

# Who Am I?": A Search For America's Identity Through Theatre For Social Change

2007

Sean Bliznik

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“WHO AM I?”:  
A SEARCH FOR AMERICA’S IDENTITY THROUGH  
THEATRE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

by

SEAN J. BLIZNIK  
B.A. Saint Anselm College, 1999

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of Theatre  
in the College of Arts and Humanities  
at the University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

Summer Term  
2007

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## **ABSTRACT**

Theatre has always existed as a didactic tool to educate society about society's own successes, failures, and foibles. The theatre and theatre artists have attempted to take society's interpretation of truth and place it on the stage for all to see and experience. Sometimes, theatre creates and performs its own truth in place of society's accepted truth by re-examining pre-existing societal constructs and creating an interpretation of truth that better represents the current state of affairs as the theatre sees it. Therefore, theatre becomes the mode by which society learns, explores, refutes, and at times, even dismisses accepted societal truths.

As a didactic tool, it is in this vein of truth-seeking that theatre has entered the fickle work of social change. First and foremost, what is social change? Who can create change? How is this change measured? How does one measure the effected change on a particular audience? These questions (and more) as well as their subsequent answers are the job of the social change theatre artist and are explored in this study. This thesis is presented in several distinct chapters. Chapters one and two examine the foundations of theatre for social change and its place in the contemporary theatre world. Chapter three explores writing theatre for social change and yields the development of two original theatrical pieces of theater for social change as a direct result of the aforementioned research complete with a stage presentation of those pieces and an audience assessment (before the performance). The concluding chapters explore the results of the audience survey which explains my understanding of theatre for social change's effect on society and the need for society to continually be exposed to theatre which is socially conscious and contributive in order to firmly define America's socially conscious theatrical identity.

For Rosemarie and Gary.

Thank You.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This educational venture has been filled with excitement and tremendous enlightenment. However, I would be deeply remiss if I did not acknowledge those who have donated their invaluable time, support, wisdom, and encouragement to make this project possible.

To Dr. Julia Listengarten, Dr. Megan Altruz, Vandy Wood, Sybil St. Claire, Ellen Jones, and Gene Columbus. I only hope that one day I will be able to share an artistic piece of myself in the unconditional manner you all did so generously with me.

To my performers. Thank you for bringing the characters of *How I Learned to Ride* and *The Water Cooler* to life.

To my students past and present. It is your experiences and life lessons which have inspired the work upon these pages and have been realized on the stage. I only hope that each and every one of you will seek your highest potential and never settle for second best.

To my family. Thank you for valuing education enough to see that it is my life's work and supporting critical thinking and socially aware conversations around the dinner table when I was young. It is this open-mindedness that has created the educator and theatre practitioner I am today.

To Kelly. Your constant love, support, and encouragement knows no boundaries and for that I am forever blessed.

To All. Thank you for believing in this journey and believing that it was always possible.

~Sean J. Bliznik

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## **CHAPTER ONE:** **INTRODUCTION**

Theatre has always existed as a didactic tool to educate society about society's own successes, failures, and foibles. As Bertolt Brecht noted in his article "Theatre and Learning", "[t]he stage began to instruct" (26). Theatre as instruction has attempted to take society's interpretation of truth and place it on the stage for an audience to see and experience. Sometimes, theatre re-examines pre-existing societal constructs and presents an interpretation of truth that better represents the current state of affairs as the theatre and theatre artists see it. Therefore, theatre becomes the mode by which society learns, explores, refutes, and at times, dismisses these accepted societal truths and as a result creates change. As Tony-award winning playwright Tony Kushner notes, "All art of every sort changes the world. [It] is not merely contemplation, it is also action, and all action changes the world, at least a little. [T]o be moved is to be changed, if only a little" (62-63). Although any theatrical performance might elicit Kushner's response, my focus, as a theatre artist, is specifically on the work of theatre for social change that seeks to change the world through a socially conscious, and, at times, provocative performance.

For the purposes of my study, Kushner's comments are a good starting point for defining theatre for social change. What is theatre for social change and how is it different from an average or mainstream theatre experience? This question lies at the heart of this study and my subsequent development of two original pieces of theatre for social change—*How I Learned to Ride* and *The Water Cooler*. This study focuses on how my two original pieces were influenced by current works of theatre for social change and examines how these works fit into the canon as

a whole. As a theatrical field, theatre for social change is quite expansive and will only be explored through the lens of these original pieces in this study.

As a theatre artist, theatre for social change evokes some type of change. Change itself can be thought about on many different levels and what change is to one person might not be change to another. So, on the base level, theatre for social change must cause a change either outwardly in how an audience member reacts to the piece (through a personal intellectual reaction or a physical action to change the world) or inwardly in the form of reflection or change in one's thought, moral, political, or social structure. Another way of defining theatre for social change is by examining works which explore the validity of a particular situation or social scenario. For example, *How I Learned to Ride* explores the realities of what it means to be a high school sophomore in America in the current age while *The Water Cooler* explores some of the truths surrounding the terrorist attack on America on September 11, 2001.

Kushner continues, “[w]hat really changes the world is the consequence of thinking about the world, the consequence of thinking about art about the world” (63). This concept is another important part of this study in terms of my own writing and the creation of two original works. I wanted to think about and explore social issues through a dramatization. Through this process, I was making change just by thinking about those issues and exploring my own thinking about theatre for social change through my writing, and examining how I was exploring societal truths in those works.

In addition, society's truths can be explored in a tangible and accessible way through theatre for social change. For example, a piece may present an issue to an audience that was not previously acknowledged or discussed openly. This was one way I approached my own writing of these pieces. Therefore, by making an audience aware of a topic also attempts to make the

topic accessible. In terms of my original works specifically, *How I Learned to Ride* explores the impact of adult issues such as drug use and sexual abuse through the eyes of a 16-year old sophomore in high school. On the other hand, however, some pieces of theatre for social change are made intentionally inaccessible, and require the audience to do more work to unpack the piece. This quality is present in *The Water Cooler* as the events surrounding the piece are familiar, but the characters and their relationship to the events are left slightly ambiguous. In both cases, a clear artistic decision has been made that will help to inform and mold the audience's theatrical experience. Neither artistic direction is right or wrong, merely different. The focus of this study is how my two original pieces are accessible works of theatre for social change by employing the techniques of either approach.

When presented as a theatrical experience, social issues represent many emotions to different people: joy, excitement, nervousness, hatred, shame, elation, fun, and so on. However, it can also prompt change—both subtle change (a conversation following a performance that results in a change of the person's way of life) and/or an overt change (feeling empowered to actually make a change as the result of viewing a particular theatrical piece). Ultimately, this external change through theatre comes as a direct result of experiencing and thinking about a theatre experience, and, in this case, the experience is *How I Learned to Ride* and *The Water Cooler*.

My original works, *How I Learned to Ride* and *The Water Cooler*, spawn from this desired blending of the engagement of the audience in the actual piece and the hope that the audience will make an outward or inward change as a result of the piece's viewing. In addition, other theatrical pieces have been written for the purposes of social change which attempt to explore, define, and work to solve societal truths and questions. This study explores the origins

of my pieces, their impact as a work of theatre for social change through a staged reading, and the creative process of writing works of theatre for social change.

As part of the exploration of these two theatrical pieces as theatre for social change, chapter two will develop a working definition and understanding of theatre for social change in the United States in context of these pieces while chapter three defines and outlines the creative process of actually writing theatre for social change. Chapter four is the complete script to *How I Learned to Ride* and chapter five presents the complete script of *The Water Cooler*. Chapter six presents the responses to an audience questionnaire regarding the audience's knowledge about theatre for social change that was distributed prior to a live reading of *How I Learned to Ride* and *The Water Cooler*. The chapter continues by exploring the audience's responses in light of the working definition and purpose of theatre for social change as outlined in chapter two.

Ultimately, it is the goal of this thesis to expose an audience to a different form of theatre which poses questions about modern American life with the hope that the audience will take action after their evening at the theatre and work to develop this field into their own socially-conscious lives while exploring the development of myself as a theatre for social change artist in light of the creation of *How I Learned to Ride* and *The Water Cooler*.

## **CHAPTER TWO:** **WHAT IS THEATRE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE?**

The American origins of theatre for social change as a movement can be compared to the origins with that of the American avant-garde movement as they both stem from a desire to create and evoke change in the audience and participant. In his seminal work, *American Avant-Garde Theatre: A History*, Arnold Aronson outlines the origins of the avant-garde which illuminates some of the key tenets and philosophic attributes of theatre for social change as presented in this study. Aronson comments that “[i]n order to effect social change, it was believed, art had essentially to be realistic” (17). So, my original texts *How I Learned to Ride* and *The Water Cooler* are realistic in setting, dialogue, characterization, and plot. Aronson further develops this belief by commenting that “a true avant-garde theatre [or theatre for social change] must seek an essential change in audience perceptions that, in turn, will have a profound impact on the relationship of the spectator to the world” (6). The connection between the avant-garde and theatre for social change as defined above becomes the key foundation of theatre for social change as explored in this study: social change is created through a text or performance which requires the audience to be an active part of the process to alter one’s perceptions. It is this aspect that both theatre for social change and the theatre of the avant-garde share—a desire for the audience to take an active role in constructing an experience that can potentially lead to change, whether internal or external.

Specifically, theatre for social change can be thought about in terms of how social change will affect the world. It is important to note that theatre for social change serves different aims and different types of theater for social change works toward different goals. For example, theatre of social change during the Vietnam War (protesting the war and calling for an end to it)

asked the audience to respond in a very specific actionable way after viewing the piece. The work of Richard Schechner and The Performance Group falls into the category of theatre for social change as they wanted their audience to “have difficulty distinguishing performance from life” (Aronson 97). While, the protest plays (such as David Rabe’s *Streamers* and Tom Cole’s *Medal Honor Rag*) wanted a decisive result (end the war), The Performance Group wanted to create a situation where it was possible for the audience to “enter into the performance – to engage the performers – without destroying the art work in progress”; thereby working to achieve two different goals through a similar theatrical mode (98). While a different type of theatre for social change appears in theatre for young audiences such as David Saar’s *The Yellow Boat* which explores the topic of children with AIDS, asks the audience to interact and become engaged in the art, but not in the same way as The Performance Group. In fact, there is a hope after viewing *The Yellow Boat* that an audience would proactively work to better understand AIDS in children and be more aware of this terminal disease.

My definition of theatre for social change seeks a change in the perceptions of theatre and its purpose in its viewing audience as well as in its participants, such as actors or members of a creative team. In my opinion, theatre which requires an audience member to be an active part of the presentation becomes most effective in conveying the meaning of the piece and the experience of live theatre as it ensures that the audience member is not merely a passive recipient of a theatrical experience, but rather processing and assessing the experience as it happens. As a direct result of this working definition, I am examining my own writing in terms of its effect and sources of inspiration as a theatre for social change artist.

In terms of theatre effectiveness, Doug C. Patterson, professor of theatre arts at the University of Nebraska-Omaha and founder of the Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed

organization, was asked by *Theatre* magazine “What kind of theatre is most effective?” and his response helps to illuminate the greater purpose of theatre for social change. He answered, “[t]heatre that creates dialogue, invites audience interaction and intervention, empowers people to imagine and enact their solutions, and goes on to create even more dialogue” (67). As a result, in terms of my study, theatre for social change shall be defined as a theatrical experience that dramatizes a contemporary social issue or concern which creates a dialogue between actor, audience, and piece through its theatrical presentation. This definition is a direct result of my understanding of theatre for social change as an art form and me as a writer. The next step in the process is developing a way to measure and understand theatre effectiveness.

