

# **Dramaturgical Applications of Shamanic Healing for Social Change**

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As I began to formulate my thoughts around my selected thesis topic, I could not help but consider the current context and consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. While some of my friends and colleagues encouraged me to write on my vision of a post-pandemic theatre, I hesitated to do so as it is impossible to predict when this pandemic will end and where our society will be at that time. As theatres across New York and the country continue to remain closed, however, the economic and artistic toll our industry faces grows every day. Faced with a truly unprecedented crisis, a whole generation of theatre-makers will be impacted for decades to come. As a result, I feel inclined to look to the past and the origins of theatre to better articulate a vision for the future of our art form. At the center of that vision, in my opinion, there needs to be a better way to understand the stories theatre-makers put on stage and why these stories should be told.

During my graduate studies I have found myself asking what we, as theatre practitioners, are missing when working on a production. I have continually felt my work, and much of the theatre in general, has been lacking something fundamental. That is not to say I have not been proud of some of my work- I certainly have- but I feel, nevertheless, *something essential* remains missing at the core of my various projects. Despite these consistent feelings, I have yet to be able to articulate what this something could possibly be.

I have felt this lack in my coursework as well. In the spring of 2019, for example, I worked on a piece entitled *Planet Earth Was Blue*, inspired by the events of the 1986 Space Shuttle Challenger disaster. Written by Jacob K. Robinson and Tatiana Kouguell-Hoell and directed by Kelly O'Donnell, this short play centers on three astronauts who are about to unknowingly embark on an ill-fated mission. As these astronauts prepare to board their

spacecraft before take-off, they express their joys, hopes and fears about space travel and exploration. In one of the short play's three monologues, the character Hatfield reflects:

*“Does everyone feel like this? Like you know you’ve done the work, you’ve checked things off the to-do list, but it feels like a dream, this couldn’t possibly be happening to you? To me...I’m still convinced everyone else deserves to be here more than me...Maybe going back [to space] will answer some questions. Clear some things up. Maybe not.”* (Robinson, Kouguell-Hoell 7)

Reading these lines for the first time, I was moved considering how even those at the pinnacle of their careers could still suffer from doubts or imposter syndrome; and that, even when doing something as courageous as going to outer space, an astronaut could still genuinely question his or her place in a mission. It is a powerful monologue that accurately reflects the beauty of the entire piece.



From Planet Earth Was Blue. Photo Credit: John Brunner

In addition to Jacob and Tatiana's inspired writing, our creative team staged, in my opinion, one of the most polished and well-rehearsed pieces produced by our graduate class in our collaboration courses. My team embraced the physical challenges of Columbia's Theatre at Shapiro and used its large, imposing concrete walls as projection surfaces. Our dark, industrial lighting design mimicked the emptiness of space and our sound design put the audience inside the NASA control room. All in all, the story and its central message were, in my opinion, well developed and our production design was thoughtfully planned and executed. This is not to say our piece did not have its flaws but, given the constraints of the assignment, I am proud of what my team and I put on stage.

Despite the successes of *Planet Earth Was Blue*, I still felt at the center of our work something was missing- the same something I have continually felt working in theatre prior to my graduate studies as well. Again, this is by no means a commentary on the writing, directing, or acting. This is, instead, a self-awareness I have developed during grad school in regards to my connection (or a lack thereof) with my own work. Ultimately, I seek to begin to develop greater purpose as a theatre-maker with this thesis.

As a dramaturg, I always try to determine what a piece of theatre is trying to accomplish. I suppose this could be distilled down to the "why" of a piece- why was it written and why should this story be told here and now? What should the purpose be in telling this story, to this audience? This why looks beyond the basics of plot and more at a work's relationship to its greater social context. So far, however, this approach has not helped me feel fully connected with my work. My hope, therefore, is to develop a new way of understanding the purpose and function of drama as it relates to issues facing society today. This includes looking to how the theatre community rebuilds and reorganizes itself after the COVID-19 pandemic.

I have decided, therefore, to look back at the origins of dramatic performance and to the human traditions that have developed over millennia to shape what we now call theatre. I hope to find a new way to approach not only individual works but also the societal function of theatre. In pursuit of this goal, I will be looking at one of the most ancient of human traditions- shamanism.

In the most simplistic form, a shaman is a religious figure believed to connect with spirits or the divine by entering into a trance-like or ecstatic state in order to provide for the spiritual and medicinal needs of a community. Mircea Eliade, a 20th-century Romanian religious historian, conducted one of the most extensive studies of shamanism in his seminal 1951 book, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*. Translated into English by Willard R. Trask, this book examines dozens of different shamanic traditions, focusing primarily on their anthropological and religious structures. While shamans, or shaman-like figures, have been found in communities all over the world, the most developed and studied examples belong to the ancient tribes and cultures of Siberia, central Asian, and central America. Throughout his book, Eliade describes in intricate detail not only the highly theatrical rituals of shamans but also the shaman's crucial societal function.

Eliade argues despite the many differences between shamanic traditions spread throughout history, shamanism is “fundamental in the human condition...what changed and was modified with the different forms of culture and religion was the interpretation and evaluation of the ecstatic experience” (504). This ecstatic experience, as described by Eliade, is the supposed ability to connect with higher powers, spirits, demons, and other worlds (including the afterlife) through a physical and visible act. This is of course a broad description and, as Eliade points out, the shaman's role differs greatly from culture to culture. As I will detail below, however,

utilizing an ecstatic experience to connect a community with the divine is not exclusive to shamanism or tribal cultures.

Eliade defines shamanism, therefore, as the use of a “technique of ecstasy” in religious or mystic practice to allow a community to connect to the afterlife (4). In any given society, Shamans can function as healer, priest, psychic, spiritual caretaker, or psychopomp. Shamans, however, are almost always just one part of a greater religious tradition. They often coexist amongst other elevated figures, such as priests or medicine men, but stand apart through this connection to the ecstatic. To this point, Eliade writes shamans are of the societal “‘elect,’ and as such they have access to a region of the sacred inaccessible to other members of the community” which gives them a unique cultural position (7).

This technique of ecstasy, however, manifests in many different forms. The shaman “specializes in a trance during which his soul is believed to leave his body and ascend to the sky or descend to the underworld” (Eliade 5). Whether a trance is actually achieved is not important- it is an audience’s faith in the shaman’s practice that gives him and his performance power<sup>1</sup>. In fact, a shaman may rely entirely on performance, only truly entering a trance on rare, or even accidental, occasions. Like theatre, dramatic aspects of the shaman’s ritual may include song, dance, and music or drums along with costumes, props, prepared text, and audience interaction. Shamans may also speak in tongues or display physical manifestations such as convulsions or changes in breath and movement. Even techniques such as sleight of hand and misdirection have been documented as elements of ritual performance. When real, though, trances may be achieved

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<sup>1</sup> While records of female shamans do exist, given that an overwhelming proportion of shamans are historically male, I have chosen to utilize he/him/his pronouns for clarity and ease of reading.

through intentional exhaustion, dehydration, hunger, or sleep deprivation. Many shamans may also use alcohol as well as drugs, such as plant medicine, to induce a psychedelic experience.

Either way, it is through a ritualistic, ecstatic experience that the shaman provides for his community. This “audience” believes he can travel to the afterlife and to different planes in order to perform spiritual healings. It is here, in ritual, that the shaman’s real power lies. Modern science, of course, proves that the shaman’s work is purely theatrical. Today’s understanding of biology and medicine dismisses the possibility of spiritual imbalance or malicious possession as causes of disease or suffering. Science also dictates that while hallucinations or ecstatic “trips” are entirely possible, humans do not possess the ability to engage in any form of actual spiritual travel. Even the concept of a soul has no medical or scientific basis. Shamanism, therefore, is a practice based entirely in lore, tradition, and religious belief.

As a result, the audience’s belief and participation in shamanic ritual imbue these practices power and influence. The shaman’s community must not only “buy into” his rituals but also his alleged supernatural abilities. The society must accept the shaman and his claims as legitimate and honest. Luckily for shamans, the community’s traditions and folklore *presuppose* these abilities and empower him to conduct his work. A mystical or spiritual connection is formed when a community comes together to practice an understood ritual or rite. It is his society’s collective understanding of shamanism, as well as their active and shared experience in his ritual, that allows for change to occur. Furthermore, the shaman’s rituals are familiar, identifiable practices passed down from generation to generation. Ritual “draws participants’ minds to ideas and feelings that have special social (often religious) importance” and “are essential for preserving a culture’s memory of its identity, character, and beliefs” (McConachie

et al. 32). In shamanic cultures, the shaman is thus the keeper of ritual, religious mythos, and ancestral lore.

Take for example the shamanic initiation rites of the Nanai people, formerly referred to as the Goldi, of Eastern Russian and Northern China:

*“The [shaman] candidate’s family and numerous guests participate. There is singing and dancing (there must be at least nine dancers), and nine pigs are sacrificed; the shamans drink their blood, go into ecstasy, and shamanize for a long time. The festival continues for several days and becomes a sort of public celebration. Obviously such an event concerns the whole tribe directly...in this respect initiation plays an important part in the sociology of shamanism.”*

*(Eliade, 114-115)*

In this example, ritual goes far beyond simple performance or religious practice. It is a cultural institution interlinked with family, food, and fellowship. Eliade continually stresses how shamanic ritual serves a fundamental sociological function, reinforcing cultural identity and unity. Ecstatic experiences, with their often theatrical and mystical elements, act as a conduit for these greater social needs. Without shared ritual, therefore, a society would be incomplete.

Depending on the ritual, the community attends either as witnesses (audience) or as participants. The shaman’s spiritual journey manifests tangibly on earth through dramatic elements such as music, dancing, and chanting. As demonstrated above, communities also come together to help prepare for shamanic rituals which are often accompanied by feasts or fasts, sacrifice of community resources, or even perilous group journeys into the wilderness. The duration and intensity of these rites will vary but it is not uncommon for ceremonies to last hours or even days with audiences attending and participating through completion. As a result,



shamanism can often provide opportunity for an emotional or even cathartic journeys for both patient and audience. For example, when a member of a close-knit tribe falls ill, the shaman must be successful in order to heal and save this patient. The stakes are high. The success of the ritual, therefore, falls not only on the shaman but on the community's engagement and support as well. As a result, there is a shared, vested interest in the ritual's outcome. Public emotional release, or catharsis, is thus not uncommon. The shaman is not the only person, therefore, on the journey. Ritual, therefore, is just as much for the audience as it is for the shaman and his patient.

