

I'm so happy to be here. Thank you ART NY, and thank you Susan and Ginny.

My first intention tonight is to celebrate. It is an extraordinary privilege to make art and, as we all know, it is also hard. Every person in this room tonight had the opportunity to choose an easier path. Every person in this room probably had moments of thinking "do I REALLY want to do this?" You may have had a moment like I did when I was 24, working at an illegal poker club to pay the bills while trying to launch my directing career, giving a head massage to a man who vomited on my shoes... in moments like that, you really have to consider, is this worth it? Isn't there something else, something a bit more reasonable, I can do? And what's extraordinary to me is that everyone in this room thought about that and said "no!" This is a room of people who have dedicated their lives to telling stories and making radiant events, and that is special and it should be celebrated. I am honored to be here with you tonight.

I've been thinking a lot about the radically inclusive possibilities of the theater, and that's what I'd like to talk about this evening. As Susan said, I run the Public Works program at the Public Theater. Public Works is about engaging the people of New York as creators, not just spectators, and we do this through deep partnerships with community organizations from all 5 boroughs. The program is animated by the idea that theater is a place of possibility, where the boundaries that separate us from each other in the rest of life can fall away.

In practice, this means that the past two summers, we have done 200 person pageant style musical adaptations of Shakespeare, each featuring 5 professional actors and about 195 other citizens of New York. This has included the old, the young, kids from the Bronx, senior citizens from Brownsville, domestic workers, formerly-incarcerated men and women, gospel choirs, Mexican folk dancers, taxi drivers, Norm Lewis, and Big Bird, to name a few.

This idea did not begin with me, of course. The production of *The Tempest* that we used to launch Public Works was inspired by a similar *Tempest* that had happened almost 100 years earlier. In 1916, fifteen hundred New Yorkers came together to create "Caliban by the Yellow Sands," a community-based pageant inspired by Shakespeare's *Tempest*. That's right, 1500. Performers. The production was part of a radical movement for art and democracy that aspired toward a theater "of, by, and for the people." It featured groups from all over the city, each performing a skill they were uniquely good at, creating a show with stunning diversity of age, culture, and geography.

The production was directed by a man named Percy MacKaye. He dreamed of a theater that was adapted to democratic expression and dedicated to public service, and to achieve this, he and his compatriots worked in a form they called "community masque." They believed that theater occupied a primary space in society, and insisted that theater was of interest not just to the dramatist, but to the citizen. They thought there was an inherent link between the act of cooperation so central to making theater and democracy. Mr. MacKaye described his production as a celebration, and he stated that the basic idea and

function of the celebration was to “help unite all classes and all beliefs in a great cooperative movement for civic expression through dramatic art.”

Percy MacKaye believed theater could express the best possibilities of the society it emerged from. I believe that too.

I consider what we’re doing with Public Works a continuation of Mr. MacKaye’s pursuit of THEATER IN ITS FULL SOCIAL SCOPE. It is part of a deep and wide tradition of community based work, a tradition that includes pioneering companies like The Foundry, Epic Theater Ensemble, Bond Street Theater, Ping Chong and Company, Roots & Branches to name a few of so many that could be named.

We talk about theater as transformative, and I believe it is- but the past couple of years have pushed me to articulate more directly- transformative in what way? And for who? It certainly transforms those of us who make it. But I believe it also has the power to transform civic culture, the basic assumptions of who has worth, who is welcome, who belongs in our society.

Tonight I want to share **3 big ideas** that for me have been game changers, and that inform everything I do.

The first big idea is that **theater is a public good**.

“Public good” is a technical economics term, and to me it describes the role the arts can and should play in society. A public good is a good that is both non-excludable and non-rivalrous, meaning one individual's use does not reduce availability to others. Examples of Public Goods include fresh air, knowledge, lighthouses, national security, flood control systems and street lighting. And theater. (In my opinion.)

