

Informal Panel Discussion/Conversation – 5/19/03

Paul Donnelly – President of Theatre Alliance, playwright, director

Michael Kinghorn – Senior Dramaturg, Arena Stage

Nick Olcott – Freelance director, actor, playwright, etc.

Introduction – Willy Conley

Question #1:

Michael:

A little background...as senior dramaturg at Arena Stage I supervise the literary department. We are a department of three. Myself, a full time literary manager and a full time season long intern, typically. We, of course, deal with all the incoming and outgoing plays of the season, conduct research for each production, do a variety of writing on behalf of the theatre, and a number of other things including season planning. Arena has 3 spaces – 800-seat Fichandler Theatre, Kreeger Stage – 500 seats, Old Vat – cabaret space – 130 seats. Play development activity in Old Vat, includes readings (Willy was in one), usually a one-day event. Develop a play; give writer opportunity to have play heard by Arena's creative team. Also, to develop a relationship with the writers so at some point, Arena may be able to produce a play in full production. Sometimes readings do go on to full productions...always a hope to pursue goal of having it produced. Last year – Anthems, with Culture Clash Latino group – Arena commissioned, put through a series of workshops and then produced on stage. Also have a number of commissions out by various writers. One way playwrights go through process is through commissions. Now have by Kathleen Mickey Anderson, John Strand, Tazwell Thompson, Robert Schenken (loosely around Louis and Clark)...another access point is commissions. Also do in house readings if there is a script arena is interested in and they want to hear it themselves to make a decision about producing it or working on it further. Season planning usually starts around October. Five – eight people involved...season usually goes through about three drafts. Everyone brings something to the table. One of literary's main functions...provide options for artistic director...try to do at least one or two new pieces each season. Difficulty...sometimes hard financially to produce risky material that artists might like and still attract audience to fill Broadway size house. Submission: policy is pretty standard with their size. They get about 1000/year. Accept manuscripts from artist representation (agents). Without representation, accept 10 pages sample dialogue, synopsis, and resume. Also...in touch with colleagues around country and city. One of reasons he is here...effort to do that kind of advocacy. If it sounds like a tough submission process, there are other ways to access.

Nick:

Really discussing from three different viewpoints. One...I am coordinator of Round-House Theatre's new play reading series – devoted to reading new plays. Also associate artist at the Round House and have a role in reading plays for selection for mainstage season. Third...freelance director on look out for interesting scripts. As the coordinator of the new voices series (used to be called) now called new works series, we are devoted

to developing new work not necessarily for production. Want to make it very clear to playwrights, that by having a reading at RH we are not promising a production will result. We don't have the resources for extensive play development, nor do we have the ability to commit to doing new plays. We have done new plays, but it is a very expensive and risky venture for a theatre like RH that has hefty payroll, though smaller than arena...with facilities to maintain, etc. For new works series, I accept all plays submitted for the series from local playwrights – LOCAL = Baltimore to Richmond to West Virginia. Expanding series to include other playwrights if they have something of interest to RH. That's a very risky business, because if you throw the doors open thousands of plays would come in. Local playwrights go to top of the pile...read first, then when they have some kind of contact or a known person, unknowns and outside the area go to bottom of the pile rarely get seen. Intention of new works series, giving playwright chance to hear the play read by professional actors and done with professional director and put it in front of an audience and have a discussion that will hopefully provide feedback for writer. As far as mainstage productions at RH, the theatre accepts plays submitted by literary agent → looked at first, second...looked at by people they know, some kind of personal contact. RH has also adopted method of asking for a synopsis and ten-page sample of the play because the number of manuscripts is too great for anyone to tackle. That's how plays enter the process for mainstage theatre selection. Not only new plays are read...also used plays...plays previously produced. Group of about ten that read plays and pass them around. As a freelance director, gets plays sent. First if there is some kind of personal contact (someone suggests, know the person, etc.) will definitely read it. then the question is, from playwrights, once play is read how does one choose a play? Very unscientific, imprecise, personal thing. What speaks to me...what captures my imagination and makes me want to get involved. Very much a function of personal interest, taste, concerns. Even a play that would fascinate me this year may leave me absolutely cold next year. True of every director, dramaturg, anyone reading...function of state of mind, time in life, etc. as to what will speak to you. For playwright, means get your play into the hands of as many people as possible hoping to find right combo.

