

Energize, Resist, Re-Purpose: An American Theatre Responds

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ABSTRACT

Curious Theatre Company, based in Denver, Colorado, is currently celebrating their 20th anniversary. As stated on their website “The mission of Curious Theatre Company is to engage the community in important contemporary issues through provocative modern theatre.” Chip Walton, founder and artistic director, stated in a recent interview that their mission, in light of the current political situation in the U.S., remains unchanged but has been turned on its head; instead of aspiring to be a professional theatre company that produces socially aware plays, they now identify as a social justice organization that uses theatre as a platform.

Several organizational changes have occurred as a result of this spin on their mission including a restructuring of talk backs after performances, a re-evaluation of the process of both season selection and the commissioning of plays, to seeking ways to be flexible producers able to respond quickly to the rapidly changing political landscape.

In this article I will unpack the impact of the election of 2016 and the politics of the current administration on the ways in which Curious

Theatre Company is defining itself, engaging audiences, choosing programming, and changing production practices.

“Curious is ready for disruptive change; we are ready to change the way people experience theatre.”

Curious Theatre Company, based in Denver, Colorado, is currently celebrating their 20th anniversary. As stated on their website, “The mission of Curious Theatre Company is to engage the community in important contemporary issues through provocative modern theatre.” Chip Walton, founder and producing artistic director, stated in a recent interview that their mission, in light of the current political situation in the U.S., remains unchanged but has been turned on its head; instead of aspiring to be a professional theatre company that produces socially aware plays, they now identify as a social justice organization that uses theatre as a platform (Walton, personal communication, September 21, 2017).

Certainly, there are many theatre companies and organizations across the United States for whom social justice is a driving force in their work. Companies such as Penumbra Theatre in Minneapolis, Fringe Benefits in Los Angeles, Theatre of the Oppressed NYC, The Red Ladder Theatre Company in San Jose, CA, The Albany Park Theater Project in Chicago, Cleveland Public Theatre and The Foundry Theatre in New York, are just a few of the organizations that place issues of social justice at the center of their work, reaching out to and working within marginalized communities to affect social change. Many of these companies boast strong programs that work with youth under the assumption that this is where real change can occur. Many, although not all, of the productions produced by these theatres are devised, based on the community’s response to a social problem. Red Ladder for instance uses the tools of improvisation whereas Theatre of the Oppressed NYC employs the work of Augusto Boal to craft productions. There are also many examples of companies much like Curious that produce more traditional play scripts focusing on social issues and still others that collaborate with some sector of their communities to produce one-off productions addressing a specific issue.

Curious Theatre Company, however, seems to be unique in the way they are currently rebranding and reinventing themselves as an organization and as artists. While the engagement with contemporary social issues has always been a core value for the company, taking the step to first and foremost identify as a social justice organization and second, as a theatre company, represents a huge shift in philosophy, approach, and commitment. As stated in a recent grant proposal, “We are a social justice organization that prioritizes community engagement and activating audience members to take real steps to make a difference. Powerful theatre is the avenue through which we drive change forward” (Denver Foundation Leadership and Equity Grant Proposal, paragraph 59). Accordingly, several organizational changes have occurred resulting from this shift. Curious is actively seeking to redefine and restructure talk backs after performances, re-evaluate the process of both season selection and the commissioning of plays, and to search for ways to be flexible producers with the ability to respond quickly to the rapidly changing political landscape. Complementing these artistic and production modifications, Curious has also made a serious commitment to re-framing their place and role within the community in numerous ways, most significantly by creating a new administrative position tasked with generating relationships with a wide variety of social justice, political, and arts organizations. Additionally, the company has chosen to focus specifically on issues of racism, racial equity, and diversity, dedicated to supporting the voices of artists and citizens of color through their programming choices, as well as initiating and continuing public forums on race, community, and theatre.

In this article, I will examine the impact of the presidential election of 2016 and the politics of the current administration on the ways in which Curious Theatre Company is redefining itself as an organization through the lens of activism, with an emphasis on community engagement and the stimulation of social change. Walton and the staff of the theatre generously granted interviews and access to the most recent grant proposals and applications which provide the bulk of the information discussed concerning the company’s season selection process, the role of the newly hired Community Engagement Organizer, and the youth playwriting program, Curious New Voices, all of which will be considered in this article.

