

# **Laura Pels Keynote Address**

## **Moisés Kaufman**

**A.R.T./New York Curtain Call**  
**September 24, 2012**  
**The Pershing Square Signature Center**

Thank you A.R.T./New York for inviting me to talk to you today. Thank you Ginny. First of all, as the artistic Director of Tectonic Theater Project I can attest to the incredible work that the Alliance of Resident Theaters is doing for all of us. In fact, if it wasn't for the Alliance, Tectonic Theater Project would not exist. You have guided us from the beginning and have aided us in becoming what we are today. For twenty years you've advised us and supported us – all the way to housing us these days in your offices.

I cannot overemphasize the importance of this organization to our company's life. So thank you! We are in your debt. I'm very honored and humbled to be here tonight in your company. The members of A.R.T./New York are the unsung heroines and heroes of the American Theater. You are responsible for making our stages live with stories by the diverse citizens of our nation and you are devoted to what's true and beautiful and unexpected. You are the lifeblood of the American Theater and your passion and dedication to our art form is what keeps it alive. And I'm very thrilled to be in your presence.

I have been thinking over the last three weeks about *The Seagull*, specifically of the character of Treplev in *The Seagull*. And as you know Treplev is a young playwright, and he is trying to revolutionize theater. He hates the theater his mother is involved in, who is an actress, as you know. And he's trying to create new work, and he has that very famous speech where he says, "New forms, what we need more than anything are new forms. We must have new forms or nothing at all." And then he puts on that play, the famous play in the first act of *The Seagull*, where he stages it in front of a lake and Nina performs in it and it is ridiculous and it is a cause for mockery.

And I've been thinking a lot about this, and I've even named this, what I call the "Trouble with Treplev". And what I have been thinking a lot about is that this man was proposing new forms in the theater, this man was proposing a radical redefinition of what could be done. And yet in the play he's mocked, and he never gets to fulfill his potential. What's interesting to me with this play is that Chekhov created, what is, as we know, the most important formal revolution for theater in the last 200 years. Which is that in 1898 when Stanislavski did the production of *The Seagull*, Moscow audiences were completely thrilled, by the fact that they were really witnessing the discovery of a new form in the theater, namely Naturalism. So the beginning of the play there is a soundscape of wind, and a river flowing, horses in the distance and

somebody walks in and sits with their back to the audience and all of the audience in Moscow was completely shocked and horrified that somebody was giving them their back. So to me the juxtaposition of this idea that one of the lead characters in the play is mocked for attempting new forms, and yet the play itself manages to achieve this, is what I am calling "The Trouble with Treplev." And what's fascinating to me is that five years later, Chekhov was so keenly aware of this need for new forms in this real rigorous investigation into what theatrical vocabularies are, that he said what may or may not be apocryphal, that he was so tired of naturalism that he was going to write a new play and the new play was going to be an actor who walks into an empty stage, looks straight at the audience and says to the audience, (*sighs*) "Isn't it magnificent, I can't hear any wind blowing. I can't hear any water in the distance, I can't hear the hooves of horses." So that Chekhov himself was already beginning to get tired of the Naturalism that he had invented.

This question about form, and this question about theatrical form, has been very important to me my entire life. It is the question upon which I built Tectonic Theater Project. Tectonic, as you may know, is the art and science of structure. What are the new theatrical forms and theatrical vocabularies that can allow us to maintain the art form alive and thriving? To me that was the reason why I created Tectonic Theater Project, and over the last twenty years I've been working with this company to create new work.

For me this passion for theater and new forms was born- I was born in Venezuela, and Venezuela at that time had a great deal of money because of our oil. And we had a fantastic international theater festival. So when I grew up, the work that I was seeing was the work by Peter Brooke, and Jerzy Grotowski, and Tadeusz Kantor, and Pina Bausch and Richard Foreman. So the first time I saw a realistic play I thought, "This is so avant-garde! There's a kitchen sink!" And I guess I was having the same reaction that the "moscowites" were having to *The Seagull*, a sense of discovery that realism was another theatrical vocabulary.

The other thing that happened to me being born in Venezuela, was that I was born into a very small Orthodox Jewish community within a very Catholic, and 'machista' country, and by the time I was eleven I realized I was gay. So I was gay inside a very small orthodox Jewish community, inside a very Catholic 'machista' country and two years later I realized that I wanted to do art. So it was only when I moved to the Upper West Side on New York that I fit in. But to me this identity of realizing so early on that I was an outsider, that I was an outsider within each one of the communities in which I lived, led me to really crave this art form I was experiencing so vividly. Granted I was really blessed I grew up seeing the work of these theatrical geniuses. But one of the reasons I was so delighted when A.R.T./New York invited me was because in 1972 was a moment in New York theater where a lot of these ideas were resonating, and so many of the members of A.R.T./New York are companies that are exploring these same questions, whether it's Elevator Repair Service, or The Civilians, or Target Margin Theater, these are all theater companies that are going to the heart of the question of how to keep the theatrical art form alive in this century.