Paul

As a playwright who has had two plays read at new works series at RH, great job done there. Large audience also shows up which is nice. I come from a different place in the food chain. Never worked for a company that has had a payroll to worry about. Some freedoms from working in a smaller theatre. Some production values you can't bring to the stage technically, etc. most closely associated with charter..They do new plays exclusively. Very receptive to a range of plays. Perform in a 50 seat black box in Georgetown...must be doing something right, in first season they did six plays and four plays had four actors nominated for Helen Hayes. Around for a year doing workshops and staged readings before creating a season. Extensive developmental process there. Theatre alliance is also receptive to new work, but no formal mechanism. If a play has an advocate and speaks to someone then it has a chance.

Michael:

Molly Smith is the final word on selection of new plays for production. In literary, we find ourselves trying to find what will be of interest to her. Sometimes we succeed. Sometimes we don't. It's a rather subjective thing. Ultimately comes down to what Molly Smith connects with. If you look at last five years, some of the new plays have been like adaptation of Thornton Wilder's *Theophilus North*...first time playwright adapting a playwright arena's audience is used to. Earlier this season, it was *Anthems*, which was a piece by the trio, culture class and associate artist Charles Randolph Wright. That was a collaboration commissioned by arena two years ago. Last season, *Polk County* which was a rediscovered play found in the library of congress by Zora Neale Hurston. Now, arena is quietly campaigning to redo campus for a third space to do new American plays. Molly has refocused the theatre by producing American plays. Michael's criteria....something that shows that the writer, or creative artist behind the work is thinking about interesting ideas, has some control of his or her medium. Deal with plays that are primarily verbal, but it doesn't matter...looking for things exciting. An interesting story, an interesting concept, an interesting thematic that keeps me interested throughout the piece. Example: Robert Wilson occasionally, Ping Chong 15-16 years ago worked in Brazil they works for a year on physically based movement and choreography.... this was a theatre that accumulated in images and not narrative.past experience. For Michael..if he finds that right project, will advocate for it....another director example is Anne Bogart.

Paul

At theatre alliance, on similarity, artistic director Mr. Skidmore is responsible for season. Try to find seasons that are not that similar. Also, moved to H-Street...very different neighborhood than Georgetown and Dupont Circle. Trying to involve community but not patronize...don't want to fall into trap of this is Feb so that is the black play.

Nick

I have seen the words visual theatre often. A project that Tim and I are working on..the first time I saw the words "visual theatre" were when I was typing it on the grant proposal. Not a term currently used a lot but I can't think of another term that is being used. The irony is right now in Washington, visual theatre is hot...Synetic Theatre founded by two people from Georgia (former soviet union) who both speak with very thick accents so they found they couldn't do plays in English so they drew on their own theatre training so they did plays that are largely visual. They did a silent version of Hamlet and they've done several other plays that were told entirely through movement or in large part. Also did production of *The Idiot* that had very little spoken language...story told through movement and tableau. That company just won most of the Helen Hayes awards...choreography, direction and production. Now a lot of interest in theatre that employs movement, dance, non-verbal communication. Found it very amusing that the production *Alek* is in of mine at Theatre J, has a lot of music and dance....co-directed with a choreographer. Some of the reviews have said they are trying to capitalize on the success of Synetic Theatre (but choreographer has been doing it for years). People in mainstage theatre are interested in visual theatre, but not using that term.