One way to measure the effectiveness of a theatrical piece is through the audience member’s decision to respond to the presentation either inwardly or outwardly. Ultimately, any visceral reaction to the piece is a change and will alter the audience member’s perception of that piece as well as any other future pieces. As Michael Rohd notes in *Theatre for Community, Conflict, and Dialogue: The Hope is Vital Training Manual*, “people must want to effect change in what they see...this work is about *posing* questions, not providing but *exploring answers or options*” (97). It is the desire for change and the process of exploration that makes the work of social change so essential to a vital community and society.

It is my desire for change, awareness, and socially conscious dialogue that led to the creation of *How I Learned to Ride* and *The Water Cooler* as pieces of theatre for social change. Specifically, my goals with both *How I Learned to Ride* and *The Water Cooler* are to engage the audience in an active dialogue about the piece. In addition, I hope the audience member will take the experience out into society to potentially change one’s personal perception and understanding of the topic as well. Overall, I intend for the experience to shape the audience

member and the participant into a more socially-conscious and theatrically-aware individual in the same way writing the piece has shaped me as a theatre for social change artist. Although the goals of each play are slightly different, as is their subject matter, their overarching purpose is to fulfill the charge of the above statement. The creative process and development of each play will be discussed in more detail in “Chapter 3: Writing Theatre for Social Change”.

Based on my working definition and basic understanding of theatre for social change as it applies to my study, I worked to determine how theatre for social change can be created and assessed. My first step toward enacting social change as a theatre artist was to dramatize a personal social concern or issue that could then be presented to an audience for evaluation. In this study, I developed two social change texts for that purpose. *How I Learned to Ride* is a social play about the daily trials and tribulations of a high school sophomore and *The Water Cooler* is a September 11, 2001 play that portrays snapshots of several ordinary US citizens who were present in the World Trade Center when two hijacked airplanes crashed into the towers. Both of these works ask an audience member to first consider the validity and importance of the actual storyline and text. If the audience member finds no validity in the piece, it is my assessment that then the piece will not change the individual and as a result make no change in society. The actual performance of a theatre for social change piece asks an audience member to examine the new text in comparison to one’s own life and beliefs. This step naturally occurs merely from viewing the piece. It is impossible to ignore the material and to not process it in light of what an audience member already knows, thinks, and feels about the topic. Finally, the text asks for a discussion—a discussion that not only explores the tenets of this newly created text, but also how an audience member will apply this new social experience to his or her own life both personally and professionally.



The reactions, impulses, and thoughts regarding theater for social change must be collected before actually viewing the piece. I created an audience questionnaire to explore the audience's understanding of theatre for social change before actually viewing my two pieces specifically. The results of my audience questionnaire compose chapter six and help to identify the role, purpose, and ultimately the goal of theatre for social change which could parallel the goal as defined in this study or oppose it. The ultimate goal of the survey was to ascertain what a modern day audience considers to be theatre for social change in an attempt to determine if the understanding and purpose of the topic is the same as when the avant-garde first appeared in the basements and lofts of America.

Theatre for social change and the avant-garde movement in America are both modes of theatrical activism—that is they require an audience to be engaged in the piece and seek to change the viewing audience which as a result will make a change in society. Claudia Orenstein, associate professor of theatre at Hunter College, comments in her article “Agitational Performance, Now and Then” that “the goals of theatrical activism remain the same as they have been throughout the century: to get a clear message to the public in a way that is both entertaining and persuasive” (144). The ultimate goal of the study is to raise the general public's awareness to theatre for social change as well as to promote the continued development and exploration of theatre for social change as a craft and an art form by exploring my own personal development as a writer and theatre for social change artist. As Doug Paterson comments, “[a]ll theatre has an impact on the flow of social movement and interaction, collectively and personally” (65). It is the level of impact that actually makes a change in society. And although this level of impact is not immediately measurable or necessarily noticeable in an individual person, any social change is a move in the direction towards the development of personal and

social awareness. Perhaps, though, performance artist, Holly Hughes said it best: “So theatre and social change, yes, by all means, I’m all for it, count me in” (72). After viewing *How I Learned to Ride* and *The Water Cooler*, the hope exists that the audience too will all be about theatre for social change.

## **CHAPTER THREE:** **WRITING THEATRE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE**

### **Writing “How I Learned to Ride”**

#### **Overview & Inspiration**

The idea for this play originally spawned from a class assignment in Theatre for Social Change. The class was asked to write an original piece in the style of an author of the student’s choosing. After much consideration, I decided to craft a play in the style of Paula Vogel. Choosing the author was the easy part, for I have always been intrigued by Vogel’s work since my first viewing of *How I Learned to Drive*. Specifically, I was intrigued by Vogel’s use of symbolism and extended metaphors (such as driving lessons as a parallel for sexual abuse) and the use of a Greek Chorus. Several of Vogel’s stylistic choices appeal to me as a way in which to theatrically explore a social topic. For this project, I developed a concept for a one-act and worked to employ the stylistic designs of a Vogel play. The inspiration for the themes and topics of this short work came from Vogel’s own style and my own students.

Paula Vogel stood out to me for many reasons. I am drawn to Vogel’s use of multiple-character narration, voices, images, and symbols to explore challenging social issues in an approachable manner. For example, Vogel explores sexual abuse through driving lessons in *How I Learned to Drive* (the main inspiration and influence of *How I Learned to Ride*), AIDS through the newly-created acquired toilet disease in *The Baltimore Waltz*, and domestic abuse through the lens of a female screen writer in the adult film industry in *Hot ‘N Throbbing*. The most intriguing thing about Vogel’s work is that these serious topics are delivered and constructed in an approachable manner. As a reader and audience member, I can access the information relatively easily and then process it for myself. The presentation of the material is not for shock value or to simply experience a visceral response to the material; rather it is

presented in a way that a good story is told. As an artist and theatre educator, the material needs to be approachable for me to use with my students and I wanted to create a work that another artist or educator could use with his or her students in an approachable and accessible manner. Ultimately, I believe theatre should be accessible to its audience. As a result, I explored teen social issues through the mode of riding the school bus from one's home to the school. During this ride many of the challenges of the modern American teenager are explored: drug use, cheating, sexual assault, swearing, self-esteem, and the exploration of one's home life. In addition, there are extensive stage directions that help to create the world of *How I Learned to Ride*.

While enrolled in Theatre for Social Change, I was teaching high school English and drama. Spending the last several years teaching high school, I always wanted to dramatize the life of an average high school student in the hopes of demonstrating that his or her life was not as simple as perhaps perceived by his or her parents, friends, and the community at large. I believe this was an important topic to discuss and to dramatize so that some creative license could be taken and the events could be crafted in a more compressed amount of time than the actual events would occur in real life (over the course of a school year or several school years). In addition, I felt that adult and parental perceptions of the high school experience were very distant from the actual experiences of the average high school student. For example, most parents send their children off to school to learn, develop their social skills, and to be in a generally safe and protected environment. They do not anticipate that their children will be exposed to drugs, sex, and other illegal or adult activity. It is this discrepancy that I was hoping to clearly develop in the play.

For many of my students, their lives are very adult in nature (dating, sex, drugs, having children of their own, etc.). However, I did not want to dramatize the visceral act of high school students having sex or doing drugs, rather I wanted the experience to be real and be one that the individual student could validate as being realistic and truthful. To achieve this level of truth and realism, I went to a cross-section of my students and asked them to make a list of things they have personally witnessed since being in high school that could be characterized as ‘adult’ in nature. The cross-section of students was six sophomore girls who were my advisees, so I had worked with them for the previous two years. These were college-prep students who had “normal” home lives and were very grounded and well-educated. The scenarios that were dramatized for *How I Learned to Ride* were provided by this group of students. Each scenario that Tessa, the main character, finds herself in on the bus was based on situations that these six girls have witnessed or experienced themselves on the bus.

After choosing the actual situations, I had to create a context in which they could be explored dramatically. This became the bus ride from Tessa’s home to school. As a society, an assumption could exist that this is one of the safest environments for our children. After all, it is just a bus ride. However, the bus ride to school can become one of the most volatile and challenging environments prior to actually entering the protection of the school. In the development of the play it was important for me to create the bus as an environment and not as a character or some other larger force. The scenarios presented on the bus could have occurred in many other school or public locations such as a hallway, a school bathroom, the gym, etc. The school bus is merely one mode by which to explore these topics. I chose the school bus for several reasons. The first was to re-create one of the environments in Vogel’s play *How I Learned to Drive*—the vehicle changes from a car to a bus. Another reason was to simulate the

experience of riding a bus with short starts and stops as demonstrated through the dialogue and the actual construction of the scenes. Stylistically, I wanted the audience to feel a part of the bus and school environment. The final reason was because the bus is a closed environment and prevents Tessa from leaving it whenever she wants to or feels trapped by a particular scenario. She cannot escape her situations. Instead, she is forced to experience and assess each interaction individually with no one to guide her.

The actual focus and development of each social issue occurs in how Tessa experiences and then reacts (or does not react) to each situation individually as it is presented to her aboard the bus. The audience learns the actual lesson of *How I Learned to Ride* through Tessa directly and not through her environment. As an audience, we go from interaction to interaction just as Tessa does. We do not have an omniscient point of view and we immediately identify with Tessa and her current situation. The school bus environment merely makes this set of particular school-related issues more relevant to the play's target audience—high school students and their parents.

### **The Concept**

The work of Paula Vogel has been sitting deep in my theatrical reservoir since I first saw a production of *How I Learned to Drive* at a local professional theatre in southern New Hampshire. Immediately, I began thinking that while the topics explored and dramatized in the play may be viewed as controversial or taboo for the stage, these topics needed a dramatic life and a theatrical voice so that an audience could become more aware of situations presented in the play that occur regularly in American life. In writing my own piece I hoped to provide the audience with very real situations that high school students experience (in this case, a young teenage girl named Tessa) and bring those issues to the general public for awareness so that the

public might react and work to change the presence of those issues in the lives of America's youth. The situations depicted in the piece, although dramatized, have occurred and continue to occur on America's public school buses and in the lives of our youth. The focus of today's youth is no longer on merely completing an evening's homework assignment and going to a part time job. Rather the experiences of today's youth are much more adult in nature: taking care of a parent, sibling or other relative; being held financially responsible for the success of the family; having daily interactions with other classmates or strangers that involve theft, drugs, and sexual acts. Secretly, the general American public is aware of these challenges facing today's youth. However, it appears as if nothing is being done to deal with the situations and no attempt is made to alter the presence of these situations—rather we have all become complacent and ignore the multiple challenges affecting the lives of contemporary youth. It is by acknowledging that these situations are real and engaging one's child in a conversation about real world scenarios that we, as a society and as a more intimate community, engage in the act of social change. This discussion, moreover, is serious and deserves not only the student's input but his or her parent's as well in order to arrive at a workable solution for the immediate parties involved. It is after the viewing and subsequent discussion that social change can occur. The students have become more aware and are willing to be open with the adults in their lives. The adults and parents, on the other hand, now aware of the challenges their children face, can work to remove our youth from situations like those explored in *How I Learned to Ride* by partnering with the community and subsequent leaders.