In the same vein, the ancient Greek scholar Aristotle asserts in his *Poetics* that "Tragedy is an imitation not only of a complete action, but of events inspiring fear or pity" (18). As a member of an audience, we become objective witnesses and observers of an imitation of life. Audiences see reflections of themselves and their beliefs on stage. Furthermore, when a play or musical has a historical basis, audiences have the opportunity to learn how and why significant world events unfolded. It is then the job of any production team, including the dramaturg, to "cast" the audience and to decide what its intended relationship to the action on stage should be. Just as the shaman relies on the community to be witnesses or aides and participants, theatre-makers must decide if their audience members are observers, victims, descendants, inheritors, antagonists, etc. In doing so, theatre should instill pity and fear, serving as lessons to help prevent similar tragedy in the future.

Pity and fear, however, are not the ultimate goal of drama. According to Aristotle, tragedy must also end with "the cleansing of these passions." This cleansing is better understood as the Greek theatrical element of *catharsis*. Aristotle, who also understood catharsis in a medical sense as the bodily purgation of illness or toxins, used it as a metaphor to describe the audience's emotional response to the events on stage. Proper tragedy, in Aristotle's view, leads

to an evocation of pity and fear followed by a purgation or purification of those feelings in order to restore emotional balance and order. Either way, the ancient Greeks saw theatre as a means of healing a community, or providing a public good, through a demonstration of societal ills and their consequences. By the end of a tragedy, those ills had been corrected or accounted for and the status quo restored. Additionally, Aristotle's *Poetics* clearly lays out not only the necessary elements of tragedy but also describes the dramaturgical structure he believes will best facilitate this catharsis and return of order (10-14).

Similarly, purgation and purification is central to shamanic ritual. The shaman's spiritual work, performed through a celestial journey, focuses on the release of predatory spirits that have either possessed or wounded a patient's body and soul. At the same time, concerned onlookers in the community are able to process their own emotions and undergo catharsis. Again, whether it is one patient in need of healing or the community as a whole, the shaman's audience has a vested emotional interest in the outcome of his work, thus imbuing shamanism with its power. As the ceremony concludes, the shaman exits his ecstatic state and the community returns to their daily lives having processed these troubles. Like in Greek tragedy, shamanic rituals force a community to confront their troubles together through dramatic means. It is a shared experience where the shaman may be the facilitator but the community is the central focus.

It is clear then that dramatic shamanic ritual not only resembles theatre but begets it. To see historical evidence of this, one must look no further than the very theatre by which Aristotle's writing was influenced. At the center of all Greek theatre were the Greek gods. Not only did they appear as characters, disrupters, and arbitrators in Greek dramas, but they were central to the practice of theatre in ancient Greece. Before the theatre was even established, Greek religious ritual provided society with a connection to the divine through rehearsed and

choreographed ceremonies. These rituals included song, dance, and masks while situated around an altar. Ecstatic release was also common, often facilitated by the excessive consumption of wine. Not only did the Greeks worship their gods through performance, but their rites and rituals were designed to appease the gods, warding off their wrath and seeking protection and good fortune. Rituals slowly began to include text and eventually plot with well-defined characters and even a chorus. Additional elements including meter and spectacle also became common. Over time, these practices gradually morphed into what is now understood today as ancient Greek theatre.

As the dramatic elements of Greek theatre became more pronounced, so did public attendance. Amphitheaters were built to accommodate larger audiences and some ritual spaces were converted in order to better meet the needs of dramatic performance. The role of playwright emerged as narratives became a more central focus. Theatrical performance eventually became an integral part of public festivals and holidays. As Greek theatre continued to evolve, however, the worship and praise of the gods still remained central to its dramaturgical purpose.

While not a direct comparison, the same practices are more or less espoused in the Nāṭya Śāstra, the Sanskrit “holy book of dramaturgy” (Gerould 84). Attributed to Bharata Muni, this ancient text played a central role in the origins of the theatrical and artistic traditions of India and Southern Asia and is still influential today in many cultures. Consisting of 36 chapters, this extensive work outlines a theatrical practice also rooted in religious worship and ritual. Bharata writes “never start a show without worshiping the stage” and, according to legend, “the first performance was to represent the defeat of the demons by the gods” (84-87). The Nāṭya Śāstra not only establishes divine origins of performance but also provides instruction on everything from costumes, props, music, and hand movements as well as individual, hierarchical roles

within theatre. It establishes a more methodological and institutional approach to the performing arts while still maintaining a religious, communal, and spiritual focus.

Furthermore, the Nāṭya Śāstra outlines and promotes the theory of “rasa.” While too complex of a subject to fully detail here, there are a few important components of rasa that I would like to highlight. First, rasa roughly translates to “taste or juice” and refers to an ecstatic and religious experience for both artist and audience found only through perfected performance. In the book *Rasa: Performing The Divine in India*, religious academic Susan L. Schwartz writes, “Artistic experience through the body may enable the attainment of the highest spiritual goals” and “the end result [of artistic performance] may include enlightenment, that is, understanding of the ultimate reality, however fleeting” (9-11). This understanding of reality is key to making theatre and the performing arts more socially efficacious for its audience and I will expand upon this below. Second, however, rasa is a spiritual-artistic experience to be worked towards and sought after in order to find connection and communion with the gods. It is believed by following the rituals and instructions of the Nāṭya Śāstra, rasa may be achieved. Like the shaman’s ecstatic experience, rasa allows humans to connect with the divine to seek clarity and understanding. Rasa, therefore, is not only a central component of the Nāṭya Śāstra but of the artistic traditions by which it is sought.

These are just two brief examples of how artistic performance can almost always find its origins in religious practice. Eliade states there is something “fundamental in the human condition” that drives our religious rituals and performance (504). Thus, there is an instinctual and an inherently human origin to storytelling and art. Even though theatre has evolved into a more secular and profane institution, it still remains rooted in the human need to share in a

communal experience. The tradition of the shaman stands as one of the earliest, yet well-documented and demonstrated, examples of this communion through performance.

The question then is what are the purported benefits of the shaman's unique communal position and how does it relate to today's theatre? To demonstrate this relationship, I will focus on one of the shaman's primary roles: healer or psychopomp. The shaman is not a doctor, per se. He has no medical training or expertise, nor does he purport to. His supposed understanding of the natural world comes from his connection with the earth and the supernatural powers his community believes guide it. While the shaman may utilize doctor-like practices, such as prescribing herbal medicine or dressing wounds, this work is not based in an understanding of science and is secondary to his primary function. With that being said, the shaman does attempt to heal actual illnesses, both physical and mental. He is understood to be a spiritual healer. As Eliade writes, "the shaman performs the function of doctor and healer; he announces the diagnosis, goes in search of the patient's fugitive soul, captures it, and makes it return to animate the body that it has left" (182). In doing so, a shaman acts as a psychopomp, or the guide of souls to and from the world of the dead. Eliade identifies three key steps here: diagnosis, search and capture, and return. I would like to briefly examine each of these parts in relation to healing and serving the community.

First, the shaman must diagnose the patient. This patient may be an individual, a group of individuals stricken with the same malady, or the community as a whole. In most traditions, disease is believed to be linked to the damage or loss of one's soul, or even possession by evil spirits. In many instances, "it is often the case that the illness is due to a neglect or an omission in respect to the infernal powers..." (216). This first step may seem simple: determine the source of the problem and then identify a solution. But, when dealing with matters as abstract and

mysterious as lost souls, malicious possession, and “infernal powers”, it is key the shaman helps the patient and their community understand both the stakes and prescribed remedy. In doing so, the shaman uniquely situates himself as the only potential source of healing.

Second, the shaman searches for the patient’s soul by embarking on a journey to the underworld or cosmos. Through his rites and rituals, an ecstatic state is achieved to facilitate travel to the spirit world and back. The shaman is believed to not only have the ability to travel to these higher realms but is, by virtue of his calling and initiation, uniquely situated to partake in this perilous journey *and* also safely return (Eliade 215 - 216). This journey is the central narrative of his practice. It has a clear beginning, middle, and end with a protagonist and antagonist(s). The stakes of the shaman’s journey are understandably high and the patient, as well as the audience, will likely face difficult truths and challenges along the way.

Today, of course, there is a different understanding of the shaman’s work. Rather than viewing shamans as spiritual travelers, the shaman is understood to be a religious performer and storyteller. For my purposes here, I am most interested in the earthly manifestations and representations of the shaman’s spiritual journey. His rituals are specifically tailored to the diagnosis of a patient and no two journeys to the spirit world or afterlife are alike. These ceremonies may take significant preparation and can last hours or even days, depending on the severity and complexity of the problems being addressed. As a result, the community is always involved to some extent. Even if the healing ceremony is focused on one individual, community resources and supplies will need to be sacrificed. The family and friends of the individual will likely be involved, even if only as concerned onlookers. At other times, as previously exemplified, the entire community will come together to help facilitate a ritual. The work of the

shaman often necessitates an audience. His journey, while maybe unknowable to the common man, ultimately results in a theatrical and dramatic social event.

Third, the shaman “returns” to earth and restores the soul of his patient(s) in order to heal them. This return marks the completion of the ceremony and the shaman withdraws from his ecstatic state. According to belief, the shaman has restored cosmic balance and set in motion the healing process, if only temporarily. That does not mean the patient will not relapse or need additional attention. Healing, in other words, is not necessarily instant.

Take, for example, an entire community in need, perhaps stricken by the “disease” of famine or drought. The shaman may diagnose these problems as a result of the community falling out of favor with the gods. Healing does not happen overnight, however. Following the shaman’s ceremony, famine will still likely persist, crops will still be dead, and rain may continue to be scant. In fact, the spiritual and evil forces at play may be so powerful that the community may be in need of repeated or even long-term shamanic attention. Or, in the case of individual sickness, a patient may take many days or weeks to fully recover, if at all. The shaman’s work has restored cosmic balance, however, and has set in motion the healing process through a cathartic event. When the famine or disease does end, however, it is understood by the community to be due to the shaman’s powers and efforts.

Lastly, when all else has failed, the shaman is called upon to conduct funeral rites. The shaman acts as both funeral director and psychopomp, preparing the earthly body for burial while also shepherding the soul of the deceased safely and peacefully to the other side. In doing so, he brings healing and closure to the mourning while working to ward off whatever evils that may have contributed to the death. Regardless of the outcome of any one ceremony, the work of the shaman requires the community to acknowledge and accept the problem at hand,

accommodate and witness his celestial journey, and have faith that healing, or closure, will one day come.

In all, through diagnosis, journey, and return, the shaman is believed to facilitate healing and spiritual balance. He not only attempts to solve the current sickness or issues facing the community, but also looks to guide them through whatever troubles may lie ahead. While the shaman is only one person, his work is inherently communal. The outcomes of his efforts are not always apparent, or even successful, but, again, the continued faith in this practice is central to the survival and progress of his community. As I approach theatre today, in the context of the complexities and issues of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I see theatre as a cultural shaman and means of societal healing and improvement.