Paul

Paul...Synetic has shaken up theatre in Washington more than any other theatre in 25 years...people are saying movement based. They also do theatre for children that is movement based and just as engaging for kids. When they do pieces more strongly connected to text...feels not as successful than when they start with movement.

Michael

Visually impaired so approaches it from a different angle. Started reading number 44, the mystery of stranger by Mark Twain. He left it unpublished before he died...after that, editors were going through his stuff and put three versions of the story together in an illicit way and published it as if it was his work...a bit of a fraud. In the 1960s, they found the last draft of Twain's "mysterious stranger," – immediately spoke to Michael. One of the things that happens when writers adapt novels to stage.

Today you will see a lot of plays that begin with a long monologue...in part so the playwright and performer can connect with an audience that we might be losing. We see characters talking to the audience...telling us how they feel, etc.

Paul

The way I've seen people respond to Synetic's work...people are open to it but need exposure. Ultimately, open to something that surprises me. Maybe I'm jumping ahead. I think non-traditional formats would be something positive...move it to a different place than a conventional work with an opening monologue by someone I don't know.

Michael

And...if I see something like that, my next question is whether the artist is thinking through the implications of this alternative format. If they are, then I'm hooked. For example, if there is no dialogue. Let's say it is like a play from 20 years ago called "request concert." Working class woman comes home from work...goes through after work rituals. At the end of the play, she takes pills or poison and kills herself as a product of this environment...of her lifestyle. Stunning piece of theatre...not done all that often. Strikes as an alternative format.

Question by Willy: Is there a place for new works like "request concert" or non-verbal Michael – at the moment it would be challenging for the audience and they might find it confusing. Our hope is to build an audience through the series at the old vat so when we have that new third space we can do more risky kinds of plays.

Nick

I know for a fact at the round-house were considering doing a play by the British writer, Alan Ayckbourn, known as British Neil Simon, b/c he writes a play each year and most are huge hits and most are pretty conventional. He wrote a play that is his tribute to silent movies...entirely silent play...RH was considering it, but weren't sure if they had the performers who could carry all the action physically for 2 hours...not sure if those people existed. That was before I began my exploration into deaf theatre and deaf actors, but at

that time that's how we felt. What we're talking about is plays that go against the grains of normal convention..making the people who read plays have to jump over a few hurdles before getting to the idea of producing the actual play. First...if the format doesn't open like a normal play with character, dialogue, etc. second..finding a person to read it and be able to visualize it. Third...have a theatre that can put it on stage and pull it off. So...thinks theatres are interested, but there are additional hurdles.

Paul

Smaller theatre's have an advantage because not as big a risk. Did a movement based piece...tales of avid, but rooted in some Ted Hughes poems most notoriously known as the husband of Sylvia Plath...movement drawn from text and a lot of text used.

Movement piece...more of a hybrid.

Question: Open to accepting ASL script?

Paul

To be really honest...would depend on cover letter. Need really compelling letter of what I am getting and why I am getting it in that format. If it just came "Dear _____, here is my new play, sincerely yours..." I might be more confused.

Nick

I actually gave this question a lot of thought before I got your questions. People who read plays are experiencing stacks of things....desks always overflowing. I know for a fact, videos don't work because they don't stack, they are difficult, they fall over and no one has a video machine at their desk. Don't have vcr and monitor....always get set aside for viewing later. In our world...later translates to never. CD-ROM is very interesting. I have no experience because no one has done that, but you do have your computer there and your disk drive. That might work. I know a script that came in with nothing but stage directions would be really daunting. I think there needs to be a visual element that comes with it. If you could have photographs or something. This is a whole new world..trying to think of what I would respond to if it came across my desk. Something that would give me an idea of what that visual element might be. I need something to grab me. I do know, if you are going the CD-ROM route or video route it needs to be very well produced, they are really hard to watch. Things that can be brilliant on stage can look really bad on video. The media are just so different. No one has the time to sit down and watch a whole production. Need to carefully edit, package and select for your production. Think of it as an advertising piece for your play. I know..huge burden on the playwright trying to get produced, but realistically it might require that. On a less expensive and more doable, with computer printing and photographs, might be able to cheaply and easily produce script with visual element interspersed with direction. Kind of produce a comic book of your show. That might excited and interest me...and as a comic book make interesting reading.

