

The Importance of Earnest Successes

It started as an innocent idea. When my family moved to the United Arab Emirates, I began sixth grade at a private school that spent all of its miserly extracurricular budget on sports. Students stopped taking art and music classes in sixth grade, and stopped receiving language education after ninth grade. After a disagreement with a sports coach, I realized I was one of the many students who felt stranded. We didn't have a community of people who thought like us or who saw the world like us. Thus, I asked the Student Activities facilitator what steps I should take if I wanted to start a drama club.

It was easy to find several students across six grade levels who were interested in the idea, and we were granted a space to use once a week. After a few weeks of improv games and getting to know each other, one of the students asked me about whether we would be able to put the skills we were developing to the test. I surprised myself with the words that came out of my mouth next: "Yes! We're going to put on a show at the end of the year! We can do Charlie and the Chocolate Factory!"

We received permission to perform in the gymnasium on a platform raised not even three feet off the ground, covered from end to end by an unappealing, splotchy, maroon velvet skirt which probably hadn't been replaced since the school opened in 1925. Because of the lack of a budget, all the actors wore black and received an old jacket, cardigan or blazer from my closet or my parents' donation pile. The Oompa Loompas wore black from head to toe and tied scraps of pink and yellow satin donated by the ballet school around their waists. Our lighting was provided entirely by the flashlight I had strategically placed at the edge of the stage before it was somehow kicked to the floor every run-through, as well as by the daylight that seeped through

the cracks in the black sheets with which we had attempted to veil the windows that stretched across three of the four walls of the gymnasium. Our sets were strips of white fabric onto which we had attempted to paint a brick wall, supported vertically by panels of posterboard leaned against the back wall. The final product looked like a child's attempt at a pillow fort made with a white sheet he had vandalized with a brown Crayola marker behind his parents' backs. The only believable element of our set was a beautiful expanse of brown silk my mother gave me after an unrealized art project. We used that for the chocolate river until a few third graders managed to rip it in two.

The actual show itself was atrocious. One of the Oompa Loompas nearly fell off the stage, Grandpa Joe forgot he was supposed to be ninety-six and a half years old, Violet Beauregarde fed lines to Veruca Salt, and Willy Wonka, who had had to be replaced six days before we opened, knew approximately four of his lines and none of his cues. The flashlight was faithfully kicked off the stage, and a black sheet slipped off one corner of a window, exposing an ostentatious triangle of desert sunlight. Still, the parents, students, and faculty who came sat politely through the whole show, clapping in the middle of scenes with ambiguous transitions and laughing at the parts that weren't supposed to be funny. By the end of it, I was nearly in tears, overwhelmed by the support of the audience and by the incredible disappointment to which I had forced them to bear witness.

Theatre is about the relationship with its audience. Theatre is the only art form where an artist can reach out and make a direct connection with an observer, and where the artistic product can be changed by the presence of the audience. There exists a sanctified connection, a symbiotic relationship, between the observer and the performer. An observer comes to a theatre to give his

or her full attention to a performer and a performer can not exist in the theatre without the connection to his or her observer. I had violated that connection. I had abused the audience's generosity by subjecting them to my ill-prepared and poorly-executed trainwreck of a performance.

While wallowing in my misery, locked inside a stall in the bathroom that served as our green room and backstage area, I heard a timid knock on my door. I looked under the stall door and saw two pairs of small white tennis shoes. I cracked the door open slightly and saw two of my Oompa Loompas with their hands outstretched, asking me to take a white envelope from each of them. I opened the door wider to accept the cards, and when I did, they pushed their way into the stall to embrace me. They didn't articulate much with their words, but inside the envelopes they had drawn stick-figure versions of me dancing on stage with stick-figure versions of themselves, complete with the Oompa Loompa sashes tied around their stick-figure waists. In another picture, I was the only one on stage, and they were circular heads in the audience, smiling up at me. Slowly, more and more members of the cast trickled into the bathroom to hug me or thank me or hand me a card or drawing.

I felt a wave of appreciation, confusion, and humility wash over me. In a way it was easier to brush the whole production off as a failure because I knew, technically speaking, it was not "good" theatre; it was not a "good" show. Why, then, were so many individuals I had spent the last few months working with so eager to show their appreciation for me? What had I done but embarrass them in front of their parents, teachers, and friends?