In an interview, Paula Vogel stated that *How I Learned to Drive* is “a walk down memory lane...[t]he play progresses in a series of flashbacks and flash forwards in the mind of the narrator, Little Bit” (Mahdesian 1). I adapted this approach in my writing by actually playing out

what one day on the bus is like for Tessa. The audience understands that Tessa's experiences on the bus are not firsts, but rather seconds and thirds—she has experienced these situations in the past and that is why she desperately tries to avoid riding the bus in first place. But, like most teenagers and adults today, we are put into situations that we are then forced to deal with whether or not we wanted to. In the end, *How I Learned to Ride* is about individual survival and adaptation. Moreover, these experiences on the bus have desensitized Tessa as she is no longer really affected by them, as evidenced by her dialogue and stage directions; their effect has already been ingrained in her being. Vogel claims that *How I Learned to Drive* is a play “about healing, forgiving, and moving on” (Vogel 2). This comment inspired me while I was considering what type of character Tessa would become. Would she be vengeful, hurting, isolated, uncaring? To a certain degree Tessa is all of those things, but she is definitely about moving on. She accepts her fate and finds a way to make it through several uncomfortable situations and survives to go on to another day.

As a teacher, these types of real-life dramatizations interest me because they deal with actual scenarios that I have seen or experienced in the public school system. My students have experienced all of the situations I have presented in *How I Learned to Ride*. However, very little time is spent on the teacher's behalf thinking of the number of experiences or challenges a student faces during the time between the student is in class on one day and the next. Although it is not the educator's job to play parent, it is the educator's job to be aware of situations that the contemporary student faces. Students are no longer just responsible for completing their homework on time. They are, in fact, dealing with adult issues and situations on a more frequent basis than the US public would like to believe as my interaction with students, their parents, and the immediate school community has revealed during my years as a teacher.



Vogel states that she believes theatre does best when “it creates a community” (5). The characters depicted in *How I Learned to Ride* create a community through their experiences and connection with the audience. We, as an audience, understand Tessa and the nameless characters that are a part of her life, whether or not she has asked them to be. Vogel continues to say that a good play “should be a dialogue. It should be a dialect” (Mahdesian 1). One of my goals was to inspire an audience to engage in a dialogue after reading or viewing the play. I want the reader to feel for Tessa, to distrust the Boy, to detest the Older Boy, to want to understand the Older Girl, and recognize the normalcy of the Girl. None of these characters are extremes. Parts of them exist in each of us as human beings without question. I believe the conversations that will emerge after reading and / or viewing *How I Learned to Ride* will begin an intellectual social change and certainly a social awareness which ultimately leads to social action and change.

I want to acknowledge a distinction between theatre for social change and theatre in general. Any piece of theatre could elicit the same response whether or not it is specifically labeled as a theatre for social change piece. However, in terms of my original pieces, theatre for social change specifically exists to engage the audience in a dialogue. The purpose is not merely an evening at the theatre, but an evening at the theater that then begins a dialogue about what was viewed, how it applies to the individual, and what the individual is going to do with this information after viewing the piece.

### **The Characters**

As mentioned, there is only one named character in the play, Tessa. Tessa is a young and seemingly innocent sophomore who is just trying to survive. We experience the play through her. Although Tessa experiences the adult actions of the play, she is still very young and innocent as demonstrated by her introverted body language and simple dialogue. She wants to

be a young girl who is not plagued by adult decisions and actions each day. This is most clearly explored when Tessa returns to her original outfit at the end of the play deciding that her more contemporary and stylish look caused her unnecessary trouble—a life lesson she learns from her bus experience.

The other characters are all stereotypes of the average student. The Boy is merely an acquaintance, a student Tessa sees on campus, but he has no real connection to her even though she continues to acknowledge him. The Girl is one of Tessa's friends, and their interaction is the lightest moment in the play even though their conversation is serious. The Older Boy is one of Tessa's mistakes, and she is reminded of him and the mistake every time she sees him and he sees her. Their interaction is severe, and Tessa is powerless in a confined space with no one to help (not that anyone on the bus would help). The Older Girl is an acquaintance, but is also the only student who probably really understands Tessa and Tessa understands her. They have a friendship just by being different and outcasts. Tessa longs for this type of connection with her own friends, but it is missing completely. Ultimately, Tessa is surrounded by "friends" but none that she can truly rely on and use as a moral indicator—she is left to figure out life on her own through her own experiences.

While working on this one-act, I mentioned my writing project to several of my students and asked them to comment on the characters and actions presented in my play. They agreed that both the characters and the situations presented in my play happen on the bus and in their lives regularly. The drug scene received the most attention, as the most regularly occurring activity. However, many students acknowledged being a part of or seeing various strains of harassment on the bus, not excluding sexual harassment and sexual activity. Their ease with this

topic was not shocking, but I was surprised at what the current 16-year old faces on a daily basis while just trying to earn their high school diploma.

### **The Dialogue**

The dialogue is written as high school students naturally talk to one another. It is a blend of adult topics and the whimsical, quick-spoken nature of high school students, specifically girls. It was important to me to capture the high school voice—a voice that is very clearly young and innocent, but through real-life experiences is forced to mature and take on the qualities of a more seasoned adult. The dialogue itself is straight-forward and does not demonstrate a wide range of vocabulary or grasp on language itself. It is basic in the sense that the words needed to communicate certain thoughts or feelings are expressed in the simplest form possible in a combination of the spoken word and body language. For example, the Girl comments: “So, did you see the fight at lunch yesterday? I mean it was really awesome. This one girl, I think her name was Elizabeth, was in line at the cafeteria and then this group of girls, of course they’re Ricans, comes up and cuts the line. So this chick tries to tell the Dean, but the Dean says she didn’t see anything. Then I guess, I mean I don’t know if this happened, Hope told me, anyways so then Elizabeth says something under her breath about the group of girls and one of them turns around and calls her something in Spanish and then punches her. Just like that. Fucking crazy that’s what it is. I mean really. What is the big deal? It’s the damn lunch line. Is that really necessary? Well, by the time the fight was over, like ten people had to be pulled off those two girls. *(a brief pause)* It was exciting. At least it gave us something to talk about over lunch.” This particular conversation was a version of an incident that I witnessed while on lunch duty one day in the cafeteria. This section captures the combination of students being placed in an

adult or hostile situation while still demonstrating the youthfulness of the average high school student.

### **The Influences**

As previously mentioned in great detail, the main influence on this project was my students. Aside from writing the piece in the style of a Paula Vogel play, my students, their lives, and their worldly experiences at the young age of sixteen compose the play and its message. The style of the piece also reflects the works from the theatre of the avant-garde and theatre for social change and how the two forms have blended as part of my personal creative expression. For example, writing the play in a series of short vignettes echoes the feel of a Vogel play while the bare stage and simple setting represents some of the more abstract work of the Performance Group and the avant-garde movement.

### **Conclusion**

It is my hope that one day I will continue to develop *How I Learned to Ride* into a full-length production that will see a staged reading and perhaps even a production. The message of the play is one of entrapment and forced adulthood. Tessa wants to be accepted by her friends and supported by her parents, but her friends are not accepted themselves and her parents are not directly involved in Tessa's life or her aware of her decisions. As a result, Tessa is forced to experience life with little knowledge of what is ahead and only a gut feeling about what is inherently right or wrong. She cannot escape her environment and must live with the decisions she makes either right or wrong. The play requires that both the academic institutions of the US as well as parents across the country recognize the adult lives America's youth is living and openly acknowledge that simply going to school is a bigger social and personal responsibility

than it was in the 1950s or even just 10 years ago. After this acknowledgement, both the parents and their children must act to change their environment.

Moreover, *How I Learned to Ride* stands at a starting point for meaningful dialogue between children and their peers as well as between children and their parents (and vice versa). We should not be afraid to engage our children in serious and real conversation—it is not taboo. It is a great disservice for parents to never ask what their child is really doing in school, but rather inquire if his or her homework is finished and then to pass the green beans. Parents and their children must engage in an active, constructive, and sometimes uncomfortable dialogue about life, growing up, and making mistakes. It is my desire that *How I Learned to Ride* becomes one of those beginning points to open a line of socially conscious and responsible dialogue in the home and in US schools.

In conclusion, it is difficult to posit where do we go from here? How does this play spark social change or the desire for it? Certainly, awareness of one's surroundings and decisions plays a major role in social change. I believe that students, parents, administrators, and teachers should not only be aware of each other's situations, but work to create a better more amenable situation than the one currently present in public schools across the US. Other contemporary playwrights are working to achieve this same goal. Specifically, on the level of theatre for youth audiences, the works of Laurie Brooks and David Saar have achieved success in bringing forth serious issues for a teen audience. Brooks's *The Wrestling Season* explores the topics of sexual identity and friendship through the lens of a high school wrestling match and Saar's *The Yellow Boat* uses the playwright's own personal experiences to explore the AIDS epidemic in children and society's response to it. Specifically, *The Wrestling Season* and *The Yellow Boat* taught me that it is possible to dramatize adult issues and social concerns for a youth audience, and have

those issues be accepted, embraced, and processed by the age group involved. In addition, it is works like *The Wrestling Season*, *The Yellow Boat*, and *How I Learned to Ride* that help to bring the challenges facing today's youth and their families to the mainstream public and ask that constructive dialogue occur between child and parent and parent and society. Obviously, not all situations are changeable, and, sometimes, a particular issue is only acknowledged after it has happened which makes it impossible to prevent, but the desire to be aware of a current situation may empower another individual to break the mold should that same situation present itself again. Armed with this awareness and knowledge, we, as a society, can work to break negative patterns of behavior and interactions with one another through theatre for social change.

## **Writing “The Water Cooler”**

### **Overview & Inspiration**

This play was inspired by a conversation that occurred in a graduate seminar, Contemporary Theatre Practice. As a class, we were discussing the American avant-garde movement and what is denoted as “extreme” theatre. In the midst of this conversation, the topic of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 was introduced by another student. As an aside, I mentioned to another classmate that an avant-garde piece on the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> would be two people standing in one of the towers at the water cooler talking when the building is hit by the oncoming hijacked plane. The end. This comment became the play's inspiration and, in fact, the idea of the water cooler remained and became the play's title as well as a central piece of the set design. I decided to develop the play as a final project and as a piece of theatre for social change. Ultimately, the concept of the attacks remained and I worked to develop the play around a series of questions. These questions were: Why write a September 11<sup>th</sup> play?, Who represents September 11<sup>th</sup>?, What can be said or written to dramatize a national tragedy?,

Whose voice is to be represented in the piece?, and What is the style of this new modern drama? From these questions, I developed a play that explored a day in the lives of three ordinary individuals before the actual physical attacks on the World Trade Center. I wanted to capture the human and humane element of the day; that this fall morning was normal in every way and no one was expecting such a horrific event. As a result, the workers that entered the World Trade Center that morning were participating in their normal routine and this routine contained excitement for some, boredom for others, and just complacency for the rest. This level of normalcy was one of the elements that I felt was missing from the media's portrayal of the events of that day. So much was said during the days and weeks that followed the attacks about the people, but yet there were very few offerings that actually explored the human element and any attempt to do so was overshadowed by the repeating image of the crashing hijacked planes into the towers.

### **The Concept**

Why write a September 11<sup>th</sup> play? I wanted to write this play after a class discussion about theatre that uses both multi-media and a created theatre environment. I did not necessarily know how I was going to connect that topic to a dramatic piece until later. Then, I realized that the topic could be dramatized using the buildings as a character which utilizes projection screens, images, cameras, and other forms of multi-media to help explore the events of that tragic day. After the two aspects became visible, I began writing a concept for what I thought a play about the people of September 11<sup>th</sup> would be like using those elements. Ultimately, my goal was to create "a day in the life of" portrayal of Americans on the day of September 11<sup>th</sup>. This normal day could depict not only the average American at work, but could also depict the events in a very real way that would create a level of discomfort among the audience members. Initially, I

did not have any interest in developing what could be perceived as a political play about the impact of terrorism or the development of the war in Iraq. However, writing about a national tragedy naturally has political overtones, so one of the challenges became framing the political aspects so that the play would read as something more than just a war on terror theatre piece. The focus of the play was on average people doing their daily mundane ordinary tasks on a day that ended in tragedy instead of another ride home on the Path.

