Starting the Conversation . . .

We’re offering this summary of our first Theatre Arts Open Forum on October 20, 2020, for the sake of those who couldn’t attend and in hope that more people will participate in the next forum. We hope to make this a regular feature of our theatre arts community as we move forward through this school year and beyond.

The Open Forum started with Bradley Branam offering updates on performance and production opportunities for the 2020/2021 season. If you’re looking for a production credit or just want to join in making some theatre this year, please contact Bradley, Janet, Jerry or Jeanette as soon as you can.

Tricia Rodley then guided us all through helpful standards for the discussions that would follow, so that everyone could feel positively supported in whatever they might have to say, and also so that we could use the Zoom format more effectively. These standards will continue to be our guide for future forum discussions.

John Schmor introduced the first topic, the condition or context of the pandemic and how, after nearly eight months, we each might be feeling or have learned. The discussion that followed was in two parts: how we are feeling and coping in such a time, as well as new things we might have learned about ourselves and others; and the second was more specific to our experiences with online courses, “remote” learning and teaching. People in both break-out sessions spoke of their grief, for all those directly affected by the virus, those who lost loved ones, those who are jobless and alone. For our Theatre Arts community, we shared our grief for those who were in productions that were so suddenly cancelled in March. Many spoke about the fatigue we can feel in the face of so much uncertainty and isolation. And while we all miss in-person experiences for classes, practical production work, and simple socializing, many expressed that our Zoom meetings and Zoom plays have been better than doing nothing. Face time with professors and friends has become increasingly important, even though we get tired of the screen. Some have found unexpected opportunities to strengthen family time or pursue new hobbies. Some were able to link up with professionals around the country; some have created small locally-based interest groups that augment classroom participation. We all greatly miss the freedom to congregate and creatively collaborate – to be with each other. Maybe one gift from all this is that we’ve learned more deeply how much we need each other, which is at the core of what we do and what we love about theatre.

Jeanette deJong introduced the second topic, the racial and social justice protests sparked by the death of George Floyd and many other people of color, often at the hands of the police. The discussion that followed touched on several points: How has the Black Lives Movement, including more awareness of Police Brutality, affected each of us? How has the movement changed each of our thinking? How do we start the discussion of systematic injustice, race, and privilege, and how can we make a safe space in which to explore our concerns and questions? How can each of us begin to change our theatre practice to respond to the protests, and how
can we expand our welcome to more people? Lastly, how do we continue this conversation into the future?

Many of the participants were not able to physically take part in the protests because of health or other concerns, but they were active on social media and through donations in support of the protest goals. There was a sense of sadness at not being able to be more present with the protests, and a sense that it was valuable to use whatever privilege we may each have to support the movement. There was an acknowledgment that racial injustice is a long-standing problem that will take sustained action and commitment to help address. There was also a recognition that racial injustice is linked to other injustices, including violence against women and homophobia. Seeing the video of what happened to George Floyd broke through and affected those who may not have felt personally affected by racial injustice and police brutality. At the same time, some people spoke of losing friends over the protests due to gaps between world views.

In terms of going forward, our conversation revealed that we are in a process of learning and growing. This will be an imperfect process. We need to listen to people who are affected by social injustice and follow their lead, as well as examine our own words, actions, and biases. We can recognize that social systems and structures work very differently for different groups of people, and that it is a privilege to be able to work within a system without worrying about how to negotiate it safely. We also need to acknowledge that we may have different viewpoints and what is in each person’s heart is their own business, but we CAN act more compassionately towards one another. It is important to be loving enough to acknowledge the hurt.

Theatre can tell stories of different lived experiences, and raise empathy. It will take sustained effort to invite more people in, but we can be welcoming to a multiplicity of ideas and people. We shouldn’t cancel what wasn’t perfect in the past - things can be imperfect and still worthwhile – but we can also be more thoughtful about what we present and represent in the future.

Theresa May concluded our evening of thoughtful and inspiring discussion by affirming everyone’s participation and the hope that more will join us, and with a reminder to VOTE.

We look forward to our second Open Forum in the week following our upcoming election.