were the most effective in garnering a response.

The notion of passivity versus participation as a dichotomy, which opened this paper, is something that grows increasingly blurred as one observes and interacts with people’s habits on social media. Certainly, some users are extremely participatory, utilizing social media platforms as a forum to express their ideas and opinions. Yet, the *Look Upon Our Lowliness* audience achieved something that I might best describe as reactive participation. They contributed to the conversation, but only in the simplest and least involved way possible. Additionally, prompts that were intended to spur deeper and fuller conversation around social and political issues having to do with the play inevitably fell off the map due to lack of participation in the conversation. Other cultural touchstones, such as the latest music trends, gathered modest attention, but by far the most successful content was that which related directly to the production.

This may be interpreted as a desire for concreteness in Facebook page content. People responded to the posts that included the most specific information, and overt directive or involved an image or story about someone they knew in the world. Thus, while it is exceedingly important for a production to have a social media presence, the content does not have to be highly sophisticated. Rather, it seems that one can achieve considerable success by keeping posts simple, direct and overtly related to the production itself.

Even after honing in on the type and frequency of communication that was working for us, it took much longer than anticipated to grow our audience. The pool of information has grown so wide and deep (and continues to grow exponentially) that it takes a considerable amount of time and effort to start to swim – that is, to begin understanding

which posts will rise to the surface. Yet, the exceedingly rapid growth of social media and the world's reliance on it as a source of information and diversion does not seem to be a passing trend. It has fundamentally altered the way we communicate, filter information, and in some respects, view the world at large. So we as a field of theatre practitioners had best begin to inch our toe toward the water, lest we be left behind. Or better yet, just dive right in.