Michael

I agree with everything you say, and might add...videos and other media (and even CDs that are not high quality) can be off-putting and hard to have taken seriously. You

included photographs as something to provide...good idea. Can be better by learning to describe work in a way that is of interest to producer...need skill of being able to advocate one's work in however you format your package. For me to connect with stage directions, needs to be written in a way that says that the writer is really thinking about images..about visual theatre in a way that is compelling to me. Versus how we write stage direction now which is short hand for the director or writer. Smart person knows that Eugene O'Neil stage directions of the past are no more.

Nick

Good example...almost produced at roundhouse a play...opening stage direction. "A flood...destruction...a blue Toyota floats by." The playwrights knows darn well you can't do that on stage, but that has written what is, in essence, a very compelling little poem so that we are immediately visually grabbed because there is this strong visual image "how could I do that" reaction. Right there...instead of writing long sentences, you crafted a well written poem to make that image immediately leap into my mind.

Question: if you got a silent script and didn't know it was, for example, Hamlet.

Nick

First question...why.....

Ray.....question...if you were representing that visual theatre company, what would that cover letter say....?

Nick

Don't write these words down or quote me...I'm thinking like an advertising person. "This is a story too big for words." "This is a story that grabs the heart as only a picture can." Something that says there is a reason to do this without words. There is something more important, more visceral about this production because it is without words. I'm a big fan of strong verbs "grabs you", "pierces your heart", "enters the brain through the eye."

Paul

We as playwrights have responsibility to research and find theatres that might be interested...find companies that have done work which suggests they might be open.

Nick...

For advertising, one of the lines from hamlet is "the rest is silence" as motto for show. They found a reason in the play to do it.

Michael

I think you made this point, but let me re-iterate. This theater does this own work so it wasn't a submission. There wasn't a cover letter. But it does get to the point of what a cover letter looks like for a submission. We know about that...it is always my advise to try to be honest, direct, try to avoid being cute, try to avoid being confrontational...you may giggle to hear me say these things, but you'd be surprised at the kind of approaches

we discover by any kind of playwright sending us a submission or sample dialogue. Being direct, honest, and as specific as possible about your intentions. Agree....do your homework. If you show me you don't know what my theatre does, it will be difficult for me to take that letter seriously. Trying to think of a good example..If you don't know that Arena no longer does theatre from world rep and focuses primarily on American plays and you ask me if we're interested in doing your new adaptation of 14 stories by Chekhov, you haven't done your homework. I think you're right about that. Theatres now have websites....easy access that information. We (arena) have a production history and a good picture of the kinds of plays we are doing and have done. If you don't know any of those plays, that may be your next piece of homework...a lot of work, but fun work.

Jane...questions about old vat, etc.

Michael

True...we haven't used old vat the way we used to. True...we use it primarily for our new works series and that is what Wendy Goldberg produces and directs. Always a possibility of having some of those events signed...I know that is not what you are asking for, but it is a possibility. We are currently in the quiet phase of a campaign to refurbish the whole theatre's campus...an announcement has been stalled by economic issues. Means...probably in about 18 months we will be off-site. That is also an obstacle to this plan. But will talk to molly, etc.

Also, I mentioned the "request concert" from 15-20 years ago. I think a lot of folks who are working with visual theatre are working in the avant-garde. Certainly room for people to explore that territory but it may be a territory one has to explore on the fringes though not necessarily exclusively.

