

Laura Pels Keynote Address
J.T. Rogers

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New World Stages

Thank you Jefferson, very much. And thank you Laura Pels for the opportunity to deliver this year's Keynote address.

I've had the privilege of sitting in the audience at ART/NY annual meetings past and hearing remarkable speeches by John Guare, Paula Vogel, and many others. So it's quite an honor to be linked with such artists.

The reason I sat among you and heard those speeches is because I used to run an ART/NY member theater. And the reason I have the honor to give this year's speech is because I failed at running an ART/NY member theater. How's that for dramatic irony?

In 1990, right out of college, I co-founded The Next Stage Company with fellow classmates from the North Carolina School of the Arts. As soon as we could we joined ART/NY. Ginny and crew helped us find a beautiful black box theater right near here on 46th Street in Times Square that we shared with the good folks at American Globe Theater, who are still there, still going strong.

For eight years, running The Next Stage was my life. I occasionally had time to write a play. But mostly I cleaned toilets, wrote grants, composed fundraising letters, cleaned toilets, sat on the board, revised the strategic plan, cleaned toilets, until I couldn't do it anymore. It was magical, it was life-changing, but I burned out. We all did. So with equal parts relief and grief, we walked away. Some of us stayed in the arts, some of us became arts-loving civilians, I committed to being a full-time playwright.

So I know—viscerally—how difficult it is to do what you do, day in and day out. And to those member theaters that started around the same time we did and are still going strong—theaters such as New Georges; Target Margin; Mai Yi; and Tiny Mythic, now HERE, who just purchased their own building as of two weeks ago and how cool is that?—I tip my hat to you. I tip my hat to all of you. I go to see your plays. I subscribe to your seasons. I'm honored to be in the same profession with the people in this room.

And while this lovefest is still in full flower, I want to say thank you to Ginny and the entire staff at ART/NY. Running Next Stage was my general theater education, but being part of ART/NY taught me lessons I use as playwright every day. Taking George and Nello's workshops, wrestling with the Nancy Quinn Fund applications—over and over I was forced to answer questions like: "Why are you doing this work?" "Who are you doing this work for?" And the dreaded: "Why should anyone care?" Wrestling with those

questions was invaluable to me as a playwright because it taught me to confront the questions I am most uncomfortable with head on.

So in the spirit of that, I'm going to speak to you tonight about the question I am wrestling with daily, a question about both my own work and our profession.

I was just in Cairo doing research for a new play I'm writing. It was an extraordinary experience. I attended prayers at the Al-Azra mosque and smoked water-pipes and talked politics in back-alley coffee shops. I spoke with Egyptians and expat Europeans and Americans from all walks of life, all political and religious points of view. I interviewed politicians, journalists, and religious leaders. I spoke with recently tortured political prisoners and with hip-hop loving, George Bush-worshipping MySpace designers. I was constantly harangued by a taxi driver who was determined I not leave Egypt without a second wife. Preferably of his choosing. And I met with people who risked their lives just to speak with me.

Now I want to be clear: I am no swashbuckling Anderson Cooper. I'm miserable at foreign languages, I'm afraid to be confrontational, and I sweat profusely in a hundred degree heat. There in Cairo, it was incredibly nerve-wracking to talk face-to-face with people whose culture and beliefs I know little about. It was humiliating to be confronted with the depths of my ignorance.

With every person I interviewed my shoulders were up around my neck, in expectation of some unknown but horrible faux pas I was about to commit. Every day, with every person, I was terrified they were going to suddenly leap up and yell:

“How dare you come here? How dare you ask that? Who do you think you are, you ignorant, sweaty little American!”

Every day it got to the point where I was so tired and so stressed, I just wanted to curl up in a ball. And to get through it I would repeat this sentence to myself like a mantra:

“You have to be here, you have to do this, you do not want to be irrelevant.”

Because as a playwright my greatest fear is making work that is irrelevant. Of writing plays that have nothing to say about the world I actually live in.

Every day I am confronted with the reality that the world I grew up in, the world I started making theater in, no longer exists. Daily I am faced with the fact that the world is changing, shrinking, and become something I don't have a map for. I'm struggling to come to grips with the fact that thousand-year-old Shia-Sunni tensions affect my life and safety in Brooklyn. That the most sought-after tutors for American high school students are women in India who teach over video-conference link. That kids I've spent time with in East Africa listen to the exact same music I do except they know vastly more about hip hop. That I get FaceBook invitations from people in the Middle East who used to be

death-to-America chanting Jihadists. And that these invitations come in Arabic with exclamation points and those incredibly annoying happy faces.

In the face of all this, I realized that as a playwright I had to lift my eyes from my navel and look out into the world. I had to start learning more—much more—so that I could tell stories that dig under the surface of people and cultures that seem deeply foreign—even scary—to me and find the connections between us. To try and understand what those connections mean.

I've been struggling with this for a few years now and it hasn't gotten any easier. I'm in a village in Rwanda, or in a mosque in Cairo, or sitting at my writing desk in Brooklyn, and so often what I want to do is throw up my hands and go AHHHH! Because part of me desperately wants to write nothing but stories about New York Times-reading, NPR-listening liberals who can hum at least two numbers from South Pacific. To only write about people like most of you. Like me. After all, I'm pretty familiar with me. I don't have to do a lot of research on me. I feel safe when it's just about me.