And there was something very powerful that happened which was that my father was a Holocaust survivor and he arrived in Venezuela without a cent and he started working in a deli, and then he bought a deli and he was a self-made man, and so when he realized that I wanted to do theater he was terrified. And he was terrified for a variety of reasons, number one I kind of think he knew in the back of his head that I was gay, and I was going to find myself in the theater, but one of the things he said to me, one of the many arguments that we had was “Why do you want to be in the theater? The theater is full of prostitutes and homosexuals!” And I remember thinking ‘don’t let him see how much that idea excites me.’ Years later, my dad now is very proud and very happy, so I reminded me that he said that to me, and God bless him, he said ‘the moment those words were out of my mouth I realized if you had needed any further encouragement I had just given it to you. So he realized his mistake, but it was too late, the words were out.

But this idea that theater was a place where one could find oneself... you know, growing up in Venezuela, I didn’t even know what a homosexual was. I was having all these feelings and the first time I saw the word ‘homosexual’ in the dictionary I was so thrilled, because I thought there is a word, that means there must be at least one other person in the world who is a homosexual. And I thought it was Mr. Merriam-Webster. I remember writing a note to myself to find out where he lived. What was exciting about that was that... then I started realizing that there are homosexuals, but I never met one. The same way I knew there were artists, but I had never met one in my life. But I had seen their work, and their work was the thing through which they spoke to me. So this question of theatrical languages and theatrical forms really has been so intimately related to me, to my kind of exploration of identity- identity as a construct. Being born within a community that is not your own, makes you not only an outsider, but makes you realize that this idea of community is a construct. That identity is a construct, and that eventually what we all do in the theater is that we create these worlds in which we can live, in which our characters can live, in which our ideas can live.

And to me there is something really worrisome about the fact that so much of the theater that is done in America is either Realism or Naturalism. Which are really nineteenth-century forms. So when we look to a contemporary art gallery, we don’t expect to see a work by Matisse, or a work by Sasson, who was painting in 1898. We expect to see a contemporary work of art. Since Impressionism of Sasson, we’ve had Post-impressionism, Dadaism, Surrealism, Futurism, Pop Art, Op Art, Post-expressionism- all of the ‘ism’s’ of the Twentieth century, so why is it that while all the other art forms have evolved from their grandparents in the heated 19<sup>th</sup> century, so much of the American theater is still grounded in Realism and Naturalism, which by now are forms that TV and film do so much better. So the question that we keep posing is: What are the new forms? And how do we create theatrical institutions that allow us to keep exploring that question?

I mean, Ginny was so kind in saying that *The Laramie Project* and *Gross Indecency* had such long lives over the last decade. I profoundly believe that, yes they’ve had this kind of success they’ve had, because they were dealing with subject matter that is important at the time, but I also profoundly believe that it was because of their form. That the *Laramie Project*, a play

about a theater company from New York, who travels to Laramie, Wyoming and interviews the people of the town and then comes back and creates a play of it, was daring and imaginative enough to really peak people's imagination. *Gross Indecency*, of looking back in the history book and trying to find out what happened to Oscar Wilde, and *33 Variations*, which is a play in variation form, about a detective investigating a musical piece. So all these questions of how can we continue to prod into theatrical forms and theatrical vocabularies that continue to create a real, rich live dialogue with an audience. I am lecturing around the country and every time I go to a university, or a high school and I talk about these ideas you can feel people's hunger, people are hungry for these new ideas of really exploring the stage in all of its potential. In Tectonic Theater Project's, um, for the last 100 years there has been this conversation about what comes first, content or form?

So many of my early teachers would say to me, "First you have to know what you want to say, and then you figure out how to say it!" And so this question of form or content, what comes first- and Samuel Beckett, for me was a great influence, because as early as the 1950's he said "form is content." Which then would become the basis of Post-modernism. And to me that was a revelation, to give equal weight to form and content. The way that we deal with this idea of form and content at Tectonic Theater Project, is that in our mission statement we say that we want form and content to copulate. And we want the work we make to be the offspring of that copulation. Partially we do that because we like to have the word copulation in our mission statement.

But the other thing that I am so grateful for A.R.T./New York is that it supports companies that are in the middle of this question. And in my mind this question is what's going to create the theater that we are going to live by for the next hundreds of years. I'm going to close this up and I'm going to say that the fear that my father had about me joining the theater was that he understood that this was a place where I was going to come to find myself, and this idea of a theater where audiences can find to have their most intimate conversations with themselves or with other members of their communities, is one that continues to inspire me. But if it is to be so, if theater is this place where we're going to continue to have our most intimate conversations, we must continue to explore, experiment and question our set of assumptions about the medium. We must commit ourselves to rigorously inquire about what we put on our stages. We must, in other words, think about form.

So to close we return to Treplev, what is the "Trouble with Treplev?" After thinking a lot about it, I think the trouble with Treplev is that he killed himself. I think that had he lived he might have been able to accomplish the vision that he so eagerly wanted, and perhaps more importantly, if he had lived he would have been able to ask those questions that he asked at the beginning of the play. So, here is to Treplev, and to us, and to a long life in the theater and as our dear playwright Tony Kushner says "more life." Thank you.