Founded in 1997, Curious Theatre Company’s first production was Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*, produced in conjunction with Hunger

Artists, a now defunct, small Denver theatre company. From the beginning, this collection of eight curious theatre artists demonstrated a strong desire to engage in theatre that was timely, thought-provoking and contemporary; theatre that took on the issues facing American society head-on. Their second show, *How I Learned to Drive* by Paula Vogel, garnered the fledgling theatre company numerous awards for artistic excellence, including two best director awards for founding artistic director Walton, two best actor, and two best production awards, among others. With these two productions Curious' reputation for producing hard-hitting, contemporary American scripts with high artistic standards was established.

Chip Walton, in an interview on September 21, 2017, stated that by the summer of 2016 Curious had already been exploring ways in which they could grow and potentially re-purpose the mission that had been guiding them for nearly two decades. As more theatres in Denver and across the country started to "look like us," Walton, the artistic company, and the board of the theatre began to investigate a re-purposing, asking the questions "who are we" and "what can we do that is different"? At the company's retreat in August of 2016, still energized by Bernie Sanders' campaign and the energy of his supporters, they added the question "how can we energize [the community] over theatre?" The subsequent election of #45 as well as racially charged demonstrations and counterdemonstrations such as the one which occurred in Charlottesville, VA in August of 2017 accelerated and reinforced the company's need to define, commit to, and put into practice a new way of thinking about and creating theatre, and to initiate strategies to more directly engage both audiences and the Denver Metro communities.

I interviewed Walton twice, once in September 2017 and again in January 2018. Throughout both interviews, Walton adamantly reiterated that Curious Theatre Company has redefined itself as a social justice organization utilizing professionally produced theatre to bring about social change. Language embedded in a recent grant proposal foregrounds and expands upon this initiative stating that the company believes in "Theatre as a tool to bring about change and deepen discussion in community spaces" (Denver Foundation Leadership and Equity Grant Proposal, paragraph 1). Walton asserts that as a company they must be "unapologetic about being progressives" asserting their role as "citizens as well as artists...[and to]...transparently and loudly

position themselves in opposition to everything the new administration stands for” (Walton, personal communication, September 21, 2017). Stressing that this political stance does not need to be partisan, Walton declares they are not activists for any political party, but rather are advocates for social justice.

As reported in a [2017 press release](#), “Following the election, Curious pledged to double-down on their commitment to tell gutsy stories and push audiences to examine their contemporary world in new ways.” Two events in particular illustrate this doubling down. On the eve of the inauguration, January 19, 2017, Curious hosted a Ghost Light Project event, participating in a nation-wide invitation to theatres vowing “to stand for and protect the values of inclusion, participation, and compassion for everyone, regardless of race, class, religion, country of origin, immigration status, disability, gender identity or sexual orientation” (qtd in Moore, 2017, paragraph 3). Theatres in at least 43 states participated in The Ghost Light Project. Coinciding with the end of the Obama administration, the event was imagined as a pledge for theatres to be a light in their community, providing a safe space for conversation, discussion, connection, and change. This moment of advocacy was quickly followed up in February of 2017 by the commitment to produce Robert Schenkkan’s new play, *Building the Wall*, as one of five theatres participating in the Rolling World Premiere of the play sponsored by the National New Play Network (NNPN).

Building the Wall is a two-hander in which a former private prison supervisor, Rick, currently jailed for incidents surrounding the round-up and treatment of immigrants, is interviewed by a college professor, Gloria, seeking to understand the motivations behind his actions. The date is 2019, the prison supervisor is white and male, the college professor, black and female. As stated in press information about the play found on Curious’ website, “Rick finds himself caught up as the front man of the new administration’s edicts and loses his humanity. In a play that harkens George Orwell’s *1984* and the Nazi regime, *Building the Wall* is a terrifying and gripping exploration of what happens if we let fear win.”

