**Statement of Creative Activity and Professional Pursuits**

**Jennifer Sassaman – 2019**

I am a theater artist. This artistry takes many forms within the genre: I am a director, an actor, a singer and a dancer, a choreographer, and finally a playwright. But it is theater that I am most interested in creating, not film or television – though I enjoy both and can see the remarkable work that those artists do. The most exciting to me about theater is that it not only happens in front of an audience, but does not exist without one. And it is this addition of the audience that nightly changes and informs the work that is happening on stage. It is the very presence of an audience that turns a play into an event that actors and audience go through together.

When I work on a show as an actor, my first responsibility is always to read through the script and begin constructing my character. As David Ball says in his book Backwards & Forwards “scripts contain bones not people.” My job as an actor is comb through the information in the text to sift out what the playwright requires of the character I am playing, the “bones” so to speak. Once I have this information, I can start to make choices about how I will go on the character’s emotional journey. The next step is to add the director’s vision into my interpretation of the character (though sometimes the director will communicate this even before I get the script so I can keep that as part of my entire process). Over the 2-5 weeks of rehearsal, I am at work on coming to a group understanding of the text, creating the physical movements, learning the choreography, working with the company to first create then memorize every moment of the character’s journey. Rehearsals for professional shows generally last 8 hours a day, but inevitably you need to put in more time beyond that to internalize the work that you did that day. Once the production opens, it becomes my job to go through the staging and the emotional journey of my part in a way that will appear to the audience as if I am experiencing the actions for the first time. Acting can be physically challenging, especially when singing and dancing in a musical; the production I was in this past summer had me involved in almost every number in the show, running up and down flights of stairs, carrying actors across the stage, and climbing a pipe wall. Productions are usually at least two hours long, and take several hours in advance get the character’s hair and makeup done correctly as well as warm up my body and voice for the performance. Theater companies generally have between six and nine performances of a show per week. When there are only six performances, the cast also must allow time to have a brush-up rehearsal once a week to make sure all staging, lines, and choreography are still remembered correctly.

As a director my work generally begins many months before rehearsals actually start. The first step is analyzing the text – this work is explained below. From the analysis I develop a unifying concept for a production that I can use to work with a production team to come up with all the design (scenic, costume, lighting, sound, hair & makeup, props, etc.) needs for the show. I hold auditions for a show and see dozens of actors who wish to be considered for the roles in the show. I put together a cast, create a rehearsal schedule, then get to work with the actors on breaking down the text and staging the show. The rehearsal period is even more intense for the director than it is for the actor and there is no time when the director can relax – the production always requires attention. From the first reading of the script through the staging of the action to the addition of technical elements, the director must observe all levels of work in an attempt to make the production clear to the awaiting audience and as easy as possible for every artist involved.

My mission as an artist is to create ensembles, provide artists the support they need to tap into their greatest creative self, to create physically dynamic staging, and to make theater that helps the world heal. While I don’t feel like every piece of theater needs to have a political slant, I do feel like what I create should lobby for positivity. I feel a strong responsibility to try to make the world a better place with the theater I am a part of creating. This responsibility can manifest itself in a variety of ways; from creating a tough social-issues play that addresses a current problem to a slapstick comedy that will make people laugh thereby giving audiences the mental capacity to handle what is happening in the world. It is important to me to feel like I’m part of the solution.

What follows below is an outline of some of the philosophies I have developed over twenty years in the industry:

**I believe that any work needs to begin with a full and complete analysis of the text**. I think this should be true for almost any role in the theater, but I cannot imagine any text-based work as a director or actor that wouldn’t start with taking the script apart. While I remain open to learning new techniques, I have about ten ways I like to go through a script before I am ready to meet with designers or start thinking about casting a show.

First I read the script and try to write down the many ways my imagination is engaged; this can be songs I am thinking of, actors I can see in certain roles, any staging that occurs to me, any design elements that I am seeing clearly. I write all of it down. Some of it will be discarded, but I find referring to that list throughout the process of great benefit.