Like the shaman, the theatre tackles the issues of both past and present through a communal experience. It also allows performers and audiences to share the same space in the same moment and in the same cultural context. There is no barrier between those performing and those witnessing. Stories told through theatre, therefore, have the potential to help a society better understand where they came from, where they are, and where they may be heading. Good theatre, in my opinion, should initiate conversation, debate, analysis, and self-reflection. It should also allow an audience to step back and to see themselves and their society from a removed, objective perspective.

I contend, therefore, that much of modern theatre, including my own work, has failed to acknowledge and implement the element of communal catharsis and restoration in theatre. Too much theatre has become spectacle driven while not successfully engaging its audience with an actual narrative. Centuries ago, Aristotle had this same concern. He argued:



*“Fear and pity may be aroused by spectacular means; but they may also result from the inner structure of the piece, which is the better way, and indicates a superior poet.” (Aristotle 24)*

I believe that a new approach to theatre that includes an understanding of shamanistic practices, can help return fear and pity, as thus catharsis, to modern drama as a means of making it more socially efficacious. The shaman’s three-part ritual, diagnosis, journey, and return, provide a narrative structure that theatre-makers, including dramaturgs, can apply in their work.

Dramaturgical form will vary here, but the ultimate outcome of a theatrical piece should be catharsis for the sake of positive social change. This approach to theatre, I believe, is what has been missing from my work and my understanding of theatre as a whole.

Before I demonstrate a dramaturgical application of this approach, I would like to discuss a few recent theatrical productions that I feel failed to evoke communal catharsis. *Hadestown*, the winner of the 2019 Tony Award for Best New Musical, provided all spectacle and very little substance. Visually and musically, *Hadestown* was stunning. The musical featured a steampunk-meets-New Orleans jazz club design all placed on a behemoth, shape-shifting set. In addition, the onstage orchestra, for me, proved to be the highlight of the show. I loved the largely jazz and folk inspired score and it was honestly just fun to watch world class musicians jam. The cast proved to be strong overall with Andre de Shields and Amber Gray standing out as noteworthy performances. The commercial success of *Hadestown* does not surprise me. Laden with spectacle and thoughtful design, it demonstrates the wealth of theatrical and musical talent available to Broadway producers.

Where the spectacle and music end, however, the problems begin. The two Greek myths on which it is based, that of Persephone and Orpheus and Eurydice, have been so watered down

that the overall plot lacks any dramatic tension. The majority of characters, for example, were given little backstory and thus I felt no vested interest in their storylines. I remember Eurydice being quite literally sucked down into the underworld but I still never really understood why this happened to her (or who even this version of Eurydice was supposed to be in the first place.) In his review, Jesse Green of the *New York Times* wrote, “Outside of their arias, Orpheus and Eurydice are blandly written and thus performed.” Exposition and world-building details are scant and important plot developments get lost in the quick, heavily rhythmized jazz delivery. As great as the score is, the musical styles of *Hadestown* prove to be a poor medium for detailed storytelling. As a result, the stakes were low. Personally, I gave up on trying to find a through-line in the story and decided to enjoy the visual spectacle.

*Hadestown* was a missed opportunity. This production’s creative team could have harnessed the lessons of these two Greek myths and found ways to connect them with their audience. The majority of the plot focuses on Orpheus and Eurydice which is a story about trust—something our society could use a lot more of, in my opinion. Unfortunately, these two lead characters were the least developed. A good love story can remind audiences of their individual place in the world and that the relationships they build and maintain with one another matter. Fruitful societies require individuals to be caring and respectful of their fellow citizens. Those who seek to oppress others, such as Hades-like leaders who want to build walls, can be toppled if we trust and listen to one another. I am not saying *Hadestown* should have changed its ending— in fact, more can probably be learned from watching Orpheus make the mistake of turning around— but this musical’s book provided very few on ramps for the audience to invest in the narrative or the character’s outcomes. As a result, I walked out of the theatre thoroughly entertained yet

unchanged. I often had no idea what was going on, even though everything looked and sounded beautiful. Catharsis was missing and thus *Hadestown*, while entertaining, had no social function.

Similarly, most so-called jukebox musicals, which feature the works of popular recording artists, also lack in dramatic catharsis. Recent examples include Broadway's 2018 production of *Head Over Heels* and 2020's *Girl From The North Country*. Both of these musicals act as hollow dramaturgical vessels to deliver audiences Broadway-talent performances of music from popular bands and music artists (in these examples, The Go-Go's and Bob Dylan respectively.)

Broadway producers feel safe investing into these productions as they can rely on a fan base to drive ticket sales. Unfortunately, the writers of jukebox musicals must adapt their stories to justify the pre-existing lyrics and narratives of the artist's songs. As a result, most of these musicals lack clear storylines or effective plot structures. More importantly, *Head Over Heels* and *Girl From The North Country* sacrifice the power of theatre's communal experience to give audiences "safe" entertainment. Tired tropes and "lessons" are repackaged and audiences are not asked to reconsider their place in the world or act to correct any social wrong.

I want to make clear that I am neither against entertainment for entertainment's sake nor the elaborate use of spectacle. Such elements help bring audiences into the theatre and Broadway's ability to continually innovate upon theatre tech should be celebrated. Mainstays on Broadway such as *Wicked*, *Phantom of the Opera*, and *Chicago* act as anchors that help keep the industry financially viable and draw audiences to other shows in New York and London. For countless numbers of theatre-makers and fans, including myself, these shows help draw us into the performing arts in the first place. But I want more from our art form. Theatre, with shamanistic and religious roots, was born out of dramatic performance designed to provide powerful social change. Communities were not only formed around religious rites but were

maintained and fortified through these rites even when facing the toughest of times. Even though in the United States only a very small percentage of the population regularly goes to the theatre, theatre and theatre-makers influence movies, music, television and the entertainment landscape at large. The impact of a socially conscious theatre, therefore, ripples through society's cultural zeitgeist. Entertainment and spectacle can actually help empower and popularize socially minded work to broaden its impact and cultural reach. Most of my criticism here is directed at commercial, "mainstream" theatre that is often developed to appeal to so-called "general" audiences. Off-Broadway, regional, and experimental theatres, however, do consistently attempt to push the art form forward and speak to social ills and uncomfortable truths- but this type of work rarely reaches any form of commercial success or notability. This is why it is so vitally important that *all* of today's theatre, including on commercial stages and at popular, nonprofit companies, harness the form's unique power to provide communal, cathartic experiences.

Below, I have selected a few key works from the American theatrical cannon to demonstrate a conceptual approach to understanding theatre through the historical context of shamanism as a means of social healing or change. I am not proposing to have "discovered" or articulated necessarily anything new about these works; they have all been thoroughly analyzed and discussed by academics, critics, artists, and audiences. What I am hoping to provide, however, is a new way "in" to thinking about the why behind dramatic performance so theatre can better harness the power of shared communal experience.

First, I will discuss the 1966 musical *Cabaret* which takes place during the end of the German Weimar Republic as the Nazi party begins its rise to power. Then, I will look at the political and social influences of Larry Kramer's 1985 play *The Normal Heart* and his subsequent 2014 film adaptation. Lastly, I will discuss the use of audience engagement in the

Pulitzer Prize winning *Fairview* by Jackie Sibblies Drury, along with examples from some recent narrative-driven magic productions on and off-Broadway. Each of these pieces of theatre have already proven to effect social change in their own ways. My hope is that by applying an understanding of shamanic healing and social catharsis as a dramaturgical filter, theatre-makers can better understand *how* these bodies of work effect social change. In doing so, myself and other theatre-makers can provide greater social impact through our work.

### **CASE STUDY: *CABARET***

The shaman's work is directly tied to the past. As a psychopomp, he is able to travel to the underworld. In doing so, he communes with the past and conjures and evokes the stories of the deceased. The shaman is a master storyteller who helps his community process their history in order to help guide them safely into the future. In the tradition of the shaman, life's tragedies are the work of evil, supernatural forces. By providing answers to questions such as "How did this tragedy happen?" or "Why did this happen to me and my family?", the shaman's rituals serve not only as a form of healing and closure but also as a means of protecting community members from said tragedies in the future. The shaman's stories, told through song, dance, and ritual, are understood, therefore, to be not actually his. Instead, he acts as a medium. They are the stories of ancestors channeled through him in dramatic fashion for the education and benefit of the living. The theatre can function in the same fashion, almost as a cultural psychopomp.

This function is perfectly demonstrated in *Cabaret*. With music by John Kander and lyrics by Fred Ebb, the book written by Joe Masteroff is inspired by the 1939 semi-autobiographical novel *Goodbye to Berlin* by Christopher Isherwood and the subsequent play, *I Am A Camera*, by playwright John Van Durten. This musical, which has three published iterations, follows a young American writer, Cliff Bradshaw, as he is sucked into Berlin's seedy

and sexually liberated nightlife along with English nightclub singer, Sally Bowles. At the center of this story of their doomed romance is the Kit Kat Klub, its enigmatic yet entrancing Emcee, and the rise of the Nazi party.

Dramaturgically, the presentation of *Cabaret* has evolved over time with subsequent productions and creative teams. The original 1966 production, directed by the legendary Hal Prince, placed almost equal emphasis on the book narrative (that of Cliff and Sally, Schneider and Schultz) and on the conceptual elements of the Emcee and the Kit Kat Klub. This approach, which was wildly successful on Broadway, relied on an understood and acceptable structure popular with the mainstream audiences of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century. But, this approach split the musical into almost two separate parts presented alongside one another. When Bob Fosse, however, directed the acclaimed 1972 film adaptation he cut Schneider and Schultz's plotlines completely, directing all the focus of the narrative on Sally and Cliff (renamed Brian and made British and gay.) The musical's two "worlds," Berlin and the klub, still remained as largely separate parts until Sam Mendes directed productions for both London and New York stages in the 1990s. Starring Alan Cumming as the Emcee, these interpretations present the musical entirely through the lens of the Kit Kat Klub. The book scenes, including Schneider's and Schultz's, take place entirely on the klub's stage. Yes, Berlin still exists and the book characters still live in 1930 Germany but the audience does not see the "real" world as separate from the klub.

This approach, in my opinion, is the most dramaturgically sound. *Cabaret* is one of the first commercially successful productions of a concept musical, where the themes and metaphors of the text take precedence over its narrative elements. The staging and presentation of the world of concept musicals, therefore, need to ultimately be in service the central themes of their texts.