Also, I did not want to explore in depth the attack on the Pentagon or the plane crash in Pennsylvania. Specifically, my focus was on the World Trade Center events only. However, there are blatant and subtle references to the terrorist attacks as a whole. The terrorist attack on the Pentagon and the United crash in Pennsylvania are represented by physical props that exist in the office as well as being incorporated as part of the video montage which examines all aspects of the terrorist attacks at the end of scene one and later at the end of the play.

### **The Characters**

Who represents September 11<sup>th</sup>? The simple and truthful answer is everyone. However, I wanted each of these “normal” characters to have an intimate connection to the actual events. First and foremost, the characters are not named. They do not have to have names to be effective—a quality I have adapted from the works of Paula Vogel. Initially, I started writing the script with character names and I was not happy with the connotation of some typically American names. For example, I kept reverting to names like “Bill” and “Sara”—names I feel are stereotypically “American” and take away from the actual presentation of the piece, so the idea of using names was abandoned. Removing the character’s names requires the audience to focus on the universality of the event and those individuals directly involved in the attack on that morning and the removal of individual psychology for a shift towards group and community



psychology. In addition, by losing the names, the audience is required to focus on the actual dialogue and the setting and staging of the play. This helps to shift the focus to the windows and the video images as well as the storylines that each individual presents. For me, it also helped to explore the connectivity between all of the characters including the actual towers as all of the elements become non-descriptive, but connected in some way. In addition, I wanted the audience to focus on the actual natural humanity of the characters being put in an extreme situation without their knowledge that it would end badly. The challenge of writing about September 11<sup>th</sup> is that it is very much like writing about the Titanic disaster—the audience knows how the story ends and there is an emotional (and perhaps political) attachment to the events. To face this challenge, the material had to be treated in an accurate and humane manner, so that an audience member would be interested in watching or reading another piece about the attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup>. Therefore, the timeline in the play was created from CNN and the *9/11 Commission Report* to ensure that the structure of the play would be accurate and factual (even in light of the controversy surrounding the report) even though the scenario and dialogue would be created.

After choosing not to name my characters, my next step was to create a tangible connection from the character onstage to the actual terrorist attack. My belief is that even if an individual audience member was not physically in New York City (like I was not for example) at the time of the terrorist attack, he or she is still connected to the terrorist attacks on the human level. This idea stems from John Guare's *Six Degrees of Separation* which ruminates upon the concept that any two individuals are connected by at most six others. Applying this theory, each audience member would be in some way connected to someone who was changed as a result of the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>. This change was overt and unexpected just as the attacks

themselves. However, the attempt to change an audience member would be deliberate, controlled, and personal to each individual audience member. One's individual guttural reaction to the events of the attacks and the dramatization of these events would create a myriad of responses to the piece and hopefully open a meaningful and insightful dialogue among other members of the audience, ultimately working towards some type of social change.

The character's connections to the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> were as follows:

- The Cleaning Woman – the cleaning woman is of an ethnic (not named purposely) origin. This is for two reasons. The first is because Americans associate the actual attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> with an actual ethnicity (in this case, Arabic). Secondly, the US was founded and developed by immigrants. The Cleaning Woman's presence by "cleaning up" represents the role that immigrants played in the development of this country and its subsequent US ideals.
- Worker 1 – Worker 1 reveals her connection to the actual events of the attack while sitting at her cubicle. At her cubicle are postcards from several family vacations. One, in particular, is from Boston, Massachusetts. Both of the hijacked planes (American Airlines Flight 11 and United Airlines Flight 175) originated from Boston even though the actual attack occurred in New York City. Having postcards at your work station is not an uncommon occurrence; in fact it is a pretty regular occurrence. However, this small connection works to prove the idea that all Americans were somehow touched and connected to the actual events.

- Worker 2 – Worker 2 has a model of a United Airlines plane and a pair of pilot’s wings. It should be clear to the viewing and reading audience that Worker 2 was a pilot at some time in his professional career. United Airlines was directly involved in the terrorist attacks on America that day as Flight 93 was hijacked and then crashed in the countryside of Pennsylvania after it was taken over by its passengers; Flight 175 was hijacked and flown into the south tower of the World Trade Center.
- Worker 3 – Worker 3 again reveals his connection to the events at his cubicle. When he is examining an engagement ring and an airline ticket, the ticket is to Somerset County, Pennsylvania. This is the site of the plane crash of United Flight 93. Whether Somerset County was going to be a honeymoon location or a vacation is not determined and it is not imperative to know what the connection is exactly. However, what is defined is that he, too, is connected to the events of the attack without his direct knowledge or involvement. All of the pieces have to be assembled by the audience which requires them to be actively engaged in the piece and openly working to understand and process the piece. It is because of this more active involvement that I believe the audience will then engage in a discussion about the piece which becomes an act of theatre for social change.
- The key to each character’s connections to the events is that they are regular activities and souvenirs from events that one would normally see at work. I feel that this helps to make the characters more human and

natural and do not come across as characters driven by a certain philosophical angle—they are “everyday joes.” This is the key to understanding and being connected to the characters. If the audience does not buy into their “normalness”, the audience becomes disconnected with the characters and the play and then only connects with the actual attacks about which they naturally already have an opinion. Therefore, to avoid feeling disconnected, the human and humane element of the piece must be a focus in order to connect the audience to the piece directly.

### **The Dialogue**

What can be said or written to dramatize a national tragedy? Whose voice is to be represented in the piece? These two questions weighed heavily upon me when deciding how to create dialogue that would be meaningful and feel well-placed and not disrespect the actual events. Given the media blitz that followed the terrorist attacks, it is hard to imagine that September 11<sup>th</sup> was actually a regular Tuesday morning for most Americans that day. No one was expecting or anticipating a national tragedy.

As a result, I felt that the dialogue was not the most important part of the play. Experiencing the play would have a larger impact on the audience, so the play only has twenty lines of actual dialogue which creates a specific symbolic pattern. The first scene is composed of two sections. The first section of the first scene has nine lines to correspond to the ninth month of the actual attack and the second section of the first scene has eleven lines to match the actual day on which the attacks occurred. To me, all that was ordinary and normal about the lives of the characters needed to be captured in these twenty lines of actual dialogue because after the attacks nothing was normal about US life ever again.

As a result of only having twenty lines of dialogue, the second scene contains absolutely no scripted dialogue because there are no words that could adequately assess the experience of those individuals in the south tower watching the north tower burn and then watch a second plane heading straight for them in the south tower. I believe that it is important for the audience to just watch those events unravel and experience how the actors actually react to the events of that day.

Ultimately, the lack of dialogue, I hope, is the reason for the audience to engage in a dialogue following a viewing or reading of the piece. To have an entire scene composed only of stage directions, video imaging, and a frantic ensemble is a challenge for several reasons. The first is that there is no dialogue. The average audience is not used to going to the theatre and sitting in silence and having the actors onstage also be in a state of controlled silence. Another reason is that once the scene begins, the theatre artist has little to no control over the audience if the audience has not been “hooked” at the beginning of the play. This scene, in particular, could play especially poor if the audience is not willing to accept the world of the play and separate themselves from the real world of these events that they know. The final reason is that this is a great diversion from the work that I am normally interested in and attracted to artistically. I want the play to direct my attention and feelings and to accomplish that through dialogue. Although I personally enjoy reflection, this particular choice allows the audience to leave the theatre with a very specific personal experience and has removed control of the production for the artistic team. The audience member is now in control of their own assessment of the work and the experience. This is not to say that an audience member is not normally in control of their own theatrical experience, it is just that this particular creative choice presents the piece with no influence allowing the audience member to process the images and the experience independently and as

separate entities. Following this self-processing stage, an audience member should want to engage other audience members in a discussion about what they saw, how they felt, and how it alters or reinforces their pre-conceived notions of the actual events. This is the birth of social change. The audience member has had an experience which questions already ingrained notions and forces the person to re-examine those notions and hopefully work to a better understanding of the event and one's personal perception so much so that he or she is willing to enact change personally first and then outwardly second. I believe the structure of the second scene naturally creates a desire to talk about what a person has just seen or read. Primarily, because there is no character dialogue in this scene and the closure to the play is violent with the final tower collapsing, followed by a series of images, which represent different thoughts and feelings to different people.

As an author, there is a certain level of manipulation present in every play, but more prominent in *The Water Cooler*. Although influenced by theatre of the avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s with the use of media and technology, I wanted my audience to have a very specific experience while viewing the piece. First, I want them to feel isolated and helpless. I am trying to recreate the emotional impact of the actual day. The disconnect between the characters on stage and the minimal dialogue helps to create the feeling of isolation for the audience. The feeling of helplessness emerges once the camera "eyes" turn on. Suddenly, the images the audience is seeing is completely controlled and the video images of terror and destruction are unavoidable. This level of control as a writer and as an artist was important because I wanted the piece to connect to the human experience. The thrust of the piece, for me, was to create an overt feeling of connection to being human while maintaining an uncomfortable level of being

disconnected from the actual performers on stage. This dual experience helps to recreate the emotion that surrounded the actual day of the attacks.

### **The Influences**

What is the style of this modern drama? There is a need to identify what influenced my decision to write such a play and who or what influenced that decision. First and foremost, I felt that the actual events of September 11<sup>th</sup> were over dramatized and the humanness was actually lost from the event even though all of the media and members of the government seemed to be focused on the “human element”. I felt that the Average Joe and how he was affected by the attacks was missing from assessing the events of that day. I wanted to show that all of the people who went to work that day in New York City were living regular active lives and this play was to capture a slice of life before the attacks. I was not looking to name or create a hero, but rather portray life as it was until the event that changed American life forever.

I think that every play and every playwright I have read has in some way influenced my take on this particular event and attempt to dramatize it. Specifically, I think the influences of Paula Vogel, Tony Kushner, and the experimental theatre of the 1960s-1970s allowed for me to create the play in this particular format. From the style and works of Vogel and Kushner, I developed my characters and their dialogue (i.e characters without a name and the quality and style of their dialogue). From the concepts of environmental theatre, I developed a play in which the characters were put into an environment actually created by the physical space of the office and the ever-alive windows and cubicle “eyes.” In addition to this, I added the video component as a way of fusing the influence of Brecht and alienation with modern technology and performance art. For example, the way the images “snap” onto the screens and provide the audience with a voyeur’s view into the more intimate lives of the workers. The video removes

the connection between audience and actor and, at the same time, provides an up close and personal view of these individuals off-setting the distance created by the cameras. Ultimately, the audience feels a part of the office environment, but the feeling created by the ever watchful cubicle eyes and windows help to separate the audience from the actual events and clearly establish a created and controlled theatrical experience.

Ultimately, I attempted to work outside of an environment in which I am generally comfortable and familiar. I wanted to experiment with a new style of theatre that did not necessarily have scene after scene of intelligently crafted dialogue and large sets for a Broadway stage. What I wanted to create was a piece that anyone could identify with and would understand the simplistic nature of the characters in a complex and uncontrollable environment. The environment is ultimately constructed through images that could be changed as each artistic team deems necessary as long as they meet the guidelines put forth in the stage directions. These images coupled with no dialogue in the second scene require the audience to be completely engaged in the piece and aware of their surroundings; a level of engagement that I hope will spur conversation, awareness, and change. As a writer, I wanted to create a piece that would control the audience experience and take the audience down a very specific path. The topic has too many contrasting emotions to leave much of the experience entirely up to the audience member individually. To help achieve this goal, the video cameras and images became part of the concept to specifically control the emotional and psychological feel of a specific scene and the play overall.

