

Thank you so much Todd for that lovely introduction and for hosting this year's Curtain Call in the Laura Pels Theatre. I also want to thank our event sponsors: Gretchen Shugart and TheatreMania, and Jolyon Stern and the DeWitt Stern Group, for their continued generous support of the Local Hero Awards. I am so proud that Lear deBessonet is tonight's Keynote Speaker. Most of all, I am so thrilled that you are here.

As Todd mentioned, I am standing on Derek McClane's set of Stephen Sondheim's *Into the Woods*, which begins, innocently enough, like a traditional fairytale:

"Once upon a time, in a far off kingdom lived a fair maiden, a sad young lad and a childless baker with his wife."

Yet this is no innocent musical, for the characters are struggling with abuse, infertility, and poverty. For reasons that become apparent early in the musical, all are sent into the woods to find the solutions to their problems.

I'm sure essays have been written about the symbol of the woods in this beautiful musical. To me, they are the place we are challenged to become our best selves. Through our journey into the woods, we must go to the deepest part of our soul. Only then will we discover our greatest gifts: courage, strength, wisdom, and independence.

For the past few months, I have been struggling in the woods. The deaths of Michal Brown and Eric Garner, followed by the Staten Island DA's decision not to indict the officer involved, and the subsequent murders of two policemen by a madman out for "revenge," brought sadness and pain to all parts of our City.

As this weighed heavily on my mind, I was sent Darren Walker's beautiful essay, "A New Testament of Hope."

In it, he wrote:

To borrow a phrase from my youth, the whole world is watching. Up close. This can be a tipping point, a time and place where we see the bending in "the arc of the moral universe." While our history has been informed by a contradiction, it also has been defied by what James Baldwin called "the perpetual achievement of the impossible.

So how do we escape the quagmire? How do we achieve the impossible again? ...we need to engage and empower communities. We need to ensure that the people affected by policy have a voice in creating it. We need to invest in our neighborhoods and cities because while talent is everywhere, opportunity is not.

I have never been shy in saying that I chose to work in this field because I deeply believe that the theatre is a tool towards, "the perpetual achievement of the impossible." I have personally experienced how theatre can improve the lives of students, inspire us to enter the world of "the other," and begin to examine painful parts of our collective past (be it The Holocaust, the Vietnam War, the AIDS Crisis, or Race).

Darren's essay, the conversations I've had with my theater board members, and a recent post-performance discussion inspired me to seek a way, with your help, to bring awareness to your work in social justice and cultural equity.

Last weekend, I attended a brilliant production of The New Group's *Rasheeda Speaking*, a play about racism in the workplace written by Joel Drake Johnson and directed by Cynthia Nixon. This powerful

production was followed by a discussion led by Eric Dyson, MSNBC Political Analyst and Georgetown University Professor of Sociology. Dubbed “a street fighter in suit and tie,” Mr. Dyson artfully led a conversation which allowed the actors and the audience to share their own experiences with racism.

So I’ve been thinking:

- I. Can those of you with partnerships in communities and the schools—from the 4th Street Arts Block, to the 52nd Street Project; from the Movement Theatre in Harlem to Manhattan Theatre Club; from Pregones in the Bronx, to the Roundabout’s Bronx High School for the Arts—help us develop a series of conversations using theatre as a tool for honest dialogue about racism and social justice?

For example: The Working Theatre has commissioned 5 playwrights to develop plays about a community theme in each borough of New York. The playwright chosen to work in Staten Island is writing a play, in part, motivated by the reactions in Staten Island to the Eric Garner verdict, and about racial tensions in Staten Island. Artistic Director Mark Plesent tells me that the interviews in Staten Island have been the most polarizing he’s ever experienced. The play will be work-shopped with those interviewed in Staten Island, and it may receive a full production at a later date.

With your help, A.R.T./New York, can we produce a panel discussion on race relations in Staten Island using the Working Theatre’s Play? Perhaps to an audience of your students, and the community organizations with which you work?