The other analysis is taken from years of studying and teaching directing: the Given Circumstances (Hodge), Dramatic Action (David Ball), Spine (Clurman), Cornerstones and Connotations (William Ball), and Theatricality and Forwards (David Ball). All the while keeping careful note of any tablework questions I think it will be important to answer with the actors, every design element required by the text, all dramaturgy, and of course any crazy ideas I have that I hope can be possible with this new magical production.

This space I have alone with a script before I am joined by other artists is an exciting, quiet time. Combing through the text I get to know it better. My imagination can wander through the words until the production concept begins to take shape.

**I believe a smart artist works with all the voices and talents around them and works to harness everyone’s best ideas**. I have seen the stereotypical dictator-director or the diva performer at work before and aside from the unhappy work environment they engender, the artistic results are usually frustratingly shallow. Theater is a collaborative art form, everyone has their own unique vision and uncommon skill set. The wise director ensures that everyone working on a project is a part of the creation. Great theater art is rarely the product of one individual. As a director my focus is on providing the overall concept for the production and collecting the best of the many brilliant ideas that everyone suggests which support that arc.

**I believe that the ensemble should do tablework together before staging happens**. Tablework refers to the time when the director and actors have not yet begun staging a scene, when they can sit around the table and work on the text as a group coming to a deeper understanding of what is happening. Ideally the full acting company would sit down for a week (give or take) and go through the text together; doing beat work, discussing obstacles and events, and going over any part of the script that may be unclear. The benefit of doing this with everyone at the table is not only that it cracks the script wide open for everyone involved, but it also shows individuals where they fit in the larger structure of the collective story, allowing them to see their piece as an integral part of the structure.

Not all rehearsal periods allow the time needed for this, of course. When I am operating with a condensed rehearsal frame, I usually spend a single rehearsal at the table as a company; first reading the script and then talking about the big questions it challenges us with. Then as each section is staged, that rehearsal starts with doing the tablework for that scene. I agree with William Ball, who writes in his book A Sense of Direction “As a general rule, it is advisable to keep the actors seated until they know what they are saying and to whom they are speaking – until they pronounce all the words correctly; scan the verse, where applicable, in correct cadence; and establish eye contact with their fellow players.”

**I believe that the physical storytelling of a play is as important as the text**. I identify as a movement-based director and try to use the fact that theater artists get two simultaneous opportunities to tell every story: first through speaking the words the playwright has written and second through somatic communication. My goal with every production is to strive for that exceptional level of storytelling which uses a physical language so recognizable that audience members are seeing the story as much as they are hearing it.

**I believe in the importance of building a connected, supportive, invested ensemble**. I think it is entirely possible for all the elements in a given show to be technically good, but still result in a hollow performance if the ensemble isn’t truly invested in the artists around them.

I think there are many ways to work on strengthening the sense of ensemble, the first of which is simply to ask for it. While rehearsal structures vary from show to show, there is one thing all first rehearsals have in common for plays I direct: I ask the cast to love one another and be invested in each other’s success. This request may be surprising to some, but I have seen firsthand how shows that have this sense of community are illuminated by it; the performances glow.

Ensemble also changes what happens in the rehearsal room. In order for actors to take emotional risks while exploring character they must feel safe. In order for actors to suggest new directions and crazy ideas, they have to feel their impulses will be respected. Ensemble provides the greatest safety net of all: you can take any risk you want if you feel the rest of your peers are fully behind you, cheering you on. It is my immediate and enduring priority to foster a sense of individuality connected to the greater whole.