### **Conclusion**

Ultimately, *The Water Cooler* is to be produced with a discussion or talkback as a part of it. Primarily because so much of the play's concept is conveyed and explored through the stage



directions that if the audience missed any of the deliberate plot or character connections, the talkback would allow for those to be fleshed out more specifically by the creative team and the actors. I envision a talkback in the style of Laurie Brooks's talkback for her social drama *The Wrestling Season*. In this talkback, the characters of the play return to answer questions from the audience from the character's point of view as it applies to his or her life in the play. Then, the actors would respond to additional questions as well as discuss their experience in the play from the actor's perspective. I believe that by having the actors respond in the voice of their characters, the audience will get to experience another level of real humanness because the responses will be honest and natural. This type of talkback will allow the audience to process the information presented in the play in several ways. First, the audience would get answers to their questions through the voice of the actual characters. Secondly, the characters will then become another audience member as they unpack the experience for the audience which helps to explore the play on a more reflective level as opposed to the immediate responses of the characters.

In addition, the stage directions are, in some cases, just a starting point for how to integrate and explore the use of video and technology in the actual performance of the play. The blending of different forms of media is crucial to the successful creation of this piece because it helps to add a surrealistic out of body feel that allows the audience to accept that they are watching these horrific events unfold (again) in front of them and are ultimately powerless to help the workers or stop the events from occurring. Nonetheless, the play is clearly and without doubt about the enduring and everlasting human spirit and the power and pride of Americans everywhere. The connection to theatre for social change is how that human spirit has changed over time and how an individual redefines their level of "Americanness" to match the political, social, and economic culture of the country at a particular time. In an effect, we are always

experiencing a level of social change. The play helps to move this ongoing level of social change from the individual person to the shared experience of live theatre and then back to the individual. It is the point at which the experience becomes shared that social change and awareness are inevitable.

As a writer of theatre for social change, this piece presented the challenge of making the piece accessible and worthy of a viewing audience given the sensitive material. This is why I came up with the five driving questions that help to guide the creative process and the end product—Why write a September 11<sup>th</sup> play?, Who represents September 11<sup>th</sup>?, What can be said or written to dramatize a national tragedy?, Whose voice is to be represented in the piece?, and What is the style of this new modern drama?. Working to create an answer to these questions dramatically kept me honest to my material and to my audience. Also, the questions allowed me to develop a clear creative path for the play and work towards an end result that was in line with the questions as well as my vision and definition of theatre for social change.

**CHAPTER FOUR:**  
**“HOW I LEARNED TO RIDE”**  
**THE COMPLETE SCRIPT**

**Cast of Characters**

- Tessa – a slightly above average 16-year-old sophomore in high school. She is intelligent and understands the difference between right and wrong, but still has trouble determining which is which.
- A Boy – a classmate from Tessa’s past.
- A Girl – Tessa’s classmate.
- An older boy – Tessa’s acquaintance (with benefits).
- An older girl – Tessa’s classmate and avid drug dealer.

**Setting**

- The scene takes place over the course of a bus ride from Tessa’s home to school. She recounts her experiences aboard the school bus and the life lessons learned aboard. The stage is bare except for six yellow straight-back chairs placed in rows just off center right. A street light hangs mid-stage upstage left. The yellow light is blinking slowly. The blinking of the light will match the intensity of the scene as the play progresses. There is a stop sign downstage right; it is weathered and appears to have been hit by a vehicle at some point in its history. Other characters enter and exit the mind of Tessa as she remembers them. They are nameless and non-descript. Their only life is provided through Tessa’s descriptions. It is morning and Tessa is standing at the stop sign as the stage lights come up onstage. The time is now.

## Scene I – The Bus Stop

*[It is early morning; the light grows brighter as the scene progresses. Tessa stands at the stop sign attentively. She is alone, well-dressed, clean and is carrying two books (Geometry and English literature) under her right arm. She sports a clear backpack providing insight into her life based on its contents: a make-up bag, two dollars, loose change, a tampon, two pencils, a pink pen, a cell phone, and hair clip in the shape of a clam shell.]*

**TESSA:** *(with an i-pod in her ears, she is singing along with a contemporary tune. She stops abruptly, removes the i-pod and looks at it):* Fuck. The batteries are dead. How am I going to make it through math class without something to keep me from slitting my wrists? *(She glances at her “Hello, Kitty” watch)* Shit. I don’t have time to go back home either. If only the stupid car didn’t break down. I wouldn’t have to take the bus. *(She quickly grabs her abdomen; she takes off her backpack quickly looking for something – we soon realize what it is)* Great! I forgot some Advil. No batteries, no car, and my period all on the same day...and it’s Monday. I should’ve stayed in bed. *(We hear the bus approaching in the distance [sound fx]. Tessa gathers herself emotionally and physically. She places the i-pod’s ear buds back into her ears to avoid any meaningless conversation on the bus with some underclassmen; the bus arrives. She steps away from the stop sign and sits in the second row, aisle seat of the bus; lights fade to black).*

## Scene II – The First Stop

*(As the lights return, there is someone sitting in front of Tessa – a boy. They know each other. However, we are not yet aware of their relationship. Tessa does not acknowledge anyone else. While seated she removes her ankle length skirt and reveals something much shorter. She is*

*built to support her new outfit, but the action seems unexpected. She stuffs the old skirt into her clear backpack—the other items become masked in jean. She looks up.)*

**TESSA:** What?

**BOY:** Do you wanna?

**TESSA:** Do I wanna what?

**BOY:** You know?

**TESSA:** No, I don't.

*(The audience should be uncomfortable. We do not know what the boy wants and many options should pop into our collective minds: “Do you wanna do my homework?”, “Do you wanna go to a movie?”, “Do you wanna make out?”, “Do you wanna do me?” The boy turns around in his seat, just as another young girl approaches Tessa and sits in the other chair – they embrace and Tessa’s mood is obviously changed for what appears to be the better.)*

**GIRL:** So, how come you're on the bus, Tessa?

**TESSA:** My mom's boyfriend's car broke down and my mom didn't want to get up early to take me, so here I am—lucky, right?

**GIRL:** I don't mind the bus. Most of the time it is quiet and I can do some homework. I try not to sit in the back...*(pause. The girl looks back to make sure that none of the 'druggies' are listening)* that's where the druggies sit. I don't know how the bus driver doesn't know what is going on—she's so stupid.

**TESSA:** Yeah. *(a pause – perhaps appropriate, perhaps a little awkward)* Well, did you do your Geometry homework?

**GIRL:** No, did you?

**TESSA:** If I did would I be asking you for it?

**GIRL:** Yeah, I guess you're right. *(She sits back in the seat. A pause.)* So, did you see the fight at lunch yesterday? I mean it was really awesome. This one girl, I think her name was Elizabeth, was in line at the cafeteria and then this group of girls, of course they're Ricans, comes up and cuts the line. So this chick tries to tell the Dean, but the Dean says she didn't see anything. Then I guess, I mean I don't know if this happened, Hope told me, anyways so then Elizabeth says something under her breath about the group of girls and one of them turns around and calls her something in Spanish and then punches her. Just like that. Fucking crazy that's what it is. I mean really. What is the big deal? It's the damn lunch line. Is that really necessary? Well, by the time the fight was over, like ten people had to be pulled off those two girls. *(a brief pause)* It was exciting. At least it gave us something to talk about over lunch.

*[The bus comes to a complete and full stop. The street light turns red. The door opens. A small handful of students get on board (none visible, except one – the older boy). The Older Boy walks by Tessa, stops, looks at her, and takes a seat directly behind her. The Girl sensing a level of discomfort, returns to her previous seat somewhere on the bus out of view. There is a pregnant pause before anything happens on stage.]*

### Scene III – The Second Stop

*[The light begins to blink again. Tessa and The Older Boy sit in silence. No one moves. Then the Older Boy takes out of a piece of paper, scribble's something on it quickly, folds the paper (not at all the way a girl would fold a note) and tosses it over the seat into Tessa's lap; she hesitates to pick it up and read it. Eventually, she does. She says nothing.]*

**OLDER BOY:** Well?

**TESSA:** Well, what?

**OLDER BOY:** Did you read my note?

**TESSA:** Yes.

**OLDER BOY:** And...?

**TESSA:** No.

**OLDER BOY:** What? What do you mean, no?

**TESSA:** I have some homework to do before school, and I need the other seat for my bag.

**OLDER BOY:** *(he laughs)* No, you don't. I'm coming to sit with you.

*[He gets up and moves into the other seat next to Tessa. He picks up her schoolbag and drops it on the floor. As she bends over to pick it up, he places his hand on her back and around to her other shoulder. As she sits back into the seat, he has a hold on her. The yellow light begins blinking more quickly.]*

**TESSA:** Really, I need to do my homework...

**OLDER BOY:** That's what you said last time, but your expression says otherwise *(he pulls her close to him – she winches.)* Remember? *(with a coy smirk)*

**TESSA:** *(sarcastically)* Oh, yeah! *(She is implying that whatever occurred last time was not for her pleasure)*

**OLDER BOY:** Look, Tessa, you know that I really like you. It's just that right now I am with Gracie. She's great and everything, but a little pretentious with her Dooney and Burke bags and Laguna Beach style. You're more real. More down to earth. *(He moves his arm to her lap.)* You understand me. *(He slips his hand up her skirt several inches and pauses.)*

**TESSA:** I know. (*Appeasing him in hopes that he will simply disappear. She attempts to push his hand out of her skirt as she fears that others on the bus are watching. They are not, but Tessa feels as if all eyes are on her.*)

**OLDER BOY:** Hey, baby. C'mon no one on the bus is watching. It's cool. Besides, this isn't the first time and I love you. (*He forces his hand up her skirt. Tessa grips it from the outside of her skirt holding it place attempting to exhibit some level of control over the situation—a situation that she has no control over.*)

**TESSA:** (*As a whisper*) Please stop. (*a long pause—searching for options:*) Later.

**OLDER BOY:** (*He leans into her, kisses her on the cheek, and speaks into her ear*): No. Don't worry, it's okay. No one will say anything.

**TESSA:** (*With tears in her eyes and a painful look in her face, she pleads with him*): Please. (*pause.*) Please stop.

**OLDER BOY:** (*quietly assertive*) Soon enough.

[*After he's finished, he gets up and returns to his seat. The light returns to its regular flashing speed. Tessa hasn't moved. She is frozen. A beat. The Older Boy comes back to her seat, leans over, and grabs the Geometry homework. Tessa had thought worse.*]

**OLDER BOY:** Thanks. (*pause*) You should ride the bus more often. (*He smirks at her and leaves—this time for good*)

#### Scene IV – The Third Stop

[*The bus comes to a complete and full stop. The light turns red. Again, several students get on the bus. The bus is starting to fill up. Another girl, the Older Girl (a senior), is displaced by a group of students and moves to sit next to Tessa. They know each other. It is not a friendship. It*



*is more of a business relationship—the relationship where you recognize someone but are not friendly enough to say hello each time you see each other. The Older Girl sits. She exchanges a glance with Tessa. They are both slightly uncomfortable, but that has become the environment on the bus.]*

**OLDER GIRL:** Hey.

**TESSA:** Hey.

**OLDER GIRL:** You still owe me... *(she is cut off)*

**TESSA:** I know.

**OLDER GIRL:** Well?

**TESSA:** Friday?

**OLDER GIRL:** I guess. But, look it's going to be twenty on Friday—it's been two weeks.

**TESSA:** Okay, okay. Look, I wasn't trying to avoid you. I've been really busy at home and I just forgot.

**OLDER GIRL:** Tessa, it's ok. I know you're good for it. So much so, that this is for you *(She hands Tessa a small clear plastic bag with some marijuana in it—it's a nic.)* Here's a free nic. Just bring me the twenty dollars on Friday or I'll be in trouble, okay?