I was introduced to this concept during my early dark days in New York, when I was baffled by how to raise money for my shows. I had a friend who was getting a PhD in economics at the time and I asked him to really break it down for me. I explained the variables of production and fundraising as I understood them, pleading him to point toward a new, better model. He suggested that perhaps I could start a hot dog stand at my shows. Then at least people could leave with a hot dog, a concrete product. I was seriously considering this depressing hot dog idea, until I pressed him to explain how economists quantify things that are valuable to society but whose value is not primarily expressed in monetary terms. He explained that something like a road falls into the category of “public good”- something that benefits the whole society, but is too expensive for any one individual to pay for themselves. For me this was a revelation. To think in the most binary way, things exist either to make a profit or for the public good. By the very fact of our non-profit status, I believe theaters are asserting that we do not exist as a product, but that we exist for the public good.

This is exciting because it unleashes us to pursue the full civic possibilities of this great art form. It's important for us to know and OWN our status as a public good, both because it then becomes a litmus test that helps us evaluate what we're doing and because it gives us power to command serious resources and respect in the wider society.

If we let ourselves think of the professionalized arts as a public good, it becomes our responsibility to think about how as many people as possible can have an entry point to what we do. It inspires us to expand who is invited to the party and who has a stake in this work, which brings me to **big idea #2: the more we reflect the diversity of this city, the stronger we will be.**

NYC is the most diverse city in the country- nearly 180 languages are spoken in our public schools, and one third of New Yorkers were born in another country. NYC abounds with multiplicity. And yet the vast majority of New Yorkers do not have contact with the professionalized arts. As we know, history has made it comfortable for only a very specific group of people to participate in and attend theater. Ticket prices and the curtain time are just the beginning: it's who's telling the story, what kind of music is played in the lobby, the unconscious narratives told through casting choices, etc etc etc. There are some very serious barriers to entry, and they are barriers that pre-date anyone in this room. But if we're serious about taking down those barriers, about engaging the WHOLE city (not just one of the two New Yorks Mayor DiBlasio talks about), we can do it. *And this deeper engagement with the city is not just a public service: it will make the art better, it will make our organizations more financially stable, and it will be more fun.*

At the beginning of creating Public Works, my game plan was really simple. It operated around the idea of **sincere encounter** with a wide range of partners both inside and outside of what we call "the theatre world": inviting partners into a dialogue with the idea that we would try to really see each other and listen. I had already done this to some extent when I created a 200 person production of The Odyssey at the Old Globe in San Diego and when I worked with homeless performers at a church in Philadelphia to create a gypsy-punk Don Quixote. But both those projects had been one-offs. Oskar Eustis was visionary and crazy enough to want to do something like this at the Public, and when we began dreaming on it together, we talked about wanting to up the ante and make a long-term commitment to these partners. One that would extend beyond any one project. A real, mutual relationship.

In practical terms, this meant many conversations with organizations all over the city; I probably met with about 30 organizations initially, and it was a very special time, just getting to sit and listen to leaders from these orgs talk about what they were working on and interested in, and what would make it interesting to them to be involved in theater. We ended up choosing 5 partners to make a deep commitment to, and asked them to create the program with us.

Once we got to know each other a bit (me attending their events, them coming to our events), we started talking about what would be fun to do together that first year. In each case it was different and completely tailored to that organization. The senior citizens at the Brownsville Recreation Center, for example, wanted a weekly dance class. The ladies of Domestic Workers United wanted to do a play reading group, where we would gather on Saturday afternoons to have a relaxed lunch together and read a different classic play each time. At the end of that first year, all 5 partners came together to make *The Tempest*. And I will say that within all these good-feeling ideas about listening, it's is not to disregard **the place of expertise**. When it was time to make the show, the partners did not choose what play we did; we chose that, because we're theater makers and we have devoted our lives to this craft. That's what we have to offer. Inclusivity and a respect for expertise are not mutually exclusive. The idea was that we would each bring our best thing, the thing we had to offer.

And the artistic challenge that we set for ourselves with *The Tempest* was to make it so that those community performers were, moment to moment, the clearest and most aesthetically exciting choice possible. So we used taiko drummers in the opening storm sequence not to be inclusive, but because they made the best storm we could imagine. When 30 tiny ballet dancers from Ballet Tech chased down Caliban, Trinculo, and Stephano in the Act 4 invisible hounds moment, they were actually the clearest expression of that moment we could imagine. And in my mind, no Broadway performer could have served *The Tempest* better than the taxi workers did when they escorted Ferdinand and Miranda to their wedding in a cardboard cab, inserted their improvised line "we love young lovers" and exited the wrong side of the stage. It was better than anything I could have come up with! These astonishing moment of theater, real genuine aesthetic excitement came out of bringing these other voices to the mix and holding them in mind as we considered the narrative. So that's part of why I am a believer in this work, and not just a believer from a 'good for you'/social services standpoint, but from an artistic standpoint.