Nick

I want to say something that may be unpopular..as a reality you as playwrights need to be aware of. Hearing people are scared to death of silence. They want to know their hearing needs are going to be met. I directed *miracle worker* that Shira was in and I had people terrified because the first five minutes of the play had no spoken dialogue and we had to put sound in there to reassure hearing people that it was ok and there wasn't a problem. There were people who completely didn't understand that and felt there was no communication because there was no sound. If you are going to market your play, you need to include a reassurance to the hearing world that their needs will be taken care of. *Wings*...for a hearing audience, the opening is scary because all I can hear is that goddamned ventilator in that theatre. If you think about music, sound effects, something that's going to be there a long with the visual elements so a hearing audience will feel ok about being there, unless you want to (and this something that would be in the cover letter) unless you want to confront the hearing audience with silence...state that up front, I want this to be a confrontational scary moment for the audience. A hearing producer, hearing director who thinks you don't think sound is important, is going got be afraid, won' know what to do with it and will worry the audience will be uncomfortable.

Paul

This is also where your research comes in value..knowing who you are sending this to.

Michael

One of the things I discovered when I lost 60% of my eyesight....used to be legally blind, now not. But..immediate cause of my problem...detachment of retina in my left eye..this is important to what he later discovered....that conventionally sighted people...people who have 20/20 or 20/40 vision, eyesight is a very complicated thing. If I say to someone, please tell me or I'm sorry I didn't recognize you, I have limited eyesight and it is hard for me to recognize things or when I tell an audience, I need you to raise your hand high and speak loudly and if I don't see you say something....there is not a complete understanding of why this is going on. There are gradations of sight. There is a close, middle and far distance. My guess is that's true of hearing as well. So...when we talk about silence or when we talk about an inability to hear, we're not necessarily talking about an absolute...we're talking about gradations. Can explore gradations....anything from vibrations to variations of sounds. That's interesting to me...I'm interested in how do people understand the complexity of this issue. People ask me...why do you wear glasses then.

Vikee...same thing with hearing aids.

Michael

I was recently in Boston...saw an old friend I haven't seen virtually since college. He had a hearing aide and he was very uncomfortable talking about that. Here we sat, trying to figure out how to communicate again..me with glasses, him with hearing aide. If you explore those things perhaps it will solve fear nick spoke and perhaps be interesting theatre.

Annie: How would you feel about receiving a play written in storyboard format?

Nick

Selectively choosing which striking visual images that will leap out at us at those moments that might well be the way to convey it to us. Depends on how good your artistry is too. I did receive one script with stick figures drawn in...looked like a child doodled.

Michael

Again...explain intentions at the top in the letter.

Vikee: When has hearing theatre accepted new changes?

Nick

Funny to hear that addressing the audience in a long opening monologue is now cliché. This was a big thing in the 1970s. Also, having a few actors for main characters and then an ensemble to cover the rest, was revolutionary in 1960s...now cliché. A play like

angels in America would have been revolutionary at one time but now it is Broadway fare. Things do change.

Paul

Just a matter of things going in and out of fashion. Audiences are comfortable with what things that were fashionable by what was in style when they went to college.

Michael

What you may be talking about collectively is a change in the means of producing the work that is important to you. Maybe that means is not passing a text on to someone, but maybe it emerges out of a company aesthetic. Maybe the transition is the company rather than the text...as writers, primary generative artists, maybe it would be valuable to look at a different way to get the work out there. What playwrights do when their work is not being produced, they produce it themselves...find colleagues, collaborators, find a space. My colleague, Michelle Hall, is starting a company called muse fire, which is interested in multi-cultural context and multi-media, women stuff. Every theatre has its own niche...that might be an avenue to look at rather than change the dynamics of an institutional theatre like arena that has a subscriber base that is very large and devoted. The obstacle is, sometimes they are adventurous in terms of context but not in terms of form. Feels like we're talking about a different form...maybe that needs a different audience...maybe it's a niche audience.

Large institutions change very slowly...part of the dynamics of that change...the people who come along with a theatre since it's founding, like Arena, are like a regular in a bar. Despite obstacles, I encourage you to keep focused on the work because that is what will get you through.