**TESSA:** Yeah. I'll have it on Friday. *(The Older Girl gets up from her seat next to Tessa and heads back to the rear of the bus where she knows there is no seat, but surely there are other delinquent customers.)* Hey...*(turning back to the Older Girl)*...thanks! *(The Older Girl is the only one to have shown Tessa some mercy and friendship. They are both outcasts on this bus and therefore share more than they know. Tessa grabs her bag and*

*begins shuffling through it. The curse of a clear school-mandated backpack is that you can see everything in it. Finally, she takes her jean skirt and places the nic bag in the pocket on the side of the skirt. It will be safe from view for now. What will happen with it at home will be quite a different story.)*

**OLDER GIRL:** No problem. Remember: Friday.

**TESSA:** *(to herself)* Okay, Friday.

### Scene V – The School Yard

*[The bus comes to a complete and full stop. The blinking yellow light turns red. This time it is for good. The door opens and the driver hops out first. Students file past Tessa on their way off the bus. She waits. Her day has been already too eventful. She opens her bag and takes out a compact mirror. She wipes a tear from her eye and fixes her running mascara. As she puts her mirror back into her bag, she pulls out the crumpled jean skirt. She unfolds the skirt and slips it back over her shorter skirt. She has changed her mind about her outfit. She stands and puts her hair up in the clip, straps her backpack on, grabs her books, and begins walking off the bus. She pops the ear bud back into her ear and presses play. A pause.]*

**TESSA:** Fuck. No batteries. Today is going to be one lousy day.

*[The lights fade as a close-up on Tessa's face and eventually go out as she disappears off stage into the school yard.]*

The End.

**CHAPTER FIVE:**  
**“THE WATER COOLER”**  
**THE COMPLETE SCRIPT**

“The Water Cooler”:  
An American Tragedy in Two Scenes

**Cast of Characters**

- A cleaning woman – an older woman of an ethnic origin.
- Worker 1 – a business woman attempting to prove that there is no glass ceiling.
- Worker 2 – a middle-aged burned out man with a family.
- Worker 3 – a young businessman who cares more for himself than the activities of the world around him.
- Ensemble workers – a second office of average workers who are forced to face a true tragedy and their own mortality.

**Setting**

The play takes place over the course of an early fall morning at an office building in lower Manhattan. As the scene opens, the interior of a Fortune 500 company office building is revealed. On stage, there are eight visible office cubicles which fill the stage. In the center of the stage is an office break station. At the break station, there is a water cooler, a coffee machine, a copier (*which reads out of order*), a fax machine, and some incidental supplies (*such as paper clips, a tape dispenser, a stapler, some coffee creamer, plastic utensils, and a corkboard with some company-related fliers posted, most of which are outdated*). The back wall of the stage and the office is a wall of windows which covers the entire space and continues on

out of view of the audience. The windows dominate and fill the stage and are ultimately become one of the characters as they are the eye into this story.

\*As a technical note, the windows are to be projection screens of some sort that allow for a variety of images to be projected on them throughout the play. At the beginning of the play, the windows should reflect a real world environment with a city skyline, other buildings, clouds, birds, etc. The windows become the lens through which the characters of the play and the audience members experience the play. Therefore, they should appear overpowering and naturally draw one's attention. Ultimately, the two dominant set pieces are the projected windows and the water cooler (*which is directly center stage and splits the office cubicles*). All of the other set pieces and set dressing should appear as regular and realistic as possible.

There are video cameras hanging above the cubicles of Worker 1, Worker 2, and Worker 3. These cameras project the cubicle environment on three eye-shaped screens that are located above the performance space. The cameras are off at this time. They turn on with the arrival of each worker to his or her cubicle location. The images projected allow the audience to experience the more intimate details of these workers' lives. The audience has become voyeurs and voyeurs who will be only able to see and experience the events of play, but not stop them.

## **Scene I – Sunrise**

*As the lights come up (the sun rises and is projected on the windows), a cleaning woman of an ethnic origin is finishing emptying the trash from the evening before pushing her cleaning cart across the stage. It is 6:00 am. The time appears on the windows. (When the time appears it is the only image on the screens, the skyline disappears and the numbers appear much like a digital alarm clock – the visual image snaps on the screen for only a brief second—enough time, however, for the audience to recognize that this is not an ordinary office nor it is an ordinary*

*play). She is listening to some upbeat music on a walkman as she sweeps in tempo and shuffles across the floor and finishes her cleaning. Time passes. It is 6:15 am. The time appears on the windows. As the cleaning woman finishes her work, she leaves and shuts off the remainder of the overnight work lights. Time passes. It is 6:30 am. The time appears on the windows. The stage is illuminated by the rising sun visible only through the full line of windows. No front light is added to the stage. There is silence. Time passes. It is 6:45 am. The time appears on the windows. A window cleaner (a projected image) is visible on the outside of the building. He squeegees a window and moves along. Time passes. It is 7:00 am. The time appears on the windows. Suddenly, the main office door swings open and the lights snap on. Three people enter one after the other, almost robotic. Who they are is not important. What is important is that they are focused on their daily routine and immediately begin the day as they do every other day completely unaware of each other.*

*Worker 1 makes her way straight to her cubicle (at which time her cubicle “eye” turns on) and sits down performing her regular “Welcome to Work” tasks: she removes a notebook from her work bag then places her bag under the desk, turns on her computer then the monitor and moves the mouse around on its sunflower-shaped mouse pad, she turns on her desk lamp to avoid the harsh florescent lighted office, she checks her voicemail, makes a couple of notes while listening, and then goes to the water cooler where she will make her coffee. Her cubicle has a personality—there are pieces of her life present everywhere (several pictures of her family, some postcards from vacation locations, specifically Boston, and some other personal decorative items that you would normally find in an office).*

*Worker 2 stops at the water cooler to read the new postings (there are none), fingers the items on the table (searching for something that is not there), takes a couple of napkins and a*

*creamer and goes to his cubicle completely out of sight in the extended office. His cubicle “eye” turns on. We hear (and then see) the same work-related noises from his cubicle—his desk light is clicked on, the powering up of his computer, “You’ve Got Mail,” etc. At his desk, there is a model United Airlines plane and a pair of pilot’s wings. Worker 2 has begun a second career in this office and hopefully a fresh start.*

*Worker 3 enters last of this small group. He is slow, methodical, uninterested. He reads a newspaper. Stops halfway into the room. Reads intensely. Looks up—he is searching for something. Pauses. Flips a couple of pages. Smirks. Goes back to the original page, takes a pen from his pocket and fills in the last word of the crossword puzzle. He smiles at his own success. Time passes. It is 7:15 am. The time appears on the windows. As he is returning his pen to his jacket pocket, there is a voice:*

**WORKER 1** So did you finish another one already? *(standing at the water cooler)*

**WORKER 3** Yup, you know me...two before 12:00 that’s what I always say. *(moving into the office)*

**WORKER 1** I don’t know how you do it really. I can barely finish a game of Tic-Tac-Toe without being stumped by my 4-year old. I guess he got the puzzle-solving gene from his father.

**WORKER 3** Honestly, most of the time, I sneak a peak at the answers. I need something to do while riding the Path into the city. I tell you, the experience on the train is scarier each day. When I was in grad school, I remember actually engaging other passengers in a conversation on my way into the city, now I just stare intensely into my paper while keeping another eye scanning the train for any potential danger.

**WORKER 1** Well, that is why we moved out of the city all together, but now I have to leave my house at 5:00 in the morning. There are trade-offs...that's for sure.

**WORKER 3** Yeah, you're right. Oh, well. What are you going do, right? Just go back to work, I guess. See you at lunch. *(He begins to move towards his cubicle).*

**WORKER 1** Yup, it's Thursday, so that means cream of potato soup today. I purposely did not bring my lunch.

**WORKER 3** It's the little things that excite me as well. *(He arrives at his desk and his cubicle "eye" turns on)*

*It should be clear that their interaction is a casually warm one. They are strangers forced to know and ultimately care about each other because they work together. This is their morning routine. It is a way of cleansing the family palette and getting a taste for the work palette. The sun has continued to rise on the horizon and birds fly by the window.*

*Worker 3 moves to his desk as he begins to put away his crossword puzzle. He sits no longer engaged. He glares blankly at his compartment, wondering where to begin another day at the office. Unlike, Worker 1, this is just a job to him. He would much rather be in a different place and perhaps today that would have been a better choice. He slowly gets into his regiment. He turns on his computer, opens a drawer and pulls out a stack of completely unorganized papers and begins fiddling through them. Among the papers are receipts, a couple of napkins, some trash, a dollar bill (he pauses takes the bill and quickly pockets it as this has brought some excitement to his already dull morning), an engagement ring, and an airline ticket. He looks at the ticket and the ring intensely and wonders off into his imagination—imagining a life that never was in the rolling countryside of Pennsylvania.*

*Time passes. It is 7:30 am. The time appears on the windows. He returns the items to the desk drawer and begins reading through the papers and cross-checking their numbers with those of his excel program. There is a quiet to the office. All three workers are in their stations, tending to their work privately. Time passes. It is 8:00am. The time appears on the windows. At 8:00am, the background music of the office turns on, first loudly which creates a verbal response from the three workers. But, then it naturally lowers itself to the approved office level. It is elevator music at best.*

**WORKER 3** *(aloud from his cubicle)* You know, every morning, that music turns on and every morning it is a complete surprise to me. I wish we could change it.

**WORKER 1** *(aloud from her cubicle)* I know what you mean. I have pretty much timed all of my bathroom breaks to changes in the music. I feel like Pavlov's dog—I have been conditioned.

**WORKER 2** *(aloud from his cubicle)* I guess I just don't notice it anymore.

*Time passes. It is 8:30 am. The time appears on the windows.*

**WORKER 2** *(He goes to the water cooler to get a drink and to break up his day, even though it is still so early).* So, who is working on this new project?

**WORKER 1** *(Standing by her cubicle)* Well, I was supposed to work on it, but my son had some school commitments that would prevent me from traveling all the way to California on such short notice.