But our stories—and this continues to be a hard lesson for me to learn—our stories are no longer what is driving this world.

We have done a remarkable job diversifying the voices and faces of the Americans we put on our stages. We have helped expand the idea of the “American Experience.” But we need to recognize that there is no separate “American Experience” anymore. Our stories are just one part of a shrinking, interconnecting world. And if I don't make work that addresses this reality head-on, I'm simply writing about the past.

The hard truth is I don't have the luxury any more of making theater that just reflects us. Not if I want to make work that's relevant. And I submit to you that none of us do. Because why should the world listen to us if we're just talking about ourselves? You see, the question of relevance that I have about my own work is one I have about our profession at large.

I'm like you: I go to Off and Off-Off Broadway constantly. It's our work; it's what we do; it's what we love. But almost every person I know who is interesting and thoughtful and not in the theater, doesn't go to the theater. They're going to foreign films and art galleries and they're TiVo-ing HBO, but not the theater. Once in a blue moon, sure, but regular theatergoing? Almost never. But these are the people I envision in my mind's eye as my audience. And when I ask these very people why they don't come to see our work, over and over, the answer is some variation on this:

“It just doesn't reflect the world I'm living in. It's just not that relevant.”

It is very difficult for me to look this in the face, but I see an encroaching marginalization of what we in the theater do. I see that we are in danger of no longer being part of the larger public discussion of where we are going and who we are becoming.

We are in the middle of a fundamental shift, an interconnecting of cultures and religions and countries and peoples and languages. We are being transformed in a way not seen since the First World War. Maybe since the Reformation. I see this being grappled with in our newspapers and magazines, in podcasts and films. Even on network television. I mean, one of the heroes on *Lost* is an Iraqi who was a former torturer for Saddam Hussein. This is on ABC TV. This is a long way from *The Love Boat*. But where I almost never see this being grappled with is on our stages.

I submit to you that we have to collectively broaden the scope of the plays we write and the plays we put on. Internationalize, globalize—whatever we want to call it. But in practical terms we have to start dramatizing the stories of people from countries and cultures different from our own. And just as importantly, stories about how we are connected to these people and places. About what these connections say about us. About who we are in the face of this new and terrifying and fascinating world. Please let me be clear: I'm not calling for more politically correct plays that preach "White Americans bad, dark foreigners good." Lord knows we don't need more of that kind of simplistic rubbish.

And of course we're going to keep doing plays about overeducated, middle-class liberals who live in New York City. I mean, we're part of this world; we want to see ourselves on stage, too.

But continuing to see ourselves represented on our stages and almost exclusively seeing ourselves represented on our stages are not the same thing. I'm simply arguing for an expansion of our vision. To challenge ourselves to increase the variety and type of stories we are telling. To further expand who and what our theater is. And I'm keenly aware of the obstacles. As a former producer and current playwright, I know how daunting it is to put stories on stage we're not instantly familiar with. That there are members of our critical establishment who are profoundly hostile to this.

But some of you are doing work like this and it's been extremely well received. *Rafta*, *Rafta*, a comedy about a family of Indian immigrants trying to find their way in small-town England, keeps getting extended at the New Group. George Packard's *Betrayed*, about the tensions and friendships between Iraqi translators and their American bosses in war-torn Baghdad, has run at the Culture Project for months and months. *Passing Strange*, in addition to being impossibly sexy, asks brutally honest questions about what it means to be a Black American in the context of the larger world. And it's moved to Broadway.

There is a hunger for this kind of work. I've just experienced it first-hand. When the Roundabout did my play *The Overwhelming* this season, Todd Haimés's inbox was, in his words, "flooded" by positive e-mails from subscribers. The real excitement wasn't about my specific play but about the kind of play they'd seen. We want to see more work like this, they wrote him. We want to see plays about things and places we don't know about, they wrote him. And this, may I remind you, is cavalierly referred to as one of the most conservative subscription audience in New York City.

And the marvelous thing is that we are the art form that is perfectly suited for looking at this map-less new world we are all a part of. At our best we do what no one else does in this country: We ask questions we don't know the answers to in a public space. We tell complex, funny, sexy, scary, nuanced stories about our common humanity. And in so doing we remind ourselves, in the words of Daniel Mendelson, that "our knowledge is merely knowingness, our vision partial rather than whole, and we must tread carefully in the world."

Right now, I don't know of anything more necessary than that.

When I was in Rwanda last year I interviewed a young woman who was a genocide survivor. She spoke with me for an hour, laying bare both the nightmare she's been through and her hopes and dreams. As I was getting ready to leave she said she wanted to tell me something she hadn't told anyone else.

"I am HIV positive," she told me. "I am going to die."

I asked her why she confided this to me.

"Because you are in the theater," she told me. "This is why I am telling you this. The Theater is important for this. To tell this."

People who have not been heard need to speak. People who need to speak are inherently interesting. Their lives are the stuff of drama.

I don't have concrete answers or a checklist for how to globalize us in one fell swoop. Or for doing the necessary work you all do every day. But the plays I love most and the plays I try to write are about starting a conversation. With that woman in Rwanda, with that taxi driver in Cairo, with those questioning, e-mailing New York theater subscribers. Tonight I simply want to start such a conversation with you, my peers and my betters, you people who are the New York Theater. I am so proud to be one of you. Thank you for your time.