Schenkkan, a Pulitzer Prize and Tony award-winning playwright (*The Kentucky Cycle*, *All the Way*), wrote *Building the Wall* before the actual election in response to what he saw as “Trump’s dangerous rhetoric and his reopening of the ‘authoritarian playbook’ which calls for the creation of a ‘constant state of crisis’ and the scapegoating of

‘minorities with appeals to nationalism, racism and isolationism’ (McNulty, 2017, paragraph 5). Written in about one week, in a well-documented “white-hot fury,” the play resonates with an urgency, a cry to pay attention, stay vigilant and really think about the ramifications of choices. This urgency is also reflected in the manner in which Schenkkan released the play for production. He stated in an interview with Jennifer Levin in June of 2017:

I completely changed my business model. Instead of huddling with my agent and figuring out the play’s best possible trajectory and maximizing potential for royalties, I wanted this play out widely. I don’t care who produces it—big theaters or small, semiprofessional or nonprofessional. If a group wanted to do a stage reading instead of a full production, that would be fine too. (Levin, 2017, paragraph 2)

Mirroring this urgency was the way in which the theatres to first produce this play essentially shoe-horned an additional production into an already existing season. The Fountain Theatre in LA opened their production in March of 2017; *Curious*’ production opened on April 4, 2017.

In speaking about the decision to produce *Building the Wall*, Walton was candid about the can of worms that discussion opened and the realizations and discoveries the company made regarding just how “lumbering” the system of theatre making is in America. Some fundamental logistical questions that had to be immediately addressed included:

- “do we say yes now or six months later?
- do we play the show on off nights in rep, or move the previously scheduled (and contracted) show later?
- do we replace an already announced show?
- how do we fund another production?” (Walton, personal communication, September 21, 2017)

Ultimately, *Curious* chose to “say yes now” and ran the production on their dark nights, Monday-Wednesday for two weeks after opening, with a full week of performances the last week of the run.

The company learned several things through this production, including the value of hitting the political moment. Performances sold-out and shows had to be added to meet demand. Virtually every performance featured a community speaker integrated into the post show discussion with an estimated 70-85% of the audience staying for these talk-backs, a much higher percentage than any other show (Denver Foundation Leadership and Equity Grant Proposal, paragraph 32). On the other hand, the small staff of the theatre was stretched thin by the additional work imposed by the short time frame for production, leaving only two months between committing to the project and opening night.

Most importantly however, the action of producing this play in such a short amount of time brought into high relief just how inflexible and non-responsive production practices are in American theatre. Most theatre organizations work within a system whereby it is expected and often necessary to plan one, two, three or more years out. The commissioning of new scripts requires a long-term commitment which, in Curious' case led to the realization that a script commissioned two years previous had no place within their new mission. Long-term and lengthy fund-raising cycles also inhibit the ability of many theatres to make spur of the moment choices without severe financial ramifications. In both interviews Walton spoke about the need to "find a way to create and model a certain amount of flexible space in the current production model" (Walton, personal communication, September 21, 2017, January 18, 2018), all the while acknowledging that flexibility challenges all resources of the organization: financial, artistic and office staff, and space.

Although *Building the Wall* was highly successful in both Denver and Los Angeles with sold out performances and favorable reviews, productions in New York and Washington DC closed early and were rather scathingly reviewed. Terry Teachout's review of the NYC production begins with the following statement, "Once more, with feeling; Politics makes artists stupid" (Teachout, 2017, paragraph 1). In the September 2017 interview, Walton spoke at length about the perceived cultural elitism around theatres and current events. He feels there is an artificially imposed division between art and politics and remarked on the perception that the only good, or even great, art is an escape. Walton noted that many theatres declined to produce *Building the Wall* either because of the overt politics of the script and/or

institutional thinking and the dependence on older, more conservative audiences. For Curious, *Building the Wall*, offered a singular opportunity to rise to the challenge of living up to their redefined mission directly and declare themselves as “citizens and artists” (Walton, September 21, 2017).