At the same time, the characters must act as reflections of the audience. This helps audiences see the implications and consequences of the characters' thoughts and actions in relation, again, to the musical's concepts. In doing so, the audience is primed for a cathartic experience.

As Eliade demonstrates over and over, shamanic rituals and ceremonies often took place in specific locations, such as atop a mountain, deep in the woods or jungle, or in a cold, dark cave. Shamans put great thought into how the space in which a ritual took place impacted the audience's experience. These considerations are equally important when producing *Cabaret*. In the 2014 revival of Mendes' production, from the moment an audience member walks into the theatre, they are made to feel as if they have been transported to a 1930's German cabaret. Mendes' productions include front row, cabaret-table seating complete with table candles and full drink service. The cabaret dancers (chorus) warm-up on stage, occasionally chatting and flirting with guests as they are seated. Here, the fourth wall never exists. The audience is made to feel as if they are *in* the Kit Kat Klub itself as paying customers. With the opening number "Willkommen", the audience is immediately transported to the musical's dark and alluring klub. The Emcee directly addresses his audience, encouraging them to stay and to "Leave your troubles outside. So, life is disappointing? Forget it. We have no troubles here. Here, life is beautiful..." Even the orchestra, often partially consisting of actor-musicians, is in view on or above the stage, just as they would be in a real cabaret.

As a result of Mendes "casting" the audience, they cannot escape what is about to come. They are now patrons of the Kit Kat Klub, reveling in its pleasures and distractions while the politics of the world outside carry on. This hopefully primes the audience to receive the lessons and warnings of the past, just like the voices of ancestors conjured by a shaman, offered by *Cabaret's* end. The Klub, therefore, acts as a metaphor for all of life's follies that distract

societies from addressing or confronting real troubles and concerns. If a production of *Cabaret* can successfully demonstrate a correlation between this metaphor and the individual lives of each audience member, maybe audiences will overcome such distractions and help improve their society for others around them. Herein lies the potential source (or at least one source) of healing that *Cabaret* offers. If a politically and socially engaged society is considered the status quo, then *Cabaret* demonstrates what may happen when that status quo is disrupted. By reminding audiences of the consequences of such an imbalance, *Cabaret* hopefully encourages the audience to prevent this history from repeating itself.

At the center of *Cabaret*, of course, is one of the most iconic characters in American musical history, the Emcee. As the ringleader of the Kit Kat Klub, the Emcee is *Cabaret*'s shaman. He embodies the sexual liberation and loose morals of Berlin's nightlife during the Weimar Republic<sup>2</sup>. These freedoms provided fodder and distraction from Germany's severe post-World War I troubles and also fueled the Nazi party's cultural propaganda. While the Emcee is "real" and tangible to the audience (and Sally Bowles), he is often presented as seemingly invisible to everyone else in *Cabaret*- he is a nobody and yet he could be everybody. For the audience, he is both best friend and also a devil on the shoulder. Genderless and nameless, the Emcee operates on a higher plane acting as a narrator and guide, if not also provocateur.

In Joel Grey's theatre and film performances of the Emcee, he is almost asexual. He resembles a puppet or marionette with beady eyes, sharp lines in his face, and an uneasy voice. Combined with his tuxedo, walking cane, and top hat, Grey's Emcee appears to try to present

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<sup>2</sup> Again, I have chosen to use he/him/his pronouns for the Emcee for ease of reading. The Emcee, however, has also been played by female and non-binary identifying actors and no pronouns are assigned in the script. One could make a strong dramaturgical argument as to a specific gender identity/representation (or lack thereof) for the Emcee.



himself as slightly socially above the klub's other performers- acting as a reflection or peer, perhaps, of the Berliners in his audience. That is not to say he does not revel in the fun- in Grey's film portrayal of the Emcee he is a boisterous rebel rouser when on stage, always the center of attention with an unnerving grin. But he invites his audience in, as equals, and gives them permission to enjoy the klub's temptations.

In contrast, Alan Cumming's Emcee leaves nothing to the imagination. During "Willkommen", Cumming strips playfully out of a dark trench coat to reveal his shirtless body, clothed only in torn pants and loose suspenders with army-like boots and a low-hanging, disheveled bow-tie. His nipples are rouged and contoured makeup accentuates not only his face but the entirety of his thin physical frame. Cumming's Emcee is physical. He kisses, gropes, and teases the other klub members, male and female, and you can almost smell his sweat.



Alan Cumming as Emcee with the Kit Kat Girls in *Cabaret*. Roundabout Theatre 2014. Photo Credit: Joan Marcus

Both are highly successful interpretations of the role. Audiences cannot take their eyes off either Emcee and, more importantly, audiences want to trust them. The Emcee has a story to tell and he knows how to reel his audience in. The Emcee's anonymity seems to also similarly afford the audience anonymity and, perhaps, a temporary waiver of guilt as well. As he welcomes his guests in German, French, and accented English as "stranger", the temptation to "stay" and ignore life's problems is real. His familiar wink and mysterious charm reels the audience in further, setting them up for the eventual heartbreak of Sally's final number, "Cabaret", and the musical's dramatic, somber conclusion. By looking at key moments throughout the musical, it is clear the Emcee acts not only as a shaman, but as a muse and guide through *Cabaret's* central motifs. He builds a sense of community and belonging which is essential to the lessons of the story.

The Emcee also directly influences the dramaturgical form of *Cabaret* in that he controls what the audience sees, and when. He is the musical's indirect narrator. With knowing smirks and glances, both Grey and Cumming play the Emcee as omniscient yet uninfluential. He represents the evolving world around Cliff, Sally, and the other characters. *Cabaret* is episodic and chronologically linear- although one could argue some of the cabaret numbers could be reflective of performances from earlier points during the Weimar Republic. As a result, the Emcee cannot change history but, like a shaman, he always has the right song at the right moment to respond.

In Mendes' productions, for example, the Emcee lurks in the shadows during much of the musical's action. Other than introducing Sally Bowles at the klub, he does not interact with any of the primary characters. For instance, at the top of Act II when a brick is thrown through Herr Schultz's shop window, Cumming walks downstage passing directly between Schultz and

Fräulein Schneider who see right through him; he is only visible to the audience. With a smirk, Cumming drops a brick onto the stage and stands back to watch Schultz and Schneider's frightened reactions. The Emcee acts almost like a "Ghost of Christmas Past", making the audience his Ebenezer Scrooge, left to sit there, unable to stop this hate crime or speak up, and thus complicit in allowing hate to proliferate. To be clear, he himself does not throw the brick into the window (some unseen, "any man" Berliner is responsible) yet the Emcee, as the audience's omniscient guide through history, acts as stand in. Thus, he is both narrator *and* catalyst. Shamans, including the Emcee, manifest a series of events to provide catharsis and healing thus resulting in the unique dramaturgical form of *Cabaret*.

Like for Scrooge, this is just one difficult moment of many in store for the audience this night. They must stand by and let history play out through their shaman's journey. Audiences watch Cliff slowly realize most of Berlin, including himself, have become unknowingly complicit in the Nazi's rise to power. He begs Sally to see what is happening around her, but she quickly dismisses him, arguing "Politics? But what has that to do with us?" Even Ludwig, who is Jewish, is in denial that the radical agenda of the far-right could actually come into power or that he, in his home country, is in any form of danger. With plentiful distractions, it is easy for intelligent, well-meaning Germans to ignore what is happening around them. As an audience, however, we know how this story ends and the inevitable atrocities that are about to occur.

I believe, therefore, it is important that the Emcee be played as secretly "knowing that we know." In other words, even though the Emcee is the front man of a 1930's club in Berlin, he should be fully aware he is speaking to a 21<sup>st</sup> Century audience who, hopefully, are well educated on the rise of the Nazi party, World War II, and the horrors of the Holocaust. If the Emcee is aware his audience already knows how this story ends, it gives what he chooses to

show the audience more impact. Audiences understand the severe consequences of Schneider bending to the will of the Nazi party, for example, or Sally deciding to leave Cliff and stay in Germany. The Emcee's awareness, however, should not be explicit or even alluded to in the Emcee's performance. Instead, it should live in the dramaturgy of the production and, perhaps, in the subtle yet knowing winks or gestures from the Emcee to his audience.

This awareness culminates in the musical's final moments. In the Mendes' productions, as Cumming briefly reprises "Willkommen" during the finale, he once again strips out of his trench coat only to reveal this time the striped pajamas of a concentration camp prisoner. The music is intentionally off tempo and off key as nothing is beautiful anymore. It is a full 180 degrees from where the musical began. In the original Broadway production, a large mirror was revealed on stage during this final moment. This mirror allowed the audience to see their own reflection, reminding them hopefully of their own individual roles in history and politics, then and now<sup>3</sup>. By the journey's end, the audience is given the opportunity to see the slippery slope of fascism and tyranny as well as their potential role in abetting it.

Productions of *Cabaret*, therefore, need to "diagnose" the audience, and society at large, with political and social complacency, thus giving the Emcee (and the musical as a whole) an "illness" to heal. As the musical ends and theatre-goers leave the klub for the real world once more, audiences will hopefully better understand the critical role each individual can each have in protecting (or endangering) democratic freedoms. Both the theatre and shaman, therefore, provide audiences with the opportunity to learn and then take action- but they cannot compel individuals to do so. Instead, audiences are made aware of their relationship to a problem and

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<sup>3</sup> The use of mirrors during the final number (and sometimes the opening) has continued to be a component of many subsequent productions, including the film adaptation.

given a moral decision on how to act, if at all. The lessons and warnings history provides often do go ignored, thus why they bear repeating in our theatre and art.

Personally, I remember revisiting *Cabaret* shortly after the 2016 US presidential election. Like most Americans, I was surprised and shaken by Donald Trump's win and found myself continually asking "How did this happen?" A few weeks prior, in early October 2016, a close friend of mine reached out multiple times to encourage me to donate to Hillary Clinton's campaign as well as sign up for a local volunteer shift. While I did consider this, with the release of the infamous "Access Hollywood tapes" a few days later I laughed off the idea that Trump had any chance. I felt it was silly to donate to Clinton's campaign, which I thought clearly was going to win. Even the idea of volunteering in liberal New York City did not feel to be a particularly good use of my time. I, of course, was wrong. My apathy in those final weeks of the election, however, haunted me continuously throughout Trump's presidency. Every time he broke with democratic norms or pressed the limits of his constitutional powers, I regretted my assumptive attitudes during the election.