This is crucial, because in his essay Darren states:

The story of who we are, how far we have come, and how far we still have to go – all these parts of our past are prologues to the moment we are in. In moments like this, it is useful to recognize that our present is a product of the past, mixed with our hopes for the future. We can't, therefore – and should not be tempted to – look only at the specifics of what Michael Brown or Eric Garner did or didn't do. To understand what happened to them, and so many others like them, we have to look beyond the immediate. We have to grapple with the past and how it infects the present; how individual episodes are linked to larger social habits and forces.

- II. Girl Be Heard brings global issues affecting girls' center stage by empowering their stories. This past weekend, their show *Breaking the Silence*, produced in partnership with the Human Rights Watch, dramatized the real life experiences of women suffering from physical abuse, sexual trafficking, slavery, genital mutilation, childhood marriage and rape.
- III. Bond Street theatre travels to Afghanistan, Myanmar and Haiti to work with incarcerated women, and refugee children affected by war.
- IV. For years, Ping Chong has researched victims of abuse and war, through his "Undesirable Elements" projects. I had the privilege of seeing a piece on African refugees who successfully fled the Congo and were relocated to Buffalo, NY.
- V. Recently I met a pediatrician, Andrea Perry, who has worked with teens aging out of the foster system. Dr. Perry wants to start a theatre company because she believes that the theatre is the strongest and only way to get kids to open up! And if

they open up and share their stories before they age out of the system, they have the greatest hope for a productive life.

Can we convene a second panel discussion, with the Girls of Girl be Heard , Ping Chong, Bond Street's Joanna Sherman and Dr. Perry to explore the healing power of "speaking or writing" using theatre with victims of war; the very crimes that inspired Lynn Nottage's Pulitzer Prize winning *Ruined*?

Darren Walker ends in his essay:

**All of this will require political courage.
We need statesmen and stateswomen to bring us together...
We need people of purpose to transcend the politics of
division...**

If there is one thing I've learned in my 23 years at A.R.T./New York, we are at our best when we come together to solve a problem or address a challenge, as we did after 9/11 and the fiscal crisis of 2008. So here's my question to you: Are you willing to come with me into the woods?

Through such a special project, we can use the power of theatre to help generate dialogue! We can demonstrate the power of theatre to bring disparate parties together to talk, to write, to perform and to listen.

We can show our elected officials that theatre is not just for the privileged and wealthy. We can prove that theatre, which is already in so many diverse and vibrant communities, has a role to play in civic dialogue.

I know you all as people of courage and conviction. I know you all love this City and that you, too, would like to see change come about.

Yes, this is a BIG IDEA. But these times call for new approaches and together we can make this happen.

Last month, we lost a member who truly was part of the solution – like Schambelan, who founded Theater Breaking Through Barriers (formerly known as Theatre By The Blind), a company that has proven again and again that blind actors and other ailed actors can do anything an able bodied actor can. Instead of a moment of silence, I'd like to applaud our beloved Ike.

To return to *Into the Woods*, the individuals who ultimately find their Holy Grail, do so only when they work together. In the end, Cinderella sings,

**Witches can be right; Giants can be good
You decide what's right; you decide what's good.
Someone is on your side; Someone else is not
While we're seeing our side; maybe we forgot;
They are not alone, No one is alone.
Hard to see the light now; just don't let it go
Things will come out right now; we can make it so
Someone is on your side
No one is alone.**

Thank you!

Speaking of **No One is Alone**: I have a devoted board, and I'd like those of you who are here tonight to please stand. (APPLAUSE).

I also have an amazing and devoted staff, many of whom are new, so I would like to call the full time staff to the stage. And please hold your applause till we get to the end, because I fear I've gone over my time:

First, our Director of Programs, Ann Marie Lonsdale

Programs Coordinator, Adeola Adebola
Communications and Membership Coordinator, Kati Frazier

Director of Development, Katherine Heberling
Manager of Individual Giving and Special Events, Brooke Berescik-Johns
Grants Manager, Katy Berry
My wonderful Assistant, Jeannie Melcher

Director of Facilities, Jerry Homan
Manager, The LuEsther T. Mertz South Oxford Space, Stephanie Bok
Manager, Spaces @520 Roberto Cambiero

HR and Finance Manager – Emilyya Yusufova

These are the people who work for you day in and day out; they
deserve a round of applause. Thank you!