In the interview with Walton on January 18, 2018, he spoke about many of the revelations the company had made in the first half of the season, as they strove to think, create, and respond to their work and the community in different ways. He also elaborated that a sense of urgency was still driving them, much like the urgency that led to the production of pieces such as *Building the Wall*. However, the fact they are not a company that creates devised work but rather works with playwrights means they are “hostage to what the playwrights are writing.” Even though there might be a lot of new, vital work in the pipeline Walton wasn’t finding “American playwrights responsive ...[in]... providing direct ammunition” with the same kind of urgency he and the company feel. Needing to readjust their thinking concerning season selection for 2018/19 Walton found more “fertile soil [in] playwrights writing about issues that have direct connections” to the concerns Curious wishes to address without the head on, naming names approach. One such play is Bekah Brunstetter’s play *The Cake*, the opening production of Curious’ 2018/19 season.

Not only are these theatre artists seeking to bridge the artificially imposed divide between art and politics but also the divide between art and action. To this end they have restructured the traditional post show “talk back” into a post-show discussion. Discussion questions are posed in the program and at least once a week a non-artist speaker or responder who brings a unique perspective to the shows and the issues raised is invited to speak. The hope is to give the audience members tools to continue to think and talk about, and, more importantly, translate into action, their response to the play and the issues within. Walton admits the company has endless conversations about these discussions. Patrons of Curious have been accustomed to the traditional talk-back since the company’s inception when it was unique to the Curious experience. Now many more theatres in Denver include some sort of after performance talk with the actors. It is difficult to steer the audience away from the desire to talk about character, the acting, the technical elements or the plot and use their experience of the production

to springboard into a discussion of the issues of the play. The community speaker helps in this transition, providing an outside eye on issues through which the shared experience of the play can be examined. As the season has progressed, the company has discovered that plays that seem to have a direct call to action rather than pieces that expose problems in a more passive way lend themselves more easily to a discussion of issues, which will inform their season selection process moving forward. As Walton stated, “we are not here to entertain, we’re here to engage” (Walton, personal communication, January 18, 2018).

The desire to provide calls to action has led the company to re-evaluate their role within the community. Two years ago, in an administrative overhaul, they created a new job position with the title, Community Engagement Organizer. There was no job description, just a title, and Jeannene Bragg continues to define her role in the company on the job. Over the past two years she has built relationships with 70 different social justice organizations in the Denver Metro area (Denver Foundation Leadership and Equity Grant Proposal, paragraph 34). She has often found herself the only arts representative in the room and has a hard time convincing some that she is there for more than selling tickets. These relationships, some of which began because Curious was doing a show about specific issues, are meant to extend beyond an individual production, allowing Curious a place at the table in addressing social issues. As part of the social justice community, Curious has begun to open the theatre on dark nights as a civic meeting place, hosting such events as the ‘Denverite on Topic: Homelessness and Housing Insecurity’ panel discussion on November 14, 2017, which was live streamed via [Curious’ facebook page](#).

Additionally, Bragg and Curious organize panels to take on issues like diversity onstage focusing on Colorado theatre specifically. In the Fall of 2016 Curious hosted three such panels, challenging the Colorado theatre community to stop making excuses and to find ways to be inclusive. These panels had an immediate impact on some of the attending organizations, including Creede Repertory Theatre. Located in the mountains five hours outside of Denver, their Executive Director noted:

We were energized and inspired by Curious’ diversity panels and immediately set to work on prioritizing diversity in all that we did. We could not use Creede’s remote location as an excuse any longer[...]

The following season in Creede, 30% of their actors were people of color, a noted increase from previous seasons. (Denver Foundation Leadership and Equity Grant Proposal, paragraph 77)

Diversity is a primary core value of Curious and “the Community Engagement Organizer has done a deep dive into the work of racial equity and diversity” (Denver Foundation Leadership and Equity Grant Proposal, paragraph 81) in the past year. Fully one third of Bragg’s working time was spent in training and creating relationships in these areas. Attending many conferences and meetings, she also participated in an intensive ‘Facing Racism’ training resulting in information and resources shared with all facets of Curious’ organization. The board membership has recently undergone a transformation with the addition of 4 women of color. In the last 10 years, 66% of the plays produced at Curious were written by people of color, LGBTQ or female playwrights. A shift in programming that increased the number of productions that focused on racial issues has created a 50% increase in non-white audience members from 2014-2017.