*Time passes. It is 8:40 am. The time appears on the windows.*

**WORKER 3** *(Crossing to the water cooler)* So, that is why they must have asked me to



join the group. And just when I thought it was because I was young and talented. *(Pause.)* I do not think I am cut out for this type of work. I mean, don't get me wrong. I love the idea of a six figure salary working in the city, but lately, I just don't think the corporate lifestyle is for me. *(The group pauses. Something has caught Worker 1's attention. She moves to the windows.)*

*Time passes. It is 8:41 am. The time appears on the windows.*

**WORKER 1** What's that? *(gesturing outside)*

*Time passes. It is 8:42 am. The time appears on the windows.*

**WORKER 3** What? *(looking around)* Where? *(moving towards the windows)*

*Time passes. It is 8:43 am. The time appears on the windows.*

**WORKER 1** In the distance...is it a plane? *(They all move to the windows and stare out in complete and utter awe. They have lost the remainder of whatever control they had on the day and their respective lives.)*

*Time passes. It is 8:44 am. The time appears on the windows.*

**WORKER 2** Let me see...hmmm...I think it is a plane. But, where is it going?

**WORKER 1** It looks like it is heading right for us. *(silence)*. That can't be. Why?

*Time passes. It is 8:45 am. The time appears on the windows. At 8:45 am, a hijacked passenger jet, American Airlines Flight 11 out of Boston, Massachusetts, crashes into the north tower of the World Trade Center, tearing a gaping hole in the building and setting it afire. At the moment of impact the stage is filled with explosive light and the set disappears from the stage as a montage of defining American images appears on the screens which are now visible as screens instead of as windows. The images should encapsulate our collective history beginning in 1776 and*

*culminating in 2001. It is a fast-forward of all things American. The images should include interpretations of how we view ourselves as Americans and how we are viewed as Americans. They should be opposing, but real images. The images are underscored by the final movement of the William Tell Overture.*

## **Scene II – Sunset**

*As the images begin to blend and become one, they fade out and the stage becomes filled with white light, the stage begins to return to an office building—a different office building with a different perspective. This time the office is in the south tower of the World Trade Center and the windows show the burning north tower in the near distance. The setting is identical. It is 8:50 am. The time appears on the windows. The current office workers stare out of the window at the horror. Most of the windows are broken from the hit on the first tower. Some workers have immediately realized the severity of the situation and are leaving, others are trying to make several phone calls, a couple continue to work unaware of their surroundings, and others are completely lost and do not know what to do or where to go. There is general chaos in the office. This is a controlled, shocked chaos. A chaos that was not planned and does not neatly fit onto a calendar or in between dinner and soccer practice. This chaos is a chaos of the human spirit.*

*Time passes. It is 9:00 am. The time appears on the windows.*

*Time passes. It is 9:01 am. The time appears on the windows.*

*The chaos reaches a new level when an oncoming jet is spied in the distance. The scrambling becomes more intense. One person runs across the office and jumps from the open broken window and plummets to the ground below. This image is capture on tape by a personal camcorder below. The chaos is forever etched into the human spirit.*

*Time passes. It is 9:02 am. The time appears on the windows.*

*Time passes. It is 9:03 am. The time appears on the windows.*

*At 9:03 am, a second hijacked airliner, United Airlines Flight 175 from Boston, crashes into the south tower of the World Trade Center and explodes. Both buildings are burning. After the second hit, the stage is filled with light and is completely clear. A calmness returns just as it was in the beginning of the play. As the stage lights fade to black, the windows come on. The image begins as a single waving American flag and then flashes of images from the rest of September 11<sup>th</sup>. The now infamous clips that appeared on television for weeks after the tragedy are spliced with this single waving American flag which is joined by flags around the world. The images should include the actual collapse of the buildings, the crash in Pennsylvania, the attack on the Pentagon, and President Bush receiving word in that unsuspecting Florida classroom. These images are compiled at the discretion of the creative team, but must maintain the humanness of the events and avoid the political aspects surrounding the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>. Finally, the image resolves to the American flag waving over the current new New York skyline. The lights fade to blackness.*

**The End.**

## **CHAPTER SIX: EXPLORATORY RESEARCH & RESULTS**

### **Overview**

In preparation for the staged reading of *How I Learned to Ride* and *The Water Cooler*, I created an audience questionnaire to help determine what an audience member already knew or did not know about theatre for social change as a theatrical medium. The questionnaire was distributed prior to the reading on Thursday, June 14, 2007. The questionnaire asked five opinion-based questions based on pre-existing personal knowledge of the field. The results of the questionnaire are divided and paired with their corresponding questions. The compiled answers are from twenty audience members.

The purpose of the questionnaire is to not only determine the general public's perceptions of theatre for social change, but also to develop a better understanding of the field and theatre for social change's potential affects on its viewing audience based on their collective responses. In addition, the survey explores the relationship between the audience and an actor and vice versa, and the audience to the actual theatrical piece. Ultimately, I wanted to determine what a general audience understands as theatre for social change and its purpose and work to incorporate those responses with my own understanding of the field and my created pieces.

### **The Questionnaire**

1. What do you consider Theatre for Social Change?
2. Given your response above, what do you believe to be the purpose of Theatre for Social Change?
3. What is the actor's responsibility in Theatre for Social Change?
4. What is the audience's responsibility in Theatre for Social Change?
5. Please list three examples of what you consider to be examples of Theatre for Social Change.

## The Responses

### 1. What do you consider Theatre for Social Change?

- “A movement toward theatre as a tool for action / anti-oppression.”
- “Theatre that provokes people to think about possibilities of change—social, political, economic, etc.”
- “Politically conscious theatre.”
- “Theatre for social change is theatre that is socially aware and that brings to light today’s issues that affect the world.”
- “Shows intended to bring awareness to a societal issue, after a social wrong.”
- “A visual piece of art that ignites a powerful response of dialogue or action.”
- “Any play or performance that focuses on an issue and illuminates it somehow, sometimes proposing a solution.”
- “Theatre used in different community settings to bring about some type of change or lasting experience.”
- “Theatre with an overt agenda of challenging the status quo.”
- “Theatre that processes the societal and political issues of a particular time and exposes those issues towards a goal.”
- “Anything that causes thought or initiates vision and thought between two parties.”
- “Theatre that tries to change a social norm.”
- “Theatre that speaks to current issues, bringing some aspects to light.”
- “Any theatre that stirs up thought or action on present social issues.”
- “Any type of theatre that attacks issues that our current society finds hard to face.”

- “A kind of theatre that attempts to approach and tackle issues relevant to current social issues and provide solutions to use problems, at least to push for awareness.”
  - “Theatre of oppression and Brecht.”
  - “Theatre that moves an audience to walk out of the theatre and take action in their own lives.”
  - “Theatre that talks about a controversial or prevalent issue and seeks to create a dialogue on this topic or issue.”
  - “Any theatre can be theatre for social change whether it is intended to be or not. When a theatre piece pushes the audience to think and / or engage in conversation about their society and their relationship to it, then the seeds of social change have been planted.”
  - “Theatre for social change is by and large any movement within the theatre community that makes us think about social issues when we leave the theatre building.”
2. Given your response above, what do you believe to be the purpose of Theatre for Social Change?
- “Promote an agenda of social equality and provoke change, action, [and an] attitude shift.”
  - “To incite change.”
  - “To make people believe that change is possible.”
  - “To make audiences aware of what’s going on around them.”
  - “Bring awareness to the issue discussed.”
  - “Inspire action among viewers.”
  - “Provide a new point of view.”
  - “To have people think differently about an issue they thought they had a grip on.”

- “To put something out there that will at least inspire thought, possibly discussion, ideally a change.”
- “To identify a problem in our society and notice how the use of theatre can change it.”
- “The purpose is to cause audiences to imagine a different outcome than their current social or political climate dictates, and to ask what would need to happen in order to effect change.”
- “To change the world in a small part.”
- “To cause thought and conversation.”
- “Trying to change something social.”
- “The purpose is to call for some kind of action.”
- “Stirring up thought or action for social change.”
- “To open the eyes of those in our society who are either ignorant to contemporary issues or those who are prejudiced to ideas or groups considered contemporary.”
- “To provide a future that deals with the social issues at hand.”
- “To wake people up about new ideas.”
- “To inspire us to take responsibility of our own lives.”
- “The purpose is to make people aware of the issue.”
- “To examine ourselves, our community, and our world. This examination can spur action, conversation, or reflection.”
- “To make the audience think...which leads to decision making and action.”

3. What is the actor’s responsibility in Theatre for Social Change?

- “Depends on the agenda of the work, the team, or oneself.”
- “High quality art first.”

- “Provoking change in thought, attitudes, and actions.”
- “To understand and relate to the material.”
- “To challenge himself/herself about possibilities of change.”
- “Represent the author’s point of view through the actor’s eyes.”
- “Accurately reflect the issues.”
- “To be true to their beliefs and take a stand.”
- “Stay focused on the concept and underlying meaning.”
- “Make the character as believable as possible, so the audience could see a ‘real’ event.”
- “His/her responsibility is to forget the play’s agenda and play a multifaceted character with strong actions.”
- “The responsibility requires thought and process for all people involved including performance and directors.”
- “To pay head to the playwrights.”
- “To present as much reality as possible, given the context of the play.”
- “To present the author’s project the way that it is written.”
- “To fill their time and resume with an array of projects that are meaningful to our social voice.”
- “To illuminate.”
- “Responsibility is to the audience. What do they need to see and hear?”
- “Stay true to the story and commit fully to what the character wants.”
- “The actor’s responsibility is to fully commit to the piece, and then hopefully the audience will be engaged and influenced by the piece.”



- “To commit to their role in the piece, and a bonus would be if they were knowledgeable on both sides of the topic to engage in conversation about the topic.”
- “to convey the message of the playwright and director.”
- “determine how they connect with the material and inspire the audience to connect with the material as well.”

4. What is the audience’s responsibility in Theatre for Social Change?

- “I don’t know that they have responsibility. We, as artists, can hope they change or work toward change.”
- “To listen, watch, absorb—be educated.”
- “Listen [and] have an open mind.”
- “To listen.”
- “Listen, stay open-minded and non-judgmental, but be thoughtful.”
- “To learn from the script and problem that is being presented.”
- “The audience’s responsibility is to listen attentively and critically, with open minds.”
- “To listen and learn and change.”
- “To accept all forms of art even if they don’t appreciate it.”
- “To pay attention to what the play is saying.”
- “To listen.”
- “To allow themselves to be affected and keep themselves open to the message.”
- “To accept any and all ideas put forth and discuss them maturely and openly post-mortem.”
- “To open themselves to examine where they are when the truth is revealed to them.”
- “Attentiveness, an open mind, willingness to think and to challenge.”

- “Pay attention, be receptive, and open.”
  - “The audience's responsibility is to be open to something new.”
  - “It depends on each production and what it asks of its audience. I believe the most important responsibility the audience has is to listen and reflect on what they are experiencing.”
  - “the audience is growing from the knowledge presented by the actor by thinking critically and then acting upon those thoughts.”
5. Please list three examples of what you consider to be examples of Theatre for Social Change.
- “Spring Awakening” (3)
  - “Wicked”
  - “Avenue Q”
  - “The Color Purple”
  - “street theatre.”
  - “social propaganda plays.”
  - “plays labeled ‘objectionable’.”
  - “The Vagina Monologues.”
  - “Angels in the America.” (6)
  - “children’s theatre.”
  - “Athol Fugard’s plays.”
  - “Brecht.” (4)
  - “Take Me Out.”
  - “The Diary of Anne Frank.”
  - “Machinal.” (2)

- “Raisin in the Sun.”
- “The Baltimore Waltz.” (2)
- “Hair”
- “Cabaret.”
- “Rent.” (2)
- “Master Harold and the Boys.”
- “The Normal Heart.”
- “Cloud Nine”
- “Top Dog / Underdog.”
- “The Maids.”
- “devised plays.”
- “Bread and Puppet Theatre.”
- “theatre which call the audience to action.”
- “theatre which reflects society back to itself (a la Brecht).”
- “theatre which presents multiple sides of an issue for people to consider and take part in exploring (TIE).”
- “Lysistrata.”
- “The Living Theatre.”

### **Assessment**

In order to explore the responses, I have highlighted what I feel are responses to the questionnaire which reflect the goals of this thesis and the purpose of theatre for social change as defined and explored in detail earlier in the study. I will examine each question individually in terms of the audience’s responses.

The first question had many similar responses. The audience posited that theatre for social change asks an audience member to become socially aware, provoke thought and, ultimately, some type of change. This response reflects my own understanding and purpose of theatre for social change. As mentioned and demonstrated throughout this study, the purpose of theatre for social change is to raise the audience's awareness of the topic as well as to incite dialogue and finally a change in the individual's thoughts and actions. This concept and end result appears to be successfully assessed by the viewing audience. The responses of the second question were linked to those of the first question. These responses echoed the sentiments of the first question by claiming that the purpose of theatre for social change was to provoke thought and incite societal change. This reflected my own personal goals and understanding of the field.

