

NORA

It was smack in the middle of the warm, breezy summer of 1997. I was enjoying the luxury of an entire weekend of theater at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF). I love these total immersions into hip, sunny, charming Ashland. On these carefully chosen weekends I would see three or four productions (sometimes as many as five) in a three-day period. There were also noon lectures, possibly a pre-show talk about the play, and plenty of time to steep myself in the ambience of my all-time favorite activity. Trips to Ashland also include the bonus of staying in a nice hotel and enjoying a variety of wonderful restaurants with friends.

These were busman's holidays for me, as I was at that time and for many years thereafter the Artistic Director of my own small black-box theater just a few hours away from Ashland.

1997 was a first class season at OSF, and I was able to see four fabulous productions including *Death of a Salesman*, *King Lear*, and a hysterically frenetic staging of Tom Stoppard's *Rough Crossing*. Last, but far from least, was a Sunday matinee of *Nora*, Ingmar Bergman's crisp and affectionate adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*.

A Doll's House is a classic late Victorian feminist play which sent a ripple of shock and a collective uproar throughout the staid and rigid European social order of the time because of its theme of woman's independence. Bergman's adaptation served the original well, removing some of the lengthy extraneous dialog while maintaining the thrust and high emotion. The story

tells of a woman who defies the constraints and suppression of nineteenth century society to leave her overbearing and patronizing husband. She also decides to leave behind her two children which was felt to be the more horrifying action.

It was said at the time that Nora's act of slamming the front, door which happens at the absolute last second of the play, was the sound heard round the world. This action was included in the final seconds of the adaptation. Slam!

This production of *Nora* was remarkable for many reasons. The cast, as one would expect, was Oregon Shakespeare Festival professional. I was captivated by Catherine Lynn Davis, the woman playing the part of Nora. Her powerhouse performance left a solid indentation in my mind's eye, and the effect of those huge emotions contained in this tiny black box space was very powerful. And then the door slammed.

I sat in my chair, limp, almost unable to breathe, as the rest of the audience around me jumped, sprung, up to clap and scream bravo! It took a few seconds, maybe six or seven, before I re-entered my world and realized a response of some sort was expected of me as well. Somehow it just seemed wrong at that moment, to leap to ones feet and applaud. I was still there, with Nora standing at the top of the brownstone stairs at the front of the house, about to take her first step into a frightening new life.

I knew that this production would have a strong influence on my future work as a director and theater manager.

The performance was held in what is affectionately called the 'old' Black Swan Theater at OSF. A few years after this 1997

season, a brand new state-of-the art experimental theater was constructed down the street. Later, the little 120 seat 'old' Black Swan would go back to being the rehearsal and experimental space that it had been in previous years. But for now, 1997, we were able to enjoy the quirky intimacy and raw theatricality of this space with no proscenium, no curtain, and with only lighting and actors telling the story.

When I was a little girl in Philadelphia, my parents would take me to Summer Stock productions in a huge round tent somewhere in New Jersey. The 'no-walls' settings of tent theater always amazed me. Since that time I had always wanted to work in a round or three-quarter round performance space.

I could think of no better template to use for any possible theater I might have than the Black Swan. So, at subsequent productions in that theater following *Nora*, I started to quietly take some measurements of seating layouts, height and depth of risers, distance from front row to action, and so forth.

An inexplicably short time later I was given the incredible opportunity to move my existing little traditional proscenium layout theater to a new space which would accommodate a three-quarter-round playing area. I jumped at this chance. My stalwart crew immediately started building my dream, and I began choosing shows and rehearsing productions in this exciting format.

The only difficulty I could see in attempting to produce *Nora* as one of my next shows, was finding just the right actor to play the eponymous lead role. Not just anyone would do. When you run a small 'community' theater, you are constrained, in my

view at least, in your choices of material by the availability of appropriate talent. I find it awkward and a little bit embarrassing for all concerned to see a show with obviously miscast lead actors.

My Nora would require experience, strength, and the emotional capacity to imbue this iconic character with the conflict, passion, determination and little-girl vulnerability which her complicated story requires.

That year our three-production season had the theme of women's issues. We produced *Romeo and Juliet*, and as the director I emphasized the harshness of arranged marriage for a thirteen-year-old girl. I was told that the emphasis made the plot so much more meaningful.

Then we produced the musical *Quilters*. The musical *Quilters* tells multiple tales of the hardship and struggles of American pioneer women.

Several months had gone by and I had almost given up the idea of doing *Nora* at all. I was looking for another play to round out the upcoming season.

And then, there she was. She walked in to the theater to audition for a part in another play. This young woman with the interesting first name Wavey, had a crisp brand new degree in drama, and was looking for some on-stage work.

I gratefully cast her in a role in my play *In Juliet's Garden* which was on the summer schedule and she did a fabulous job as the very daffy and eccentric Ophelia.

Wavey had a command of the stage and was not intimidated by the up-close amorphous three-quarter-round setting. She was an intelligent actor who was willing to absolutely throw herself into the role, no matter what it took.

About mid-way into the run of *In Juliet's Garden*, I asked her if she would be interested in the role of Nora. She had to give it some consideration as she was not sure how long she was staying in the community. Finally she accepted and I began to put together the remaining cast, picking and choosing some of the best actors in the area.

I was very pleased with the product. The cast worked well together. Technical necessities such as quick changes (the bane of the shoestring budget community theater) were cleverly accomplished without the need for the much-to-be-avoided repeated blackouts. And much to my satisfaction, some very satisfying, finely-tuned work was being done on stage.

So this is where this story might end.

However, about halfway through the five weekend run of the show something extraordinary happened which was so astounding that it made me begin to reconsider the entire idea of audience, appreciation, and the need we have, as actors, directors, and designers, for applause.