That friend has since described her experience volunteering for Clinton's campaign in Pennsylvania as like "living on a different planet." Being in a battleground state and interacting every day with voters, the narrative she heard from the news media was completely contradictory to her own experience. The enthusiasm and excitement towards the Trump campaign all over her state was not only concerning but also shocking given how downplayed and underreported this reality was on cable news. To her, distractions in the final days- like the premature celebration of Clinton's presumed victory on *Saturday Night Live*- got more news coverage than the election itself. My friend felt as if the world around her was ignoring what was happening right in front of them, no matter how much she tried to get people's attention. Given how close Trump's margins

were in the swing states, it is clear now that with a more engaged and focused electorate Clinton could have actually won, thus preventing the tragedies of the Trump administration.

Prior to Trump's election, *Cabaret* resonated with me as an important perspective on the beginnings of fascism and World War II. Since then, however, when revisiting this musical, as well as plays such as Brecht's *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, I cannot help but also see a reflection of America leading up to the 2016 election. While nothing can change the past, theatre can help audiences remember our society's wrongs in order to help not repeat them in the future. Scott Miller, a theatre historian and artistic director of New Line Theatre, writes:

*“Cabaret is about that moment, a time when it wasn't yet too late, when Germany wasn't yet locked into the path that would lead to the murder of millions of Jews. But the people of Germany couldn't see what we see. They didn't know how their choices, their fear, their apathy would lead to bigger things. People like Fraulein Schneider and Fraulein Kost were busy just trying to survive. People like Sally Bowles were busy having too good a time... We have an obligation to learn from what happened in Germany. We have an obligation to make different choices. If we don't do it today, it may be too late tomorrow.”* (Miller)

This is where theatre can heal. Like the shaman galvanizing efforts around fixing a societal ill, plays and musicals provide an opportunity for an audience to confront a shared experience together, process their emotions, and leave the theatre enabled to effect positive change. As Miller points out, *Cabaret* reminds individuals of their place within society and how they have an obligation to consider the societal consequences of their own choices and actions.

On *Cabaret*, Hal Prince reflected “It was only after we'd come by a reason for telling that

story parallel to contemporary problems in our country that the project interested me.” It is that parallel that gives *Cabaret* its punch. The value Prince saw in this musical was in its attempts to effect positive social change by making historical events personal and relevant. When *Cabaret* was first produced in the 1960s, political protest and unrest in relation to the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War directly influenced the development of the musical. Now, in the 2020s, hyper-partisanship, mass disinformation, and demagoguery keep *Cabaret*’s themes as relevant as ever for American audiences.

As I contemplate my “why” for doing theatre, a musical like *Cabaret* excites me most. For a lot of my generation, the comfort and stability of coming into adulthood during the Obama administration made us, in my opinion, less politically minded. Trump’s win changed that. My generation now feels more politically and socially engaged than any generation since the 1960’s. Even the best production of *Cabaret*, of course, would not fix today’s dysfunction in Washington DC or the social injustices of racism, xenophobia, and sexism. What it can do, as demonstrated above, is galvanize an audience through a shared experience and, again, seek to heal political apathy by making the lessons of the past relevant, personal, and cathartic.

#### **CASE STUDY: *THE NORMAL HEART***

When famine or drought strikes, when disease plagues a group, or when a series of hunting trip returns unsuccessful, shamans are often called upon to intervene for the benefit of society and to restore balance. In fact, the shaman does not just have this ability but has a social responsibility to do so. He is a servant of and for his people, uniquely situated to effect change and provide healing and cosmic balance. Anthropologist Anne-Marie Colpron offers another perspective on the role of the shaman, that of a “cosmopolitical diplomat” (376). According to Colpron, the shaman’s ability to shift between multiple planes or universes and to share in the

perspectives of other beings such as plants, animals, microorganisms, and even the weather, makes him a master mediator (376, 380-381). This is central to his work within his community, providing spiritual wisdom and guidance.

Theatre too possesses the power to address crises and to organize a society around a central cause. In one example, Eliade describes the moments before a shamanic ritual: “Silence reigns...darkness now becomes total...all hold their breath” (230). Theatre often begins the same way. In my opinion, it is also a modern cosmopolitical diplomat, a way for cultures and societies to better understand the world around them and the role they play in it. Theatre can help transform complex ideas into accessible, relatable experiences for audiences while sharing new and challenging points of view. Again, any healing from theatre is not immediate or even guaranteed. But theatre can be a catalyst for action, stirring the audience awake in service of a greater cause. Theatre’s greatest power, perhaps, is its relation to the *now*, to speak to an audience gathered in one place, at one time, in one context. The shaman and the performing arts both rely on a prepared act, a prepared moment, in which their work can take effect.

In 1985, Larry Kramer understood and harnessed this power of the theatre in a way very few playwrights before him had. His play *The Normal Heart* tells the story of Ned Week, a gay man in his 40’s, fighting to address the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s. An urgent cry for help courses through the play’s two acts as Ned fights for equality, justice, and decency as this pandemic cruelly takes thousands of lives in New York City, including that of the only man he ever loved, Felix. Through this almost entirely autobiographical work, Kramer does not seek sympathy but instead intends to slap the audience awake. In an introduction to the play written in 2000, Tony Kushner writes “Kramer...wrote a play that made news, made a difference, had an effect- not to win prizes or encomia in the press, nor to set the box office ablaze, but to catalyze



his society...” (Kushner vii). Kramer wrote *The Normal Heart* to heal his audience of ignorance and inaction as well as recruit allies and activists.

*The Normal Heart* is the story of Ned Weeks and therefore the story of Larry Kramer. Ned is the so-called “author avatar” and many of the play’s events and secondary characters are directly pulled from Kramer’s real-life experiences. For the audience, Ned Week’s acts as a shaman, even if indirectly. While the pandemic is out of Ned’s control, everything else in the play is. The form of *The Normal Heart* is episodic and chronologically linear because the play follows Ned’s personal journey. Ned “conjures” the events of each scene through his passionate appeals and emotionally driven fight. He is responsible for each escalation, each situation he and those around him find themselves in. In his 1985 review, theatre critic Frank Rich of the *New York Times* stated “there can be little doubt that *The Normal Heart* is the most outspoken play around - or that it speaks up about a subject that justifies its author's unflagging, at times even hysterical, sense of urgency...” It is this hysterical urgency that dictates the dramaturgical form of *The Normal Heart*. Ned is not just outspoken, he is outraged. He has chosen to become a vocal and relentless advocate for gay health and gay rights and must endure the push back and social resistance to his cause. If at any point Ned, or Kramer for that matter, had given up, the play would have stopped there. This play demonstrates the reality Ned, like a shaman, has shaped for himself.

As a result, every scene furthers Ned’s and Kramer’s cause, stacking one tragedy on top of the other with unapologetic bluntness. The play is heated. Ned not only loses his temper several times, it seems all the characters are prone to argument or emotional outburst, highlighting the literal life and death stakes of the crisis. As Rich describes it “The writing's pamphleteering tone is accentuated by Mr. Kramer's insistence on repetition - nearly every scene

seems to end twice - and on regurgitating facts and figures in lengthy tirades.” The dialogue is often a staccato back and forth, propelling the action forward and maintaining an urgent undercurrent. Ned’s journey is the audience’s journey, or at least that is the intention. Kramer wants his audience to share in his passion and feel this pandemic’s profound cruelties. Unlike in *Cabaret* where the audience is purposefully cast as passive bystanders, in 1985 Kramer wanted to directly implicate New Yorkers as either part of the problem or part of the solution. He calls upon his community and city to become activists and allies for those most maligned and vulnerable.

The play’s frenetic energy and high stakes, combined with Ned’s emotional plight, serves as a pseudo-ecstatic-trance. At every turn, Ned is looking to upset the status quo through public and personal disruption. This is how Kramer wants to “heal” his audience- they need to understand the severity of the crisis, share in his anger, and to action for positive change. Why should the world continue as if everything is fine when this disease continues to mercilessly kill, undetected and underreported? Kramer wants theater-goers to stop going about their lives as usual- how could they? It is not enough for the audience to feel sad or sorry, they must join Kramer in his fight. Ned is the vessel for the audience’s journey, just how a shaman shepherds his community on his spiritual journey. Through its form, *The Normal Heart* provides the audience with a direct link to the inside Ned’s mind and psyche. At the end, the audience is spit out of this journey at the moment of Felix’s death and as Ned cries, “Why didn’t I fight harder! Why didn’t I picket the White House, all by myself if nobody would come. Or go on a hunger strike...” (Kramer 121). Ned’s loss acts as Kramer’s charge for the audience: speak up and act up! Kramer’s writing holds nothing back in hope that care and compassion will be shown to those suffering, therefore returning balance to society.

*The Normal Heart* is not asking for pity on gay men, either. Instead, Larry Kramer directly implicates his own community as part of the problem. With being out still largely taboo for most gay men in 1980s, sex was considered one of the few means of affirming one's true identity. Kramer dismisses this notion. He looks beyond New York's then very promiscuous and sex-driven gay culture in order to propose a more "traditional" future for the gay man. For example, the 2014 HBO film adaptation of the play written by Ryan Murphy and Kramer, Ned organizes a community meeting at his apartment with dozens of gay men in attendance. He and Dr. Emma Brookner attempt to educate those gathered about the disease. She pleads, "You are all going to infect each other" as she begs them not to have sex until she can learn more. The crowd is aggressive and they shout the two of them down, dismissing her medical opinion altogether. Mickey, played by Joe Mantello, fires back at her with "Guys will become frightened of sex. Then we'll lose our self respect that we fought very, very hard for..."



Julia Roberts as Dr. Emma Brookner in the film adaptation of *The Normal Heart*. Photo Credit: HBO

But, Ned's journey directly counters Mickey's view. As Ned falls in love for the first time, he demonstrates what Kushner describes as "a campaign against the oversexualization of gay male life...in favor of long-term commitment..." (xxi). Kramer holds up a vision of an "ideal" for the gay man: a world where men are out and proud, freely able to pursue monogamous, loving relationships. Kramer encourages his fellow gay men to look beyond the predominately closeted, hook-up only culture of the 1980s. The audience witnesses the journey that is Ned and Felix's beautiful love story only to see it in end in tragedy. In the play's final scene, Dr. Brookner officiates a symbolic marriage between Felix and Ned, only for Felix to die immediately after. As heartbreaking as this moment is, Kramer's argument is clear: act now, stand up for yourselves, or this ideal may never be achievable. The work of both shaman and playwright is always audience oriented. Kramer does not allow for a passive experience. He ensures his message and expectations are clear, resulting in a visceral and moving piece of theatre designed to effect change.

