

Bill Irwin – Laura Pels Keynot Address
A.R.T./New York Curtain Call
2009

I am extremely proud to have been asked to deliver the Lara Pels Keynote address here this evening. Laura Pels and I go way way back, and here I am delivering her keynote. I certainly plan to do it right -- observing all Keynote conventions and protocols.....

First, a Keynote premise statement)

My keynote premise is this: That the theatre is useful and necessary. This I submit.
To restate: The theatre is useful.... And necessary.

The theatre is a way in which the culture talks to itself. It's a means by which we in a culture talk to each other. But with the theatre -- given certain things about it -- you can really feel the whole in dialogue with itself, at times. IS this a big deal? Most of the time, not. We put the talk to trivial purposes most of the time, as in all things human.

But on occasion, (when it becomes useful, when it becomes necessary), the presenting of "plays" --as we call them -- is a way we talk about the things we can't speak of -- hatred, brutality, love, sacrifice, loss -- the unspeakables. The things that we must avoid talking about most of the time are things that -- often -- can only be talked of --really talked of -- in the theatre. Movies of the week pretend to -- and sometimes they do get us started -- but finally it's the theatre where the conversation takes place.

(You can talk about other things in the theatre of course. Indeed you have to, to have any chance at talking about the hard or impossible things, you have to -- but this is where the conversation, oddly, can best take place).

Why the theatre? I think that some of the theatre's claim -- some of its ability -- has to do with it happening every night. It's baseball, not football. Weirdly, this somehow makes it more possible, not less, to look at what you can't look at. To tell the story of loss without the story-telling -- and the story-teller -- burning out in the loss. That is somehow an essential secret in the process. Telling of -- revealing -- what wants to stay hidden, and coming back to tell of it the next night.....

A glance here at theatre history and all the tedious theorizing that surrounds it -- this is de rigeur in a keynote, so bear with me: Many theorize and claim that our ever talked of forbears, the Greeks and Romans, were not interested in representation of things on the stage, only in the thing itself. Real brutality, real suffering. Some of my best friends make these claims. But I have always found this interesting and somehow of essential importance: The gladiators of Rome -- the performers we tend to hold as the ones who embodied the realest of spectacles, the fight to the death -- did have a guild, and that guild tends to resemble -- the more you read about it -- a modern trade union. It starts to feel a lot like 'show business' -- you can't kill the performers off because they have gotten good at telling an essential story (they've become useful and necessary).

Bill Irwin – Laura Pels Keynot Address
A.R.T./New York Curtain Call
2009

This gives me great hope, somehow, for my premise statement: You have to have this often silly pursuit, and you have to have it happening on a regular schedule, to get at what can't be gotten at any other way. Poetry, to come out of the academy, to reach the whole culture, has to connect with show business. This is where you get the odd alchemical pursuit we call the theatre.

And here I'll claim the convenient Keynote convention of re-statement (when in doubt, as a Keynoter, restate). What we do in the theatre -- in the pursuit of what we call the theatre -- is useful and necessary -- and we have to keep at it, even when -- especially when -- it feels like it isn't so. We have to look for the essential act of theatre -- the place where marketing and publicizing and rehearsal joking and warming up and doodling and railing at reviewers ends, and the essential act of theatre begins. Then we have a chance to tell the stories to each other that have to be told. Even though we may approach it all obliquely -- have to -- have to joke ourselves into it -- we can do useful work here, and tell essential stories.

Also, when in doubt, or when nearing the end of a Keynote, go to a quote: Here's one that I have the honor, the responsibility, and the delight, to repeat every night in my current job: In Act II of WAITING FOR GODOT, when things have gotten about as strange as they might get for him, Vladimir says: "Was I sleeping while the others suffered? Am I sleeping now? Tomorrow when I wake -- or think I do -- what shall I say of today....?" There it is -- a kind of mission statement for the work in the theatre -- what shall we say of today -- no matter how unsure of my footing -- what shall I say of today. It's an essential, if impossible, kind of work.

I'm honored to have been asked to take this time at the microphone --(which has only worked intermittently, as you've seen, allowing for one of the keynoters' cheapest activities, microphone business).

So many of you here tonight are 'Local Heroes', here to be honored for the work you do. Man, that is humbling -- that will test an actor's premise statements -- to stand in front of people who work in the fields you do, and who work with the perseverance you do. I can only put my fist to my heart and say, bless you and let a theatre person salute you. And let him step down from the microphone so the honoring can begin. The keynote business is done -- let us get to the useful and necessary act of honoring you, who are local heroes.....