In 2004, Dee Covington, director of education at Curious, started the Curious New Voices (CNV) playwriting workshop for young people, ages 15-22. One of several outreach programs for youth, CNV was conceived at first as a three-week summer intensive. The program has grown to include multiple workshops throughout the year often affiliating with area schools for in-school playwriting programs. In 2014, the National Collective Program was added into the summer schedule. Partnering with professional theatres across the nation, companies such as Berkeley Repertory Theatre, Steppenwolf Theatre Company, Portland Center Stage, and Philadelphia Young Playwrights send selected students from their playwriting programs for a one-week intensive workshop at Curious.

Nationally known playwrights serve as mentors to the young writers, regardless of which workshop they attend. Students are paired with a professional director and professional actors who respond to their plays and ultimately stage a public reading of the new work. Curious New Voices provides a place for these young writers to “voice their opinions, with no trigger warnings” (Walton, personal communication, January 18, 2018). As one playwright said of her experience in the National Collective:

Curious presented my work to the world in the same way: unapologetic, uncluttered, bold, and life affirming. Curious told me theatre needs your voice. Now I can't escape it—the art of storytelling runs through my veins. No guts, no story—I wouldn't have it any other way. (National Collective, n.d.)

In the summer intensive of 2016 a young, biracial playwright, Lamaria Aminah, wrote her first play, *Black*. As stated on the theatre website, the play was “born of her involvement with Black Lives Matter 5280 and her desire to articulate a common problem she saw in our country – we don't know how to talk about race.” In the play, a black mother and a white mother have an emotionally charged conversation about the murder of a black 12-year old child—an act that the white mother finds bewildering, the black mother, inescapable. This 20-minute play has toured extensively to high schools, churches, and other community organizations. Directed and facilitated by black director and activist, donnie I. betts, each performance is followed by an extensive conversation about race, inspired by the “authenticity of voice, the voice of a young playwright to a young audience” (Walton, personal communication, January 18, 2018) and driven by the experiences of the people in the room. Aminah stated in an interview, “Each audience has been so different. In the spring at the Convention Center, the black people said they felt relief and connection. The white people said their perspective had been changed. How has this play changed me? It's given me purpose and shown me what my gift is to this world. It's our job to tell our stories, and to have these tough conversations” (Martin, 2017, paragraph 17). In terms of community engagement, *Black* epitomizes much of what Curious Theatre Company hopes to accomplish, using theatre to not only address issues of social justice, but to privilege underserved voices, start conversations, and activate audiences by providing tools with which to tackle these issues for themselves in their communities.

This transition from professional theatre company that focuses on socially aware plays to a social justice organization that uses theatre as a platform has not been an easy or smooth process and is an ongoing challenge. There is considerable risk of losing audience as well as artistic associates when a theatre declares themselves transparently and loudly “ideologically in opposition to everything the new

administration stands for” (Walton, personal communication, September 21, 2017). When producing *Building the Wall*, a silhouette of Trump was used in marketing. A conservative subscriber related that he almost didn’t come to see the show because of the marketing (Walton, personal communication, September 21, 2017). However, the reputation of Curious Theatre Company as a theatre that produces difficult, socially aware work with high artistic standards, has garnered a certain amount of trust from their audience members allowing them to make this radical shift without too much financial stress or loss of subscribers thus far. That conservative audience member who was turned off by the use of Trump’s image in marketing *Building the Wall* trusted his previous encounters with Curious’ work and saw the production anyway. He told Walton that “he was glad he came because it [the production] made him think.” (Walton, personal communication, September 21, 2017). This same reputation and their place on the national stage, through participation in organizations such as NNPN and TCG have provided the company a good foundation for successful fundraising. Curious Theatre Company secured a three-year Steinberg Grant, a transformational grant which the company intends to use to explore and build a flexible producing frame and to bring in artistic collaborators, both individuals and groups, that support their long-term goals of greater diversity, partnership with the community, and affecting social change.

Curious Theatre Company’s tag line for many years has been “No Guts, No story.” In seizing this tumultuous moment with both hands, proclaiming themselves as an organization primarily interested in social justice and making ground breaking administrative and artistic changes that put their money where their mouths are, this dictum rings true not just to the stories they choose to tell on stage but the story they are creating about themselves.

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