Kramer's intent is also demonstrated in the visual presentation of *The Normal Heart* as well. With a minimal set, both the original and 2011 productions had an intentional scrappiness to them. Like the real-life activists who were forced to work with minimal resources, the characters on stage were limited in the same way. In the 2000 publication of the play, Kramer writes in a forward "The New York Shakespeare Festival production at the Public Theatre was conceived as exceptionally simple...For the 2011 Broadway revival: Once again, minimal everything" (15-18). The white walls of these sets became canvases for the designers. Facts, statistics, and headlines about the disease were painted or projected onto these surfaces. In the 1985 production, statistics such as the rapidly increasing death toll were updated continually, making it a living document reflecting the severity of the pandemic. Similarly, by the final scene

of the 2011 production, the walls were covered with the names of HIV/AIDS victims, providing a grounded realness to a disease that was for too long undetectable and misunderstood.

Through these design choices, Kramer and his designers do not let the audience ignore the realities or consequences of HIV/AIDS. As Ned puts it, “Yes, everybody has a million excuses for not getting involved. But aren’t there moral obligations, moral commandments to try everything possible?” (Kramer 44). Like a shaman looking to heal his community, Kramer offers audiences the chance to understand what has been ignored and forgotten and, more importantly, the opportunity to share in his anger and become activists themselves.



*The Normal Heart* at The Public, 1985. Photo Credit: Martha Swope

The play is also of the moment, of the time and place in which it was written and performed. Shamans respond to the problems in front of them and in context of the world around them. This allows audiences to see their direct relation to these problems. For example, audiences of the original production of *The Normal Heart* left The Public and walked out directly into the East Village- one of the few LGBTQ-friendly neighborhoods of 1980s New

York City. Victims of HIV/AIDS lived on that very street and the riots of Stonewall Inn happened just a few blocks away. The play does not take place in some fictionalized New York or America. It names names, it implicates and it exposes. Kramer calls out the then- mayor of New York, Ed Koch. Koch, a lifelong bachelor whose sexuality was a frequent source of speculation, was hesitant for many years to directly address the issue of HIV/AIDS or provide support for activists and doctors. Kramer also pans the *New York Times* for their minimal response and coverage of the pandemic, even though he knows a Times critic will be coming to review his play. No one is safe from Kramer's wrath, and rightfully so. He ultimately gives the audience a charge: *here's what your city and your government is doing, or rather not doing, so what are you going to do to fix it?* Kramer wants to create a sense of community and inspire collective activism through direct emotional appeal.

Through the journey of *The Normal Heart*, Larry Kramer diagnoses his audience, his city, and even his country with ignoring and forgetting. Its episodic form, which piles one tragedy and emotional tribulation on top of another, is designed to demonstrate the relentless devastation of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and encourage the audience to join in Ned's fight. The emotional intensity of the progression of the play's events is an intentional effort by Kramer to insight catharsis followed by a call to social activism. Kramer holds those in power to account and he asks every audience member to not only hear his anger and urgency but to share in it.

Following each performance of the 2011 Broadway production, a letter from Kramer was distributed to each audience member as they left the theatre. Entitled "Please Know", this letter contextualizes the play and the HIV/AIDS crisis for the 21st Century. Kramer calls out politicians, including then-President Obama, as well as pharmaceutical companies and NGO's. He reminds his audience that this disease has killed over thirty-five million and is still largely

ignored by the public. But, maybe most profoundly, he concludes, “I have never seen such wrongs as this plague, in all its guises, represents, and continues to say about us all” (124). With that, *The Normal Heart* becomes much more than play about gay men or HIV/AIDS. It becomes an indictment of all of his audience, of their behavior and society at-large, which allows this disease to continue to kill. Like a cosmopolitical diplomat, this raw and powerful play is designed to shake the audience awake through a cathartic experience and then demands individual and communal activism. Ultimately, Kramer hopes to remind society of the power of respecting and loving one another, despite any and all differences. His only solution is not medical but political: speak up, stand up, and fight.

#### **CASE STUDY: NARRATIVE-DRIVEN MAGIC AND *FAIRVIEW***

Theatre, at its core, is storytelling. The dramatic elements used to tell a story greatly differ from production to production, genre to genre. In recent years, illusionists, mentalists, and magicians have brought their crafts to New York stages, both on and off Broadway. In many cases, these artists and their creative teams have married the elements of a traditional magic show with dramatic forms of story-telling. The success of these narrative-driven magic shows in traditional theatre spaces is not only a sign of their popularity with audiences, but also a clear example of the familiarity theatre organizations and producers see in their dramaturgical structures. Unlike traditional theatre with a fourth wall, however, these magic shows, which teeter on the edge of performance art and long-form spoken word, rely on direct address and even audience participation. The mystique and anticipation built into the performance’s atmosphere allow for the audience to seemingly enter another plane where anything can happen.

These shows stand apart from traditional magic performances, however, as they rely heavily on pre-scripted narratives where illusion, misdirection, and sleight-of-hand are only one

piece of a much larger production. This is not your “Vegas” style show with loud music, pyrotechnics, scantily clad assistants, or wild animals. Instead, as I will describe in the two examples below, these performances are autobiographical and personal in nature, requiring immediate intimacy and trust between performer and audience. In doing so, the illusionist does not just tell a story but addresses much larger, societal issues, acting, in a way, as a modern shaman.

Take, for example, *Darren Brown: Secret* which ran Off-Broadway at The Atlantic before transferring to Broadway in late 2019. Brown, known for his long-running TV and stage performances in the UK, combines traditional magic techniques with mentalism and hypnosis. The show opens with Brown, dressed in a perfectly tailored three-piece suit, sitting comfortably on stage and calmly discussing the secrets, and lies, humans tell themselves. In just the first few minutes, he shares his deeply personal journey of holding in the secret of his sexual orientation for the first 31 years of his life. According to Brown, the stories and lies he told himself to justify remaining publicly closeted were the most elaborate and harmful fears he had as a gay man. When he eventually did come out, however, none of the nightmare stories he told himself came true. The world did not care who he was attracted to, it just wanted to see more magic.

Brown asks his audience to reflect on their own individual secrets, as well as internalized narratives, used to limit themselves. In doing so, he diagnoses society with a self-deception problem. Humans craft both internal and external narratives to protect themselves, and the world, from self-truths they are afraid to accept. Brown points out that this habit is more rampant than ever with the rise of social media platforms where users curate and portray idealized lives. He invites his audience on a two-hour journey to not only prove that they are all guilty of telling stories to themselves, but to demonstrate, through mentalism and illusion, how quickly and



naturally they do so. Brown is acting as a healer. While he makes it clear he cannot stop anyone from engaging in self-deception, he can help individuals identify when it is happening as to hopefully break the habit. With the malady clearly laid out, the journey can now begin.



Daren Brown in *Daren Brown: Secret*. Photo Credit: Sara Krulwich of the *New York Times*

The purported spiritual journey here is vastly different from that of the traditional shaman. Brown assures his audience he has neither special powers nor is he tapping into any higher realm. He repeatedly makes clear everything he does, or claims to do, is a combination of misdirection, illusion, and lies. This admission does not weaken his performance, however, but actually enhances it. He stresses that his power lies in manipulating us, the audience. With a charming smile and a proper British accent, Brown is scarily approachable and disarming. Often, he is eerily still and quiet in his delivery. At other times, he speaks at a rapid clip and moves quickly across the stage with intent and elegance. Brown controls the rhythm and heartbeat of the space. This is his shamanic trance and it is his most powerful tool to rope an audience in and

guide them through a journey of self-reflection. Brown's audience has no idea where this show will go or what he will attempt to do. They must trust him.

Brown's "spiritual" work, therefore, is done in his audience's own heads and imaginations. From the simple lie of which hand a coin is hidden in, to, during the finale, calling into question if they have had free will during the show all along, Darren Brown forces his audience to engage in the very self-deception he hopes to fix. Because his audience is directly implicated in the narrative, the show's dramaturgy is highly effective. Again, his goal here is not for his audience to walk out magically healed. Instead, Brown hopes to begin a conversation about how humans engage with our own secrets to hopefully start lifting the burdens of this natural tendency. In his 2019 review, I believe Ben Brantley of the *New York Times* correctly identified the true power of *Darren Brown: Secret* when he wrote "we allow those walls to come tumbling down, perhaps with some helpful prodding by the likes of Mr. Brown, we would see that we are all in fact connected, a race of secret-sharers rather than isolated secret-hoarders."

Magician and performer Derek DelGaudio created a similar experience in his 2017 - 2018 Off-Broadway production *In and Of Itself*. Autobiographical and introspective, this piece jumps between a highly theatrical and scripted "soliloquy" (Hulu bills it as a lyric poem) to a group therapy-like session with magic and mentalism. At the center of it all, DelGaudio argues no one knows the true Derek DelGaudio, including himself. He demonstrates how in an attempt to define his true self he instead found complex multitudes of identities, constantly shaped by others' perceptions and labels of him. The entire performance is an invitation for the audience to explore their own internal and external identities while also proving that no individual is alone in wondering "Who am I?" While I was unfortunately never able to attend this production in person, I was able to reference the recorded version directed by Frank Oz and released on Hulu.

Staged at New York's Daryl Roth Theater, *In and Of Itself* was performed in an intimate setting with only approximately 150 audience members per night. The front row is only three or four feet away from the center of the stage and the backrow is only a few steps up into the risers. A large part of the scripted portion of the show consists of DelGaudio sharing personal stories and childhood experiences as well as carefully selected allegories. Like Brown, he uses silence and stillness to draw his audience in at key moments. His delivery throughout has a slight nervous edge to it with built-in moments of hesitation and melancholy designed to make his speech feel both fearful and revelatory in nature. DelGaudio's openness is designed to make his audience feel that he is "one of us"- even though, like a shaman, the skills and powers he is about to demonstrate would prove otherwise. He remains in this calm, trance-like state throughout the majority of the performance. The intimacy of the room, which I was able to feel even through the screen, allows the audience to join him in this journey of self-reflection.



Derek DelGaudio in *In & Of Itself*. Photo Credit: Matthew Murphy/Hulu

Unknown to the audience, this journey begins before the performance starts. Each member of the audience is required to select an “I Am” card from a large, peg-board wall before entering the theatre. On each of these white cards is a unique “I Am” statement: “I am a leader”, “I am a ninja”, “I am a pediatrician”, and even “I am a dramaturg.” Some of the labels, like Ninja or Cowboy are fun while others, like Failure or even Racist, carry much more weight. No matter which card is picked, each audience member labels themselves. They have selected an identity that allows others, including complete strangers, to make assumptions about them. Furthermore, it is both the internal and external consequences of these labels and assumptions that DelGaudio believes is hurting society and holding individuals back. By forcing each audience member to select a card, DelGaudio implicates them in the very action he hopes to address. DelGaudio can now begin the communal journey towards healing.