It was a Sunday afternoon matinee at four o'clock. Our theater seated only seventy-five people at full capacity, and on this lovely mild and sunny afternoon we had about thirty-five or forty seats filled. My pal, the drama department head from the local college was there with his wife, sitting in his usual spot, and there were a number of other people who I knew from

the community as well as many new faces. I always sat by the door to the lobby behind a thin curtain.

My cast had been giving this show their all and getting some excellent responses from previous audiences so there was no reason to in any way expect what happened.

In the final scene, Nora's husband Torvald is in bed. Nora re-enters the room in a travelling outfit, carrying a small suitcase, and announces that she is leaving him and the children. Torvald is left sitting up in bed, holding his head in his hands as she performs the final act - the slam of the door - and disappears into the darkness. The lights narrow on the bed and then go black about two seconds after the slam. Torvald leaves the stage in the darkness and the cast lines up offstage waiting for curtain call. Then, usually, the lights came up full and the cast moves to their places for call.

But nothing happened, not a sound, not a movement, not a whimper. A frenzied voice in my ear from the lighting director said 'what should I do.' I said bring them up!

Lights up and still nothing. There was not a sound from the audience. Not a sound. Not a cough or a sniff or an awkward clap of a hand. Nothing. I could not even discern the sound of breathing.

The cast came out in the deafening and absolute silence and took their places for curtain call. The actors looked into the darkness in the general direction of where I was normally standing, but they could not see me and could not know what kind of reaction I was having to this aberration.

The actors took their normal well-paced bows, to all three directions, with slightly confused and amused looks on their faces. Then they left the stage.

Still not a single sound of any kind.

I admit that there have been times over the years when I have initiated some *light* applause to get the audience going, times when there might have been a technical reason for it, but I generally hate it when little theater directors think they need to leave breadcrumbs for the audience to help find its satisfaction with loud leading clapping.

Next I did my job. I pulled the front curtain aside and opened the door to the lobby. As usual, I stood outside as the audience left. Still not a sound. People quietly shuffled out of the rows and down the aisles to the door. My college drama professor friend came out into the lobby. He looked at me, cocked his head to one side and, with a shrug of his shoulders, left without a word. Others came out, speaking to one another in whispers - 'I'm going to the ladies room, I'll meet you at the car.' 'Okay' said in a barely audible rasp.

Backstage there was consternation and humorous bewilderment. The cast was still being quiet, the crew silently packing up, hanging costumes, replacing props - whispering. Whatever happened out there was affecting everyone.

What did happen? What was that all about?

Why do we perform? Why do we act, or dance or sing, play an instrument, or design a set? Why do we set ourselves apart from

the non-performers of the world and study scripts, don often ill fitting and uncomfortable clothing, memorize lines or music until we speak it in our sleep, take time away from family and relaxation to rehearse often until all hours of the night, and then stand in front of an anonymous and judgmental group of strangers who, in the cover of darkness, make or break our experience by their chorus of appreciation?

Applause. It is what the performer lives for. It is *all* we live for. The peals of it ring joyously in our ears long after the show is finished and the after-performance pint has been consumed. The applause lives in our efforts, the hours of memorization, the second and third time we pull apart a set to get it just right, or change a line in a new untried play. That sound is there. We want it to be right for the audience. We want the applause.

To act well, or play well, or dance well, then have the appreciative applause, the shouting, possibly a standing ovation, it is a drug, it is a fabulous drug causing an absolutely stimulating euphoria which rings in our ears, fills us to our very souls and keeps us on a lovely high for days afterward.

So what about this other thing, this silence? I have had conversations with many artists of multiple disciplines about this rarely-occurring phenomenon. A classical pianist mentioned that he just hates that first know-it-all guy who jumps up to clap and shout bravo before everyone else. It is as if he wasn't even listening to the piece, but just pacing, waiting to be the first to show that he knows more than others - that this is the end.

But when you are listening, for example, to the Brahms piano quintet in F minor, and it is well played, and the musicians have spent the last 45 minutes in an exaltation of their life-long experience to express to you the glory of this music, and that final chord is struck, you should be completely wiped out at this moment, you should be limp in your seat, you should be uneager, you should be unwilling, you should be unable to stand on your two feet and applaud. You should be lost in the music and its message.

Or in the case of a highly sensitive and well-done play like *Agnes of God*, when the psychiatrist finishes with the words "I want to believe that she was blessed. And I do miss her, and I hope that she's left something, some little part of herself with me. That would be miracle enough, wouldn't it?" By this time the audience should be mush, reduced to tears and really unable to applaud. I've played that role, and I think that absolute quiet would be okay.

I believe that is what happened that sunny Sunday afternoon after the production of *Nora*. I think that special audience was lost, lost in the story, lost in the way we brought the story out and placed it squarely on the stage, lost in the simplicity of the three-quarter-round staging, lost at the slam of the door.

A larger, perhaps more sophisticated audience might have caught the rhythm, held its collective breath for five or six seconds and then let loose with its true feelings. Perhaps.

That last chord, last word, last action, should, I believe, be allowed to hang there in the thick, murky, pregnant, electric atmosphere the piece has created. It should hang there and live

in the space until the audience abruptly changes the chemistry and rushes into the rewarding applause. And that should take a few seconds.

My mother and father trained me to be an audience member, and I trained my children. I hope at some point parents train their children that it is okay to sit, enraptured, for five or six seconds, to just continue to feel the emotion of the moment, let it resound in the hall, before giving the performers their due. If we can do this, I think we might reach a new level of appreciation, a completely new one-ness with the performers, the writers, the directors. We might become one with the performance.