In examining the third question, the audience felt strongly that the actor's role in this theatrical mode is to be true to the piece, the playwright, and artistic team as well as work to represent the material in an honest and truthful manner. These responses could certainly apply to any type of theatre, so why theatre for social change specifically? For me, an actor's commitment to the work is paramount. Regardless of playwright, director, or artistic team, if an actor does not believe in the purpose of the work and its message, the performance will still be missing a level of believability that cannot be achieved without that personal level of commitment beyond just being an actor. This particular audience felt strongly about this point as do I. I feel that an actor's commitment needs to be even more pronounced in a piece that is working to not only change the pre-conceived conceptions of the audience and general public, but also work to change those thoughts and ideals to better society as whole because the theatrical stakes are higher than a general theatrical experience. Again, the audience had many of the same responses to the fourth question. The audience felt that their individual

responsibility to theatre for social change as a theatrical mode was to listen to the piece intently and be open to receiving the message of the work.

The fifth question provided a wide range of responses. The three most popular responses of examples of theatre for social change were Brecht's work overall, Tony Kushner's Tony-award winning play *Angels in America*, and the 2007 Tony-award winning Broadway musical, *Spring Awakening*. It is interesting to explore that these responses make up over a one hundred year period to identify theatre for social change which demonstrated that theatre for social change has existed and will continue to exist in every social age. However, the mode is defined by its time period and what is considered socially conscious in one era becomes common knowledge in another. To me, the most interesting response to this answer is *Spring Awakening*. This new musical was based on a German play, *Spring's Awakening*, written by Frank Wedekind in 1891 and was banned and considered controversial at its inception. So, what makes this modernized version still such a hot topic in 2007? Clearly, the subject matter of teens exploring one's own sexual identity and awakening proves to be a hot topic in any society at any age. Applying the responses of the audience to this pattern, works like *Spring Awakening* should not appear one hundred years from now if the audience has remained open-minded, listened, and worked to change their lives and society as a result of the play's viewing unless the play is being created or refashioned to reflect the needs of a new ever-changing society that is in a constant state of social change and development. Revising a topic or theatrical piece to reflect the needs of a given society in a specific time is an example of social change regardless of when the piece was actually created and who the original audience was. Wedekind's original audience was very different that today's current audience who is experiencing a manifestation of his work and thoughts one hundred years later.

Overall, these responses demonstrated that a theatre-going audience needs to be engaged in the piece of theatre, willing to explore the piece's message, process it, and then decide what type of change is required—a personal internal change or a move to change a societal belief. Nonetheless, theatre for social change remains necessary in every age to work to teach an audience to be engaged and question their own set of beliefs and societal constructs. It is this need for works of social change that I created both *How I Learned to Ride* and *The Water Cooler*. The responses showed me that my works and my individual goals for those works were not entirely different than an audience's expectations of theatre for social change—the desire for socially-aware dialogue, to evoke thought and conversation, to challenge accepted norms and morals, and to just be aware of oneself and one's surroundings. Ultimately, the survey and its responses reinforced my own efforts with my two original pieces of theatre for social change.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN:** **CONCLUSION**

Theatre for social change: What is it? How do we define it? How does it help to alter our perception of ourselves and our society? These questions marked the starting point for this thesis and are still in the process of being defined as the answers continually change with societal needs and trends. In this thesis I attempted to explore theatre for social change's origins and overall place in the modern theatrical world. From the works of Brecht to Boal to Rohd to Kushner to Vogel, all of these artists have attempted to redefine theatre and the way in which theatre communicates with its actors, audience members, and society overall. The question and purpose of theatre for social change will remain ever-changing as it is a living and breathing theatrical entity that alters itself to reflect the needs of the immediate artist, audience, and society. This constantly changing quality makes it difficult to define with great certainty. However, this thesis demonstrates that theatre for social change exists in society and works to engage both actor and audience member and to provoke thought which ultimately leads to change (either inward or outward) to mold and shape a more socially conscious society as demonstrated by both quoted professionals and the surveyed audience.

Certainly, this process has molded and shaped me as an artist. For example, one of the greatest challenges and learning experiences was the actual creation of theatre for social change. I have never thought of myself as a 'playwright' and I am still not sure if I define myself by that title. However, by writing, I have discovered a very clear and passionate theatrical voice that uses the medium of the written word and constructed language to explore thoughts, concepts, and ultimately works to change the world one word at a time. Language has always struck me as incredibly powerful and a shaping force in how an audience or an individual views and assesses

a particular thought, concern, or societal issue. *How I Learned to Ride* and *The Water Cooler* demonstrate how I have found a way to use language to benefit artists and audiences alike.

The culmination of these texts was their live reading for an audience. Assembling a cast and hearing the written word move to the spoken word was incredibly powerful; just as listening to how a particular actor chose to represent a character or idea from the play. For example, as a writer, I have a very specific voice in mind for how a character will be depicted, but when an actor sees and reads the script for the first time he or she reads it with a feeling of the first time. Sometimes this first time experience with a character is slightly or completely different than how I envisioned the character being represented. This extreme did not occur in my reading specifically, but there were several conversations about how to present the characters, their ideas, and their understanding of their own lives in the play. This representation became an act of theatre for social change in itself for it presented a new understanding and interpretation of my own work. This process was social change in action. In fact, I achieved my own desired goal: to provoke thought and change. In addition, the discussion following the reading proved to be most valuable because it took the written word and moved into an open discussion where all audience members were engaged and working to understand their own position in relation to the piece and society.

My work with theatre for social change is not finished; rather this thesis outlines the beginning stages of a theatre for social change artist at work. It is my hope to continue to develop my two theatrical pieces which define themselves as theatre for social change and work to engage the actor and audience alike to create a more socially connected and responsible piece of theatre. Naturally, *How I Learned to Ride* and *The Water Cooler* will continue to develop into more mature pieces as I continue to find my social change theatrical voice.



For example, on the evening of the staged reading, several audience members raised questions about the quality of my theatrical voice and any potential revisions to the original works. In the first instance, there was a feeling in the audience about a very specific authoritative voice that was present in both pieces so much so that the suggestion was made to make the stage directions an actual character in the form of a narrator. I considered this option during the time between the staged reading and the final thesis project. However, I felt that the stage directions were powerful in the way that the stage directions are from the works of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams. I want the stage directions to create a clear descriptive picture of what I want the audience to experience. Ultimately, the stage directions remained without a narrator as a character. In terms of revisions, I felt that the pieces were intact for now. This particular manifestation of *How I Learned to Ride* and *The Water Cooler* are complete theatrical pieces with specific goals and purposes. This is not to say that I would not consider altering or revising the piece on a subsequent visit to the work as a whole. The ability to examine myself as an artist and my works has been my focus from the beginning of this process.

The work of the social change artist is never over nor will my work in this field. The excitement that comes from theatre for social change is that it is living and it can change its own view and focus as new artists enter the field. As artists, we are only limited by our own inhibitions and theatre for social change requires you to push beyond those inhibitions and examine why they have become roadblocks and work to remove them for the individual as well as for society as a whole. It is this ever-changing force that makes theatre one of the most dynamic of all performing arts and theatre for social change, more specifically, the foundation to creating a more socially aware and actively engaged society.

Ultimately, the process of creating two original works of theatre for social change and determining what theatre for social change means to me as a writer and as an artist was the focus of this thesis and my journey. For me, theatre for social change contains elements of the avant-garde and the traditional theatre. My theatre for social change asks an audience to reflect about their individual theatre experience and act upon any new feelings or thoughts that are born as a result of the experience. I learned that as an artist I want my audience to have a controlled theatrical experience that works towards the piece's individual goal. As a writer, I developed my voice and worked outside of my own comfort zone to create a different type of theatre for social change—one that was just as effective, but employed a different mode of storytelling. Finally, this thesis helped me to develop my path as a theatre artist in terms of what type of theater I am interested in creating and sharing with an audience to continue to evoke social awareness and change.

**APPENDIX:**  
**IRB LETTER & CONSENT LETTER**



University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board  
Office of Research & Commercialization  
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501  
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246  
Telephone: 407-823-2901, 407-882-2901 or 407-882-2276  
[www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html](http://www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html)

### Notice of Expedited Initial Review and Approval

From : UCF Institutional Review Board  
FWA00000351, Exp. 5/07/10, IRB00001138

To : Sean Bliznik

Date : June 22, 2007

IRB Number: SBE-07-05029

Study Title: Theatre for Social Change Audience Questionnaire

Dear Researcher:

Your research protocol noted above was approved by expedited review by the UCF IRB Vice-chair on 6/21/2007. The expiration date is 6/20/2008. Your study was determined to be minimal risk for human subjects and expeditable per federal regulations, 45 CFR 46.110. The category for which this study qualifies as expeditable research is as follows:

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

A waiver of documentation of consent has been approved for all subjects. Participants do not have to sign a consent form, but the IRB requires that you give participants a copy of the IRB-approved consent form, letter, information sheet, or statement of voluntary consent at the top of the survey. All data must be retained in a locked file cabinet for a minimum of three years (six if HIPAA applies) past the completion of this research. Any links to the identification of participants should be maintained on a password-protected computer if electronic information is used. Additional requirements may be imposed by your funding agency, your department, or other entities. Access to data is limited to authorized individuals listed as key study personnel.

All data must be retained in a locked file cabinet for a minimum of three years past the completion of this research. Any links to the identification of participants should be maintained on a password-protected computer if electronic information is used. Additional requirements may be imposed by your funding agency, your department, or other entities. Access to data is limited to authorized individuals listed as key study personnel.

To continue this research beyond the expiration date, a Continuing Review Form must be submitted 2 – 4 weeks prior to the expiration date. Advise the IRB if you receive a subpoena for the release of this information, or if a breach of confidentiality occurs. Also report any unanticipated problems or serious adverse events (within 5 working days). Do not make changes to the protocol methodology or consent form before obtaining IRB approval. Changes can be submitted for IRB review using the Addendum/Modification Request Form. An Addendum/Modification Request Form cannot be used to extend the approval period of a study. All forms may be completed and submitted online at <http://iris.research.ucf.edu>.

**Failure to provide a continuing review report could lead to study suspension, a loss of funding and/or publication possibilities, or reporting of noncompliance to sponsors or funding agencies.** The IRB maintains the authority under 45 CFR 46.110(e) to observe or have a third party observe the consent process and the research.

On behalf of Tracy Dietz, Ph.D., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Joanne Muratori on 06/22/2007 10:50:30 AM EDT

## **Theatre for Social Change Audience Questionnaire Consent Form**

### Contact Information:

Mr. Sean J. Bliznik, M.A. Theatre Candidate  
University of Central Florida, Theatre Department  
Dr. Julia Listengarten, Thesis Committee Chair  
[sbliznik@hotmail.com](mailto:sbliznik@hotmail.com)  
863-221-6322

### Overview:

Please note that the attached questionnaire is a form of research and your responses will be used in part or in full as part of a graduate thesis on the topic of theatre for social change.

The purpose of the research and subsequent questionnaire is to identify a working definition and understanding of the term theatre for social change and how it applies to theatre today.

Your participation in this survey is 100% voluntary and you can choose to any question in whole, part, or simply not at all.

All participants must be 18 years old or older to participate.

In conjunction with your participation with the questionnaire, I am also requesting a waiver of documentation of consent, which means that I will not obtain signatures and collect and store the consent forms for my records. This research is anonymous and again voluntary.

Please retain this form for your records.

Thank you for your participation.

~Sean

Information regarding your rights as a research volunteer may be obtained from:

IRB Coordinator  
Institutional Review Board (IRB)  
University of Central Florida (UCF)  
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501  
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246  
Telephone: (407) 823-2901

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