As DelGaudio suggests, maybe this is a label they actually see themselves as or how they wish to be seen; or maybe it’s a front, a label used to hide a true, secret identity. He points out labeling ourselves and labeling each other is a natural human instinct but, what we, as members of society, do with those labels is much more consequential. DelGaudio diagnoses the audience as both victim and culprit. He invites his audience to acknowledge they all suffer from not being truly seen and also not knowing who they truly are as individuals. I would argue this performance attempts to heal his audience from the associated worries, fears, and frustrations by acknowledging no one is alone in dealing with these problems. Again, this healing is neither instant nor even guaranteed. But, like a shaman, DelGaudio has designed an experience, a journey, and a ritual to set his society on the right path.

This is best demonstrated by the performance’s mind-bending finale. DelGaudio walks through the audience, looking each individual in the eye and correctly identifying them by their

self-selected “I Am” descriptor. Given these labels were selected only roughly 90 minutes ago, DelGaudio has had no time to memorize such a large amount of information. The trick makes him appear to be a mind reader. I have no idea how he pulled off this moment, but that is not what he wants his audience to focus on. This feat of mentalism is designed to demonstrate the power of standing before another human being and attempting to truly see them as they wish to be seen. Sure, the trick is impressive but the real magic DelGaudio wants to celebrate is the simple act of truly seeing others.

As DelGaudio has stated in interviews, this finale provides a powerful, tear-jerking moment designed to make each audience member “forced to be a little vulnerable in front of strangers, but at the same time... [be] seen and heard and acknowledged...” (Gordon). Most importantly, it is his proposed solution to overcoming the labels humans give themselves and each other. Both times I watched this production, in the span of 24 hours, I cried. Most of the audience members appeared to as well. For me it was a surprisingly cathartic event that I would never expect from an illusionist, let alone the recording of a filmed theatre production. Nevertheless, this emotional journey allowed me to better appreciate the joy of feeling truly seen as my authentic self. I felt compelled to try to better listen to others and see and acknowledge their authentic selves. In other words, the show worked.

I want to make clear I am not advocating for theatre to adapt these specific methods of storytelling. Magicians like Brown and DelGaudio have honed and mastered highly specialized techniques of performance that should not be carelessly thrown into productions. While their New York productions may also rely heavily on traditional theatrical elements, including carefully scripted narratives, they are still at their core magic shows. What I believe theatre practitioners should take away, however, are the innovative and intelligent ways the forms and

dramaturgy of these pieces engage audiences. They attempt to heal through identifying issues of human nature that have negative social impact. The use of magic and mentalism not only demonstrates these social problems but also proposes potential solutions. The issues these two productions seek to address are not new- but the way in which audiences are asked to look at them are. Brown and DelGaudio have found innovative and highly personal ways to construct new narrative forms. By breaking the understood “rules” of the theatre, such as the fourth wall, audiences eagerly trust the journey in which they are invited to participate.

Similarly, one of the more recent and successful examples of theatre breaking these rules is the 2019 Pulitzer Prize winning play *Fairview* by Jackie Sibblies Drury. Through *Fairview*'s three distinct parts, Drury addresses several issues including white privilege and white gaze, cultural appropriation, and systemic racism. In a 2019 interview with NPR, Drury characterized the play as “basically one giant microaggression, in a way. And it lasts for so long...” (Martin). *Fairview* is a dramaturgically and socially complex piece of theatre and merits analysis on both of those topics.

Set in the American suburbs, the Frasier family, prepare to celebrate their grandmother's birthday. *Fairview* begins as your traditional well-made play, or kitchen sink comedy, complete with loving, sitcom-like bickering. In fact, Drury has described them as an “upwardly mobile” black family, not unlike other black families portrayed on American sitcoms. Act One's narrative form is not only familiar, it is intentionally formulaic until it is broken. The play suddenly resets in Act Two with the actors silently repeating step-for-step their blocking from the top of the text, but with audio playing over their movements. A recorded conversation between four “white sounding” individuals is played over the onstage action. These disembodied voices discuss racial stereotypes and “if you could choose to be a different race, what race would you be?” (Drury

32). It is a painful conversation to sit through. Slowly, this conversation begins to narrate the actions of the actors on stage as the voices observe the family's movements, questioning their intentions and what it means to be black.

The third and final act of *Fairview* suddenly begins and re-breaks the established form of Act Two. The play picks up where part one left off and the audience can once again hear the on stage actors speaking. The white actors, whose voices we previously heard, slowly appear on stage as various members of the family as well as Keisha Frasier's friend, Erika. The four of them disrupt the party and vandalize the Frasier's home while dressed in culturally appropriated hair and clothing, an act Drury describes as "other people start[ing] to project their own versions of blackness onto these characters" (Martin). At the crescendo of the chaos, Keisha, abruptly stops the play, breaking the fourth wall. She invites the white-identifying audience members to stand up and literally walk onto the theatre's stage. Keisha wonders out loud:

*"Could I say  
Come up here folks who identify as white,  
you know who you are.  
You can choose to come up here  
to where I've always been, where my family has always been...  
And we can be all of us together alone?  
And if I were to be out here with my colorful people,  
could I tell us a story?" (Drury 139-141)*

As she speaks, the black cast members join her and the non-white identifying audience in the house. The play ends at the conclusion of Keisha's monologue with most of the audience still on the stage.

For centuries, racism and white privilege have persisted not only in America but also in the theatre. Through *Fairview*, Drury intelligently uses the shared, communal experience of theatre to demonstrate and call out these social and institutional issues. Neither Drury nor the production team has to do any work to ensure the demographic makeup of the audience will almost certainly be a majority white every night. During Act Two, white audience members, if they have not already done so, are given the opportunity to acknowledge their position as observers of the black bodies before them. And in Act Three, once the white identifying audience members are crammed on stage left staring at a nearly empty house, Drury's point has been made clear- in that moment, theatre's inequality and systemic racism has no place to hide. Furthermore, those aiding in its perpetuation, even ignorantly or unknowingly, have the opportunity to accept its existence head on. *Fairview* thus creates a shared communal experience designed to directly address an institutional and societal ill. The play does not let anyone sit back or remain a bystander or objective observer. Even if an audience member chooses not to participate, just witnessing "the event" of Act Three will likely have a profound impact on any theatre-goer.

Keisha proves to be the audience's unassuming, shaman-esque guide through *Fairview*. As the world wizzes by around her, she is just trying to get through the uncertainties and challenges of her senior year of high school. With college only a few months away, it appears the energetic and academically successful Keisha has a bright future ahead of her. In her soliloquy in Act One, however, Keisha expresses doubts when discussing her goals and dreams: "But I feel like something is keeping me from all that. / Something.../ Yes, something is keeping me from what I could be./ And that something./ It thinks that it has made me who I am..." (Drury 27). The fears and doubts expressed in Keisha's soliloquy act almost like an invocation of the



chaos about to ensue. Keisha always seems to be one step removed from the events around her. Multiple times she appears slightly dazed and confused, even saying to her father, “I just feel like something is wrong. I have a pit in my stomach and my heart is-...” (Drury 82). As the white characters intrude upon the family it becomes clear that the “something” holding Keisha back is them and the racism and oppression they represent.



Mayaa Boateng as Keisha in *Fairview* at New York’s Theatre For A New Audience.  
Photo Credit: Henry Grossman.

Furthermore, the Frasier family as a whole cannot escape systematic racism and white surveillance, no matter how hard they try. *Fairview* “earns” its end event because it demonstrates that until white people understand these social ills and begin to correct them, the “Keishas” of the world will continue to suffer from an unjust society. Ultimately, like how Larry Kramer speaks through Ned Weeks, Jackie Sibblies Drury speaks through Keisha to invite the white identifying audience members to participate in the very issue she hopes to confront.

Looking at the dramaturgical form of *Fairview*, the structure of the play is directly shaped around Keisha's storyline. Midway through the "normal" world of the first act, where the unities of time, location, and action are maintained, Keisha is introduced. Her home, which should be a place of comfort and security, is instead frenzied and unbalanced. For the audience, Keisha is the most sympathetic character and her brief soliloquy in Act One acts as foreshadowing for what is about to come; this moment notably occurs during the height of uncertainty in this act. When Keisha breaks the third wall again in Act Three, where the unities have been completely broken, she steps fully out of the play. In other words, the character of Keisha controls (as indirectly as it may seem) the shape of the play and thus the audience's experience. She, as a representation of the victims of oppressive white surveillance, is able to directly speak to the white-identifying audience who are actively and consciously engaging in that oppressive act. Keisha, through the dramaturgical form of *Fairview*, acts as a shaman-shaping the audience experience to achieve a desired outcome and impact.

*Fairview* provides an active experience for its audience. How that experience is received will greatly vary between individual audience members. Before discussing my personal experience attending *Fairview* though, I believe it is important to note here that there has been much discussion as for whom it was written. Salamishah Tillet, a contributing critic at large for the *New York Times* and a black woman, described her experience at *Fairview* as feeling "like I was a 'prop' who suddenly had to perform racial solidarity in that moment and was under more scrutiny in the end than I was in the beginning." (Tillet, Green). I cannot speak to anyone's experience attending this play other than my own, but I can certainly comprehend how *Fairview* could make Tillet, or any black audience member, potentially feel the way she described. *Fairview* uniquely bisects its audience into two communities by the play's end. As a result, one's

experience attending the play will greatly differ depending on which community with which they choose to identify.

As for myself, a white man, I can say *Fairview* proved to be an engaging if not also challenging evening when I attended a performance of the 2019 production at New York's Theatre for a New Audience. Even though I had read the script beforehand and thus knew exactly what happened, I was surprised by the emotional journey of *Fairview*. During Act One, I caught myself "settling in" to the conventional form of a family comedy and enjoyed watching the play as a passive audience member. Drury intelligently uses Act One to lure the audience into something that feels familiar and safe, a ritual she knows her audience has witnessed many times before. I fell right into her trap. With the abrupt start of Act Two, the racially tone deaf conversation turns this ritual upside down. The conversation between the white voices does not necessarily break the fourth wall, but it does force the audience to become hyper-aware of their experience sitting in the theatre. While I listened to this conversation the actors on stage became just that- actors, roughly thirty yards away from me, walking around on a raised stage performing rehearsed actions. This was very much a meta-theatrical experience. I became aware of my spatial relationship to them and the theatre itself which put my mind to work; I attempted to listen to the conversation while also watching the on stage actors to make sense of these two narratives in relation to one another. In this moment, the audience, if they have not already done so, must acknowledge its position as observers of the black bodies before them. Like the work of a shaman, the play's narrative and form suddenly transformed my perception of the space in which I was sitting in order to address a larger social issue.