The practice of listening that shaped all of that has continued into Years Two and Three. We have ended up with a program structure that I never would have dreamed up on my own. After the *Tempest* when we were ready to resume classes in the outerborough locations, we got a very clear sense that people didn't want to just go back to their own corners of the city. A sense of ensemble had taken hold in the community, across ages 4-90, and dammit, they wanted to stay together! So in response, in addition to the classes starting back up, we started hosting monthly potluck dinners at the Public for the full community. Other cross-partner initiatives have come up too, like the community's desire for its own newsletter to keep track of birthdays and graduations, a hospitality committee, a structure for community members to bring people from their neighborhoods to attend shows, etc etc.

The key to this deep and long-lasting community is that we practice true, radical inclusivity. Being in real, frequent contact. Being in each others spaces. Those truly diverse encounters are responsible for my constant learning. They are humbling and

beautiful. Being in relationship with these orgs and individuals has led me to **big idea #3**, the idea that excites me maybe most of all, which is

**Redefining the idea of V.I.P.** (that is, who is a Very Important Person). As theater people, we are already in the business of hospitality. We already know how to treat people well and make them feel important. We live in a world that orbits around VIPs. We know how to make sure that the star gets the best dressing room, that the fancy board member's call is returned immediately, that the prize donor gets the good seat. But to some extent we've been forced to accept the larger society's assumptions about who is a VIP. How do we get out of that mentality? How do we reverse the paradigm to insist that the everyday citizens of New York are Very Important People. With Public Works, we have our own VIPS.

**Donald Gray** is a VIP. Donald is a 54 year old man from Brooklyn who came to us through Fortune Society, a prison re-entry program. He brings a big box of candy for the kids to rehearsal and books for the teenagers. At the end of the Tempest, unprompted, he held his own awards ceremony in which he presented a gift to every single member of the creative team, including the assistant assistant stage manager, the choreographer's assistant, the music director's assistant. He is a prince among men, and he is a Very Important Person.

**Nelson and Carmen Olivo** and their 5 children, 4 of whom performed in Winters Tale with their parents, are VIPs. They light up a room.

**Bianca Edwards**, a school safety superintendent in Brooklyn, with a badass voice and a wicked sense of humor- she is a VIP.

**Nanjean Gonzales** from Dreamyard in the Bronx has brought her 11 year old daughter to every single show that has happened at the Public in the now 3 years we have been working together, and she is a Very Important Person.

My life is so much richer for the presence of these extraordinary humans. And I think for all of us at the Public, having them integrated into the very fabric of what we do, having their energy in our building, learning about the world through their eyes, has been a game changer.

All of us in this room, we're subversives. When we chose working in the illegal poker clubs and cleaning vomit off our shoes, we weren't pursuing a life of fame and comfort; instead, we were choosing a path in which we could make our own vision of the world a reality, a more just world, a world that looks unlike anything anyone has ever seen before. There is a subversive, truth telling thread in all of our DNA that puts us on the side of progress, and on the side of depth. We are NOT the status quo- we disrupt the status quo. And so what if we apply our skills in making VIPs feel welcome to all New Yorkers? What if we treat everyone, including the person who has no money to give us and no review to write about us, the way we would treat Meryl Streep?

I am convinced that this redefinition of VIP is the key to everything- it's the key to really opening our arms to the city, and it's the key to stepping into the full possibility of what it means to be a public good.

I want to close with one more Percy MacKaye quote, because while being on some level a madman, he also completely rocks my world. This is from one of his manifestos, and he's talking about the promise of things to come:

“Such an achievement is surely a foretaste of the eventual realization of the democratic ideal, when art will be made not only for the people, but also by the people, and all the people will cooperate to make the common life more beautiful until the communal life itself shall become a living work of art.”

Thank you for having me tonight. Thank you very much.