

Arts Advocacy Day at the State House 2009

Speech by Curt Columbus, Artistic Director, Trinity Repertory Theatre

Walt Whitman said, “Did you, o friend, suppose democracy was only for elections, for politics, and for a party name? I say democracy is only of use, there that it may pass on and come to its flower and fruit in manners, in the highest forms of interaction between people and their beliefs – in religion, in literature and art, in colleges and schools – democracy in all public and private life...”

I am not going to speak about aesthetics today although that is my stock and trade, or at least, I’m not going to speak about specific aesthetic choices, but rather how those choices impact socio-political forces. I am going to talk about why art matters in our American democracy, in our state, and in our communities.

Let us take a moment to define the term, “Democracy.” From the Greek, two parts, “demos” meaning the people, and “kratos” meaning force or power. In a play called Prometheus Bound by Aeschylus, there is a character who is called Kratos, and Kratos is this silent, vicious Titan who hammers spikes through Prometheus to bind him to his mountain rock. This is the root of the end of our beloved “democracy” – Kratos.

This linguistic detail is important so that you remember that for the past two thousand plus years we haven’t talked about demarchy, which would employ as its ending the

Greek word “arche” meaning rule or leadership. Arche implies a sense that there are those who are more like first among all others, actually. As we would find in words like oligarchy or monarchy, sensible, orderly words.

No, when we talk about democracy, kratos is right there in the room with us, implying power to the people, power of the people. It’s quite possible that the word “democracy” was coined by early detractors of the system, and they put that ending on there to suggest the notion of mob rule, or leadership by the beast with no head. I just think it’s important that we keep this messy quality of democracy in the forefront of our thinking as we discuss why arts matter in our society.

I’m going to ask us to leave the fast-paced modern world for a few moments and go back 25 centuries to the remarkable city-state of Athens, somewhere around the middle of the 6th century BCE, where the tribal culture in Greece is, over the course of a few short centuries, being replaced by what we would now call “Western Civilization.” Two “movements” were born simultaneously on this little rocky outcrop of a country: one, the social/political movement that we now know as representative democracy, the other a cultural movement that we now know as western theater.

Think about this: what we would consider to be a small city of about 250,000 inhabitants, Athens, a city that was moving from a tribal phase to a more organized form of society, produces these two revolutionary, world altering forms. That’s a city-state, by the way, that was not much larger than Providence, Rhode Island.

What I really want you to think about is the Athenian Theater. Think about that theater, the Athenian theater! We are outdoors, up to 15,000 of us at a time. We are celebrating the festival of the god Dionysus. But really, really what we are doing is negotiating our social contract. Through this new art form, we are deciding what kind of culture we are going to be. We are seeing that if you kill your father and sleep with your mother, you'll end up blind and in exile. Now, it seems like we don't need to be reminded that we shouldn't sleep with our mothers and kill our fathers, but! In our post-tribal Athenian society, this is exactly what is being negotiated by watching Oedipus the King. And a good thing, too.

Let's look at a more complex example of this negotiation. In the beginning of the 5th century BCE, the Athenians defeated the Persians in a very bloody war. Aeschylus, playwright, was also a foot soldier in that war. And one of his first great dramatic success was a play called The Persians. What's fascinating is that it is a story told from the perspective of the Persians! Oh, sure, there's plenty of patriotic, the Athenians are amazing and really, really powerful kind of talk. But there is also empathy for the vanquished. There is empathy for the Persian women, who have lost their husbands, sons, and brothers. There is even empathy for Xerxes, the Persian leader. Would that we, as contemporary Americans might access this kind of empathy more often, especially when it comes to the modern day inhabitants of Persia.

This is a complicated negotiation of what kind of society the Athenians will choose. Instead of being ruthless tribal conquerors, we Athenians choose to be “civilized.” And we talk about our civilization in this public forum, in which all voting citizens all participate, in this “theater.” So we have a particular cultural moment which gives birth to the western theater, but which is fundamentally shaped by that theater, by the social forces which that theater represents. In other words, the way we, as Athenians, define our selves within a democratic context arises from the theater. Imagine democracy without theater? You can’t. I’ll go one step further – democracy would never have been born without a thriving theater.

The American archeologist Howard Winters said, “Civilization is the process in which one gradually increases the number of people included in the term ‘we’ or ‘us’ and at the same time decreases those labeled ‘you’ or ‘them’ until that category has no one left in it.”

Allow me to fast forward two thousand years, around the end of the 16th century, to a little island in the northern Atlantic. We are in England, in the middle of the Elizabethan era, and again, the notion of cultural identity is in play. Remember, we’ve had a hundred years of civil war in our recent past at this point, we’ve split our church from the prevailing European religion, not a small thing to do, and we’re being ruled by a (gasp!) woman. Dark times, indeed. On top of all of that, we’re trying to start an empire! What we need is a good play, right?

But that's exactly what we need. A good play in our theater. And here comes Shakespeare. I will go so far as to say that Shakespeare is a genius without peer. A genius without peer, who is also a man of the people. Shakespeare's real contribution to our Elizabethan culture is the way he shapes how we think about ourselves, the way in which we negotiate our understanding of ourselves as English. Listen to this passage from *The Merchant of Venice*. Listen to the probable villain of the play, at least from the perspective of Shakespeare's audience, Shylock, the Jew.

Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, heal'd by the same means, warm'd and cool'd by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?

Shakespeare gives these words to the ultimate outsider, Shylock. English audiences might not have known any Jews personally, and a Jew would never have attended Shakespeare's theater. But Shakespeare is challenging his audience to think about some of their most deeply held prejudices. "Oh," you may think, "that person is not like me, so he or she doesn't need the same rights as me, doesn't need the same privileges in our society." Shakespeare wanted his audience to contemplate the outsider, and he placed them in contemplation of themselves by asking them to contemplate this "other."

It is his very democratic impulse that makes him so great. Shakespeare does it, and in such a way that five hundred years later, his plays still have powerful messages to us. Indeed, would that we in our contemporary society were as understanding of the other, were willing to place ourselves outside of ourselves when thinking about people's basic human rights. I am certain that contemporary bigots need a good dose of Shakespeare.

Noam Chomsky said, "The most effective way to restrict democracy is to transfer decision-making from the public arena to unaccountable institutions: kings and princes, priestly castes, military juntas, party dictatorships, or modern corporations." I will go a step further. The most effective way to restrict democracy is to hand over decision making power, and then become increasingly isolated, increasingly unwilling to collect around Art and ideas, to connect to other people, and to converse in a substantial way.

I believe that we reached another of those historical moments when we NEED Art. When we need to renegotiate the social contract if you will. I know that there are 700 hundred channels of television, and Netflix, and Appleflicks, and the internet. But none of those options are even aware of our presence. You can get up during a television program, go to the bathroom, die on the bathroom floor and the television will NOT EVEN NOTICE. Television does not invite us to collect. Television is not culture, television is commerce.

That's why I think we're at just such a cultural moment as the cultural precipices of the nascent Athenian democracy or the nascent English empire. People are starving for a

genuine point of interaction, a way to fight the isolation. They want to find meaning through conversation, through community. And they want to collect in a room with other people to find themselves engaged, enlightened and entertained.

And people want the messiness, the democratic disorder that the Arts inspire. Our country needs this kind of radical, creative thinking in this particular moment of crisis. Creative thought, creative and innovative solutions for the 21st century that only the Arts can inspire. The Arts in this country can be at the crest of a cultural tidal wave, ladies and gentlemen, if we will just begin to support them as they should be supported. Do you know that in France, arts funding is equal to 1% of the national budget, around 5 billion dollars a year? Do you know what America spent on the National Endowment for the arts last year? Around 150 million dollars a year. Shame on us, the greatest democracy in the world, can't compete with France. A democracy cannot remain great without its art, and we will not remain great without some investment in the arts.

How do we start? What can we do? Well, let me remind you that Sophocles created his Oedipus in a city of a little over 200,000. Shakespeare was making art for audiences of several hundred people a day, no more. One could argue that the Elizabethan age was among the most enlightened of all of the monarchical periods of the Renaissance. In fact, when Cromwell and the Roundheads took power and restricted freedoms in the century after Shakespeare, one of the first things that they did was to shutter the theaters and ban public art and music.

University of Chicago educator Robert Hutchins said, “The death of democracy is not likely to be an assassination from ambush. It will be a slow extinction from apathy, indifference, and undernourishment.”

We must begin to save our democratic urge by saving the arts **LOCALLY** first. I’d like to point out that the strength of local artists, making local art, for local audiences. Not giant corporations based in Australia and Hollywood who control your programming by whim, but a group of artists who live here making work in a way that no one else does anywhere in America or the world. Those artists have a place in community, an investment in its health and in its future.

At Trinity, our production of [A Raisin in the Sun](#) was one of the highlights of our season. But what you may not know is that nearly ten thousand high school students from around our region will come to Trinity during the run of this production. And more importantly, actors from our company will go out into those schools to work with students on literature, on acting, on the subject of all of the humanist ideas in the play. Programs like these at Trinity reach students in 60 % of the schools in Rhode Island. And that’s just Trinity. Dozens of arts organizations around the state have a lasting and significant impact on the development of our children. Local artists can truly have a profound local impact.

What is a world without local art? It is a world that allows ideas and innovation to be dictated by power elites that will never be interested in democracy, in the great

experiment that is America. It is a world without innovation and connection and humanist urges, a world of cultural isolation. And in that kind of cultural isolation it is easy to say to people, “Go on, discriminate.” Television commercials and even our elected public officials can encourage us to keep civil rights from some, because they are not like us. They are other. They are not human. Without Art to discourage this tribal, destructive thinking, you end true democracy and real freedom.

In the Politics, Aristotle wrote, “If liberty and equality ... are chiefly to be found in democracy, they will be best attained when all persons alike share in the government [and the fruit it bears] to the utmost.” I’m sure there is a small amount of self-aggrandizement in thinking that the Arts can save American democracy. But I know that Art encourages people to see the other, walk in their shoes, which is the ultimate humanist act, and where you rub up against the rest of the world, outside your limitations, outside your comfort zone and into a world of creative possibility. And that is where the democratic impulse begins at the very least. Thank you.