

# Towards a Democracy of Art

By Joan Lipkin

I often am asked why do I do what I do. Like many of us, as a young child, I was influenced by some of the incredible icons of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Dr. Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, Gandhi.

But I was also influenced by Louisa May Alcott who wrote “Little Women”. I remember thinking as a young girl. Wow, a woman who writes. And about girls. And I think maybe gets paid for it.

That is really cool.

Later in high school, I was excited by the Chicago Women’s Liberation Rock Band. I had never seen women rock out. Only the Rolling Stones or maybe the Beatles. How times have changed.

But it was not just the famous or the notorious that caught my eye. I remember Lorraine, our crossing guard at Bret Hart Elementary School, an African-American woman, tiny, who knew everyone’s name and asked about their day and how that math test went. Or Leo, a man who had one arm and went from door to door, selling fruits and vegetables.

It wasn’t what they did, in the grand scheme of things but rather, who they were. Incredibly decent hard working people who made conscious decisions about how they would relate, given their circumstances.

I could say the same thing about my family. My parents were poor growing up. My mother, the not enough to eat kind of poor. She was born on the boat on the way to this country. She and my father found each other as two young kids. They married, finished their educations and raised three kids, paying for braces and college educations, while still donating their money and time to their community. Quiet middle class activists.

And I have had the inspiration of my siblings. My brother is a world class scientist who works on global health and emerging diseases, often at great peril to himself. My sister is an urban planner who has focused most of her career on low income housing and community development.

All of these people and instances have laid a foundation for me. Modeled risk taking and the need to take responsibility in the world.

All of these people lead me to the next part of my story.

There was a time when my ambitions were more mainstream. I liked writing and having plays done in different places. And like most serious playwrights, I set my sights on some of the leading centers for theatre. New York, London, Chicago. I continue to write and have work done in those places, but I don't do it with the same regularity or intent as I imagined when I set out on this path about 20 years ago. Because a funny thing happened along the way. I had a major turning point.

About 10 years ago, I was attending auditions for my play, *Small Domestic Acts*, at Bailiwick Repertory in Chicago. I was thrilled and dismayed, watching as many as a hundred people audition for four roles for a three week non-equity run. It was exciting that so many people were wanting to do theatre To be in my play. But then I realized that, of course, we could not possibly cast them all. So I sat in the green room, wondering. Who were these people? What events in their lives had led them to want a life in the theater and to the moment of this audition?

Then I began to think about saying no, never my strong suit. If I have a hard time saying no to chocolate, a seductive, but inanimate object, it's really tough around living, sentient beings. And then I thought, maybe I don't want to say no. Maybe my resistance to saying no is really worth exploring. As I watched person after person strain to conform to what they thought we wanted from them, not just in their potential acting, but in the very way that they presented their personhood, I had an epiphany.

And it went something like this...

Maybe I don't have to say no. Maybe I could find a way to say yes. Isn't too much of life already full of rejection and exclusivity? Why not provide opportunities to participate to everyone who really shows up? What might that look and feel like? Why not try to cut the cloth to fit the participants rather than shoehorn a very few people into a preconceived role or structure.

Now these realizations would mean a radical shift in just about everything in my life. I felt exhilarated because it somehow felt right. And terrified because it meant departing from a more clearly marked path. I knew many people, including some colleagues in the theatre, would not understand and financially, it would be rocky.

But I also realized that there was something deeper behind my shift, something much bigger than me. That had to do with a rethinking of the way our values are reflected in the ways we think about and make art.

And so I began to conceptualize for myself a democracy of art and a new kind of theatre. A theatre that centers its artistic life in certain communities to explore the values, interests and concerns of those communities. A theatre that is based on local lives investing in the local community. A theatre that sees people as our richest resource. A theatre that sees people as our cultural assets.

Now, with so many other demands on our time, one might ask why is theatre so important? And to be sure, it does not hold the same claim in the public imagination that film or television do. Or music. Or even sports.

For me, theatre is important because I have seen and believe in what it can do. It offers those transformational moments for the spirit in which audiences and performers can share joy, sadness, new perceptions, and a sense of our common humanity.

And don't we need those moments?  
Don't we need that transformation?

Theatre can be an antidote to the narcotized, enraged, or depressed states in which so many of us find ourselves in these challenging times. It is about exploring and expressing our creative spirit. And to be creative, is to truly be alive.

For certain communities that don't have much economic, cultural, or political control over their own image, theatre is a way that they can speak on their own behalf through the magical alchemy of art. I love going to the theatre, all kinds of theatre. Shakespeare in the park, our regional theatres, the small edgy companies, Broadway. But they serve a different purpose than the one I am talking about today.

Because when we strictly rely on or pay others to tell us who we are, we lose our ability to tell our own communal stories about ourselves. We lose an ability as a community to dialogue about who we are. So I believe in and am deeply drawn to helping people create to theatre about their lives.

And once I started down that path, there has been no turning back. People with disabilities, blind children, inner city public school students. Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered youth and adults, African-American women with breast cancer. And most recently, people with early stage Alzheimer's and dementia. These are some of the populations with whom I have worked.

I continue to live parallel creative lives in which some of the writing that I do on my own--- whether librettos, plays, or essays---- crisscrosses with my community-based work. Undoubtedly, on those occasions when I do work with professionals, there is a kind of shorthand. Often, we work quickly and deeply and I marvel at the level of craft and technique, like a hand-stitched seam by the finest tailor.

But I also marvel at the discoveries in working with nonprofessionals whose desire to express themselves more fully touches me deeply. When I do community-based work, I see the transformation of both performers and audiences whose participation is mutual. The performers discover or reconnect with their essential creativity and the vitality of its expression. Then, in the amorphous space between visible and assumed identities, audiences either see the all too rare confirmation of their own experiences or have a profound exposure to another's.

The people with whom I work call upon me to grow continually and it is a privilege to witness the authenticity with which they share themselves. It asks that I also be more authentic. With them. And with myself. And that affects how I deal with others in the wider world.

That is just one of the many gifts I receive from doing community-based work.

We can never really know the impact of art and what it makes possible for someone in the space of their own life. What I know is that art saved my life as a confused and rebellious young girl growing up on the Southside of Chicago and I believe it can save others.

I am often asked why I don't choose a singular path. Why I don't focus more narrowly. My answer is that it is all my work. And that all of my experiences inform each other. But perhaps more basic for me, is the awareness that in doing community-based work, I feel more engaged in the world. I feel more like an active citizen and less like a passive spectator who feels high jacked by a culture that increasingly reflects values and choices with which I do not agree.

So this is my way of doing my share. It is exhausting, stimulating and harder all the time to raise money, particularly for populations that are marginalized in our culture. And I am grateful to anyone who has ever given us any money

I know there are many people who are deeply concerned about the direction of our world. It feels good to know that we are trying to figure this out together.

Just as I continually urge myself, I encourage us all to continue to step outside our comfort zones and ask how we can truly reach out to others. There is no convenient time to do this. It almost always feels awkward. And I think most of us are shy. I know I am. But the time is here. The time is now.

Art is one way, doubtless there are others. But one thing is clear. We need new processes and structures and funding for change. The culture of domination over each other, other countries and even the environment is the path to physical and spiritual annihilation. While valuable simply in and of itself, theatre can also be a grand laboratory for experimenting with some new ways to be and grow. When we extend ourselves, when we make our vulnerable selves visible to each other, we can restore our natural desire and ability for connection.