After *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, I didn't direct anything else for a few years. In that time, I moved to Michigan and joined my high school theatre company as an actor and

make-up artist. I participated in theatre from what I considered naively to be a less involved position. For the first time, I witnessed firsthand the support and budget required to produce a quality production, “good” theatre. It seemed so easy; if I were to direct, I could have someone handling the costumes, someone else choreographing, another finding me props, a fourth calling light cues, and a fifth managing the scene changes. Most importantly, I would be guaranteed a whole day in the theatre dedicated to painting and erecting our set with the help of the parents of nearly all our company members. All of these were jobs I had tried to take on by myself as I had neither a support system nor any kind of funding from my school in the UAE.

Thus, I found myself directing again. It was challenging, but in a way that couldn't compare to what I had to take on in UAE. I directed the Brothers Grimm Spectaculathon, a light comedy about a cast of unprepared actors attempting to retell all of the Brothers Grimm fantasies in the order in which they originally occurred. Overall it was a wonderful group of actors and a wonderful rehearsal process. It was not without challenges, and I had a few bumps along the road with a particular actor, but in the end, the production turned out to be quite spectacular. The audience laughed until they cried and all the parts they laughed at were intended to be funny. I didn't need too much for the set, so my cast helped me to mount beautiful black curtains that added the element of realistic theatricality but also served the production by adding to the image of a disorganized, unprepared cast. The props and costumes, all sought out by a theatre company board member, looked fantastic. The extensive support system of our theatre company meant the props and costumes could be collected from a variety of locations: borrowed from neighboring community theatres, bought at church rummage sales or Salvation Armies, or borrowed from other students.

By all accounts, the play was a resounding success. Parents congratulated me and my cast and crew members thanked me. My teachers lauded me and my peers raved about the show for days afterwards. On stage I was presented with flowers and at the cast party I was given the traditional paper plate award for “Best Director”. Yet for some reason, by the end of this production, I didn’t feel the same wave of gratitude as I did when the two second-graders came up to me with their cards. I had put on a “successful” play, but I felt apathetic.

If asked to name the most successful theatrical production I’ve participated in, I would hesitate to respond. The answer should come naturally to the tip of my tongue; it should be the production I am most proud to have been a part of. Yet I can not say the Brothers’ Grimm Spectaculathon was my most successful work at that time. I didn’t feel as though I had made a connection with my cast. I didn’t feel as though I had brought anything particularly new or revolutionary to an audience. I didn’t feel as though the Brothers’ Grimm Spectaculathon represented the love and dedication I have for my art. However proud I am to have directed it and to have been a part of that process, that pride isn’t enough to make me feel it was the most successful production.

Since Brothers Grimm, I have gone on to direct several shows and participate in incredible productions alongside individuals with more experience and knowledge than I can fathom. Yet I find myself questioning the success of those productions. I feel flattered when I know local newspapers and magazines have written about shows I’m involved in. I feel ecstatic when the tickets sell out. I feel validated when the audience gives the show a standing ovation. And yet that is not enough for me to feel as though the show has succeeded. Theatre is about the

connection with the audience, so why don't I feel successful when my show is appreciated so deeply by its audience?

Perhaps my cast of actors in the Brothers' Grimm Spectaculathon felt more successful than my cast in Charlie and the Chocolate Factory because they could see that their audience understood and appreciated their performance. However, for me as a director, the audience in the house seats is not my audience. The theatre I create begins in the rehearsal room with my actors and crew: they are my audience. The theatre I create is successful if it is groundbreaking and challenges my audience. It is successful if my audience understands, appreciates, and contributes to my vision. It is successful when my audience helps shape the theatre we make in the rehearsal room. It is successful when my audience understands the love I have for my art and my reason for creating.

Thus, the most successful theatre I have so far helped to create has been the production of Charlie and the Chocolate Factory I directed in eighth grade. My audience - my actors - understood what I was trying to achieve even though I was struggling to do it without enough support. My audience was challenged: some of them were on stage for the first time in their lives. My audience was faced with something groundbreaking: my school had never seen a theatrical production and my audience was the first to stage one. My audience could understand the love and dedication I had for my art: I pursued despite the odds stacked against me because I knew this production was important for the community we had come to be. I had made a connection with my audience which would outlast all the applause of a standing ovation.