**I believe in freedom through discipline**. In an interview in 1975, the great American dancer and choreographer Alvin Ailey was quoted as saying “The idea of freedom through discipline is beautiful to me.” This has resonated with me for years: the notion that you would rehearse something until it is so deeply within your bones that you don’t need to think about the technical choices when you are performing, your body knows what to do, and this knowledge frees ones conscious mind to focus entirely on *living* as the character. I think this concept is just as true for actors as it is for dancers, and I always make space in the rehearsal process for the discipline side of things. The way that plays out practically is once something has been staged, I make sure that the actors have time to run it. In fact, early rehearsals alternate between creating new blocking and running established blocking. Once the full show has been staged, this switches to alternating in depth scene work and running the show either in its entirety or by act. I feel this process allows actors to understand the full arc their character goes through and discover the optimal pacing for all show moments. I also know that there are certain levels of character work that actors cannot find until they have the structure of the scenes into their bones.

**I believe that creating theater feeds a basic human need for tribe**. In his TED Talk, Sebastian Junger argues that it is difficult for combat veterans to return to civilian life. In spite of the horror that veterans feel over the atrocities occur in battle, Junger describes former soldiers as missing being involved in war. He explains that throughout most of our history, humans have banded together in small groups where individual survival depended on group effort. Junger explains this willingness to do anything for someone in your tribe to keep them safe is something modern society has lost and as a result many people feel a hollowness they cannot name; whereas soldiers do have that and even though they want to be away from battle, they don’t want to leave that sense of belonging.

While the creation of art is never going to ask the same level of risk or commitment that military combat does, I see important similarities that address this fundamental need to feel like we belong to a group that we can depend upon. This touches on the same notion of ensemble, and how it is possible to take risks when you know people are there to support your efforts. But it goes further because theater is different from many art forms in that it cannot happen in isolation. Theater requires equal commitment from multiple parties; everyone has to come together for a short, intense period of time, pour all their creative energies into a given work, listen and collaborate, and create or it doesn’t work. Because of this, productions bond people deeply, they make people feel like they are a part of something important. And this sense of belonging can make all the other sacrifices required by the art feel worth it.

**I believe the theatrical event addresses a series of innate human needs.** Every known civilization throughout recorded history has some kind of performative storytelling element – even when theater was outlawed at the time! Theater is older than agriculture. I have spent a lot of time considering what it is exactly that creating and watching theater does that is so essential to being human, and I have come to suspect it is not one single thing but many. To begin with, something extraordinary happens when a group of people turn their attention to a story being told; the emotions possible when hearing a story are magnified when it is a group hearing it instead of an individual. If it was funny enough to smile on your own, when you watch it with a group suddenly you are laughing out loud. Fear and love are both intensified when the audience is swept up in the drama of the story together. The emotions of those attending an event amplify those of the other attendees. This amplification can be felt by performers as well, and will change their connection to that night’s show. It is exhilarating to go through an event together, audiences and actors can feel bonded by a performance.

Theater simultaneously engages our needs to feel connected and to share what we are going through. We are social creatures. When something significant happens to us in our lives, the first thing many of us do is to tell the people that are close to us what has happened (or, if you’re like me, the person standing next to you in line at the grocery store). Furthermore, when something significant happens to the people we know and they *don’t* tell us, we are hurt, we feel we don’t matter enough to that person for them to take the time to communicate. We want to share stories because when we do we feel them again, or we spread the burden of our pain a layer thinner.

We want to hear stories because we want to experience all the emotions that humans go through. We are junkies when it comes to feelings, addicted to the various chemicals our bodies produce in connection with extreme feeling. Glutamate from fear; phenylethylamine from that dizzy feeling we experience in the early days of romantic love; epinephrine from anger; dopamine/serotonin/ oxytocin/endorphins all produced in association with happiness and pleasure; etc. Not only do we love feeling these feelings first hand, but we get very strong echoes of it through storytelling whether the story is real or invented.

Connection to the community around us, caught up in the whirl of the story, laughing together, crying together. Theater bonds us as it hypnotizes us. We humans need theater whether we know it or not. And creating theater helps me serve humanity while doing the things I love to do.