As Act Three began, even though I knew what was going to be asked of me, actually participating in "the event" was a bit nerve-wracking and uncomfortable. Around me, some of

my fellow white audience members appeared to be quite eager to get on stage while others were clearly caught off guard and unsure of what was happening. Some cried while others even smiled and laughed nervously. Upon reflection, this experience may actually be one of the closest moments of catharsis I have personally felt in the theatre. The actress playing Keisha looked directly into as many eyes of the white audience members as possible during her final monologue, including mine. I was directly implicated, stripped of the opportunity to remain a passive audience member. As a white theatre-maker, I felt appropriately called out for never really recognizing the struggles and inequalities facing arts of color. To be honest, I was relieved when it was over, a feeling that surprised me. The many conversations and debates provoked by *Fairview*, including those I have since had with my classmates and friends, have personally opened my eyes to my own privileges and unconscious biases, both in the theatre and beyond.

The experience of *Fairview* is unlike anything that has been done in the theatre before, at least to my knowledge. Racial inequality and discrimination have plagued America since before its founding. Jackie Sibblies Drury crafted not just a play but a communal event that directly implicates many of its participants and demonstrates each individual's relationship to these problems. *Fairview*, like a shaman's ritual, allows performers and audiences to share the same space in the same moment and in the same cultural context. There is no barrier between those performing and those witnessing. Drury, through the character of Keisha, relies on the ancient techniques of shamanic social healing. This play directly evokes pity and fear and does not attempt to hide its moment of catharsis. With that being said, *Fairview* is not an easy production to pull off and has run into both celebration and resistance from audiences, critics, and theatre-makers. All of that, however, is part of its social function and provides a challenge that I am excited to embrace, even as a member of the audience. I propose, as a dramaturg, that any group

of theatre-makers wanting to produce this play should approach it first as a communal experience that uses theatrical conventions and techniques- rather than the other way around. In doing so, I believe *Fairview* will continue to be a socially efficacious play that can help form a more just and equitable society.

In many ways, magicians like Brown and DelGaudio are like modern shamans, even though they would be the first to argue they are nothing of the sort. Their work and talents transport audiences, even if for just an hour or two, to a plane where the normal limits of physics and human ability seem to not exist. Their audiences do not need to suspend disbelief, it is suspended for them, even if only temporarily, through stunning and inexplicable feats of magic. What observers should take away, however, are how Brown, DelGaudio, and also Drury take advantage of every element of a communal experience. Am I arguing that all theatre productions should use more direct audience participation? Absolutely not. But theatre-makers must consider how they will engage, or even implicate, their audiences with the social issues they seek to address.

## **FINAL THOUGHTS**

Theatre today can create a shared communal experience that directly influences emotions and attitudes. It can make the inaccessible accessible through thoughtful and also entertaining narratives. As I have previously mentioned, Eliade saw shamans as of the societal “elect” and thus capable of accessing the elements of the sacred inaccessible to other members of their communities (7). To me, theatre has always had a similar power. Modern theatre may be entirely secular in practice but that does not mean theatre-makers cannot approach their work as having a higher purpose. In my eyes, theatre and the performing arts are elevated, if not sacred, human traditions. On the dramatic nature of shamanism, Eliade writes:

*“Something must also be said concerning the dramatic structure of the shamanic séance...every genuinely shamanic séance ends as a spectacle unequalled in the world of daily experience...[revealing] the world in which everything seems possible...and a certain superhuman ‘freedom’ is exemplified and made dazzlingly present.” (Eliade 511)*

What is theatre other than a means of accessing that unavailable in daily life? Even a theatrical production complete in verisimilitude and void of any spectacle allows an audience to have an objective perspective on the thoughts and actions of the characters depicted before them. Theatre resurrects stories of the past, reminding audiences of important historical lessons and lifting up the voices of the forgotten. This imitation of life, as Aristotle describes it, has the ability to connect an audience with different perspectives and experiences than their own. Most human conflict, I believe, can be avoided by attempting to listen and understand one another. Theatre provides a powerful way to facilitate such listening and understanding through accessible and relatable means. I argue, therefore, theatre-makers have a social responsibility to always attempt to effect positive communal change through their work.

Despite always being challenged at Columbia to determine a “why” behind my work, I never felt like I could formulate a proper argument for putting up any given production or project. Even though I have been actively engaged in theatrical creation for a majority of my life, somewhere along the way I stopped asking myself why I was doing it. Theatre has always been instinctual for me, even from a young age. Even now, I feel compelled to create theatre, and share in the work of my fellow artists, purely out of a sense of enjoyment. While enjoying one’s work is definitely critical to good art making, theatre can provide so much more substance for

both creator and audience. The tragedies of COVID-19, including the economic and occupational toll it has taken on the theatre industry, have driven me to seek a greater artistic purpose and better understand my own why.

I have always loved being a student of history, including theatre history. Even from my first theatre history class during my undergraduate studies, the brief lessons on shamanism and tribal ritual intrigued me. To me, anthropological accounts of these ritualistic practices proved the existence of a natural human instinct to perform and tell stories. I am fascinated by the idea of the shaman not only as a practitioner of ritual but as a keeper of a people's histories, and traditions. At the end of the day, shamans are dramatic storytellers who help preserve a sense of unity through maintaining traditions and religious identity. They sustain community and, through religious mythos, attempt to help their fellow humans understand the world around them, including life's troubles and tragedies. Today's theatre needs to work the same way. It must go beyond entertainment and spectacle and serve society as a beneficial resource. Like a shaman, today's theatre must help audiences acknowledge and accept a problem at hand, accommodate an emotional journey to evoke an emotional and behavioral response, and provide hope that one day balance can be restored.

In all of the above case studies, the playwrights and performers created a sense of community to address larger social ills. Larry Kramer, for example, does not just discuss the HIV/AIDS crisis in *The Normal Heart*, he seeks to unite his audience around actively working to combat it. He wants each audience member to become their own version of Ned Weeks not for any political reason but because it is the right and human thing to do. Ned, and Kramer for that matter, share the shamanistic quality of "a certain superhuman 'freedom'" (Eliade 7). Both men reshape the world around them to unapologetically seek healing and justice for their community.

Kramer, in 1985 and again in 2011, knew he was sending theatre-goers back out into New York with a sense of social empowerment and also accountability. *The Normal Heart* is an intensely emotional piece of art, designed to evoke catharsis. This catharsis, Kramer hopes, will remind audiences what it means to care for one another, including strangers and those historically marginalized. Ultimately, art became a means for Larry Kramer to effect positive change and restore order to the world around him.

While those who practiced shamanism in tribal societies may have not actually possessed any supernatural capabilities, communal experiences can and do provide spiritual and mystical opportunity. Regardless of what modern science may prove or dismiss, humans continually seek to share in a communal experience in search of a spiritual, maybe even ecstatic, experience. Throughout history, as previously exemplified, we, as humans, have formed religions and faith systems to provide individuals with an understanding not only of the world but also of one's place in it. In attending church, communities today engage in ritual and public expression of shared beliefs and values. Theatre, and the performing arts at large, do this too. The stories artists and producers choose to put on stage- and the stories for which audiences choose to buy tickets- reflect the experiences, morals, and perspectives in which our society sees value and worth. Furthermore, humans continue to return to the theatre and dramatic expression because it, like shamanic traditions, is also fundamental to the human condition. In my opinion, as the lights go down and the curtain comes up, something mystical and spiritual does happen in the theatre. A sense of unity within the audience is formed when they come together to share in a story and the instinctual draw we, as humans, feel towards the performing arts attests to a spiritual element.

Theatre provides a means for one's sense of self to become secondary to a communal identity, even if only temporarily. This is not to say every audience member will experience a



story the same way or all be united in agreement- in fact, this will most likely never happen. Instead, however, a shared, cathartic experience should provide each audience member with a better understanding of their role in their own society. Eliade coined the term hierophany to describe a moment when the sacred is manifested or revealed. These types of moments, according to Eliade's theological arguments, provide mankind with structure and order on which to shape morals and behavior. He writes, "In the humblest hierophany there is an 'external new beginning' ...a desire...to recreate the world..." (xvi-xvii). Good art, in my opinion, should function as a series of hierophanies that reveal truths or mysteries of the human experience. In doing so, art can encourage each individual to see their unique place in the world, as a part of something much larger than any one person. *Cabaret*, *The Normal Heart*, *Daren Brown: Secret, In & Of Itself*, and *Fairview* all ask audiences to adopt a sense of individual responsibility to address a societal ill or concern. Through these and similar theatrical works, it becomes incumbent upon individuals to make moral and deliberate choices if they want to help make the world a better place. In other words, good theatre can help provide audiences with, as Eliade describes, a sense of a new beginning to recreate and reshape their world.

So, what does this look like in practice? Dramaturgs need to be at the forefront of ensuring any production has a positive social impact. This is my new "why." Playwrights are drawn to tell the stories they feel the world needs to hear. Even if a playwright's work is not as socially, historically, or politically oriented as the case studies I have provided, every good piece of theatre shines light on the human experience and the relationships we form with one another. The dramaturg, as a champion of the playwright's intention and voice, should work to tell these stories and help a creative team clearly define a shared purpose behind presenting a play or musical.

The dramaturg also needs to be the first advocate for the audience. In addition to ensuring clarity and cohesion, dramaturgs have the responsibility to help define what an audience's relation to a production should be. This means dramaturgs need to be able to accurately identify how a narrative's structures and forms function to shape the audience's relationship to that narrative's central issues. As demonstrated in my vastly different case studies, dramaturgical forms greatly vary. There is not a specific type of form or narrative structure that I feel is more effective than another. But, when purposefully constructed, any given dramaturgical form should empower shaman-like characters, such as the Emcee, Ned Weeks, or Keisha Frasier, to shape the communal experience intended for an audience. Obviously every individual audience member will experience a show differently but determining the intended audience-narrative-production relationships will give actors and designers greater clarity and purpose beyond their work. The dramaturg must work to ensure audiences, and thus societies, will benefit from the stories being told in today's theatre.

I am not saying every theatre-maker needs to become an expert on shamanism. But an understanding of the origins of performing arts in shamanic, communal healing rituals can help theatre become more socially efficacious- something I feel the world could greatly benefit from right now. Theatre remains one of the few communal forms of expression and storytelling that is able to connect with an audience in their own social, political, and historical context. As the theatre industry slowly returns from COVID-19 closure, theatre-makers have a responsibility to find new and innovative dramaturgical approaches that better serve both audiences and artists. Theatre must be of the now. It must be born of, and live in, the messes and complications of today's society while taking the lessons of the past to advocate for a better future.

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