

zAmya Theater Project: Toward an Intimacy of Social Change

by Rachel Chaves

It is a warm evening in late July 2007, and rehearsal is under way for a remounting of zAmya Theater Project's *Ten You Win/Ten You Lose*, a play devised with and about the homeless population in Minneapolis. zAmya rehearsals take place in the basement common area of St. Stephens's Catholic Church, across the parking lot from the church's temporary shelter, so there are always friendly conversations to be had on the way in to rehearsal with folks staying the night. The large, open basement is used often by zAmya, so it has the feel of home to these actors. The rehearsal this evening moves haltingly because the actors are reviewing lines and movement they haven't performed since the show's original run last November, but there is an atmosphere of friendly and gentle camaraderie. Although playwright Josef Evans facilitates the rehearsal, the group gathered there that evening "remembers" the play together. If an actor makes a late entrance, the others cheerfully remind her to come in earlier. If an actor forgets a line, he is greeted by a chorus of voices singing out the forgotten words. Every gesture in rehearsal is intended to support the members of the group. There is no competition here for the spotlight, but an earnest dedication to doing one's job well in order to make the production a success.

Although clearly a collaborative effort, zAmya's productions also allow a unique opportunity for the homeless and formerly homeless to voice their own personal stories in public. For example, toward the end of the restaging rehearsal, actor Donald Fonzy struggles through a monologue based on his own life but crafted by the playwright. Unable to remember the story as it is written on the page, he stops rehearsal and says in frustration, "It'll never be like this in performance." "It's your story," Josef responds. "You can tell it however you want." Donald puts down the script, speaks from memory, and the monologue flows smoothly for the rest of rehearsal.

At the performance the following week for Hennepin County government employees, I witness Donald's monologue. It is a deeply felt and beautifully rendered personal account of his experience as a young man with drugs and homelessness. Donald's story, spoken directly to the audience, and the accompanying "human sculptures" created by the rest of the cast, emphasize that with a little bit of care, people in need can recover from the most dire emergencies of homeless existence, such as drug overdose. At the end of the monologue, Donald takes his place in the human sculpture at the end of a chain of people in different stages of recuperation. We see before us a healed man, but one who is still in process, and we are reminded of the continued efforts that must be made to help those in need. Moreover, we don't see "a homeless person," we see Donald. The power of this performance has less to do with Donald's acting ability (which is surprisingly natural and moving considering he has had no formal training) than with the fact that he has taken the stage and is telling his own story, a story often overlooked by the people who make theater and, therefore, the people who go to the theater. In the course of my ethnographic observations, I have seen that zAmya is a place where those who have experienced homelessness are placed front and center, and made visible through the conventions of theatrical performance as agents of their own stories and histories.

Changing a Word into a Person

zAmya Theater Project was founded by Lecia Grossman in Minneapolis in 2004 as a way to turn “homeless” from a word back into a person. Each year, the Project brings together a group of housed and homeless actors to create a traveling road show around the interests and concerns of the group. The play tours in the fall during National Hunger and Homelessness Week, and has been remounted for events such as the Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed conference in Minneapolis (2007) and the Minneapolis Fringe Festival (2005). When I asked Lecia why she started the Project, her explanation was faltering and emotional: “Every time I saw someone on the street . . . I knew nobody was looking at them like a human being! . . . That was 20 years of feeling like this, you know, real intense, just hurting.” She recognized that just *looking* at someone who is homeless, and recognizing that person as human, makes a difference. After attending a leadership seminar that inspired Lecia to transform impulses into action, she began the Project. “I didn’t want to do something *for* homeless people, I wanted to do something *with* them,” she emphasizes.

One way that zAmya accomplishes *being with*, instead of *doing for*, is holding board meetings, rehearsals and many performances at temporary-housing shelters like St. Stephen’s. This practice not only helps the housed to meet the homeless where they are (access to services can be a big problem for the homeless in Minneapolis), it also encourages an intimacy between the two groups. Intimacy in the act of making theater opens up a space of possibility rather than allowing participants to remain safely and remotely detached from the subject (and subjects) at hand. In fact, I like to think of what happens at zAmya as an intimacy of social change, because change occurs at the intensely local site of interaction between actors and audience members in performance. This is a very different activist goal than trying to have laws changed (although material effect is also an important goal at zAmya). The kind of change achieved at zAmya is a *new seeing*: the housed and homeless see each other differently (or see each other, period) as a result of the sharing of personal narrative in performance.

So, how is new seeing achieved at zAmya? In the summer of 2007 zAmya conducted a series of workshops designed to introduce new people to their work while also generating some creative material for the fall road show. The company held workshops at a Salvation Army in downtown Minneapolis, a place where the homeless community can just drop in. Holding workshops in nontheatrical spaces helps to blur the border between art and life, between “characters” and “real people.” At one point during the workshop, an employee of the Salvation Army dropped in to see if someone from our group had left a coat in the restroom, and stayed and chatted with participants who were right in the middle of performing a creative exercise. Unfazed, Maren Ward, the director of the workshop, continued the story circle she had begun before the woman’s “interruption.” As I observed, I asked myself: Who are the artists, and who are the “real” people? Which is the creative fiction, and which is the “truth”? Somehow, the business of theater and the business of everyday life, the artful story-telling and the casual chatting, continued to coexist for some time. In this sense, zAmya is a theater that relies on the interruptions of everyday life: the theater-maker’s job here is not to create or shape a fiction, but to allow a space for reality to be seen within the art object. In other words, bodies are not *transformed* through this process of art-making, but *revealed* by it: the actor’s body is revealed as agent, as the one who tells her own stories, and as fully human. I worry sometimes about activist theater that sets out to transform people and events (a.k.a. theater for social change), because I feel that it may be ignoring what is already working and needs only to be seen. The homeless body on stage, telling his or her own

stories, creates a new kind of seeing in the housed audience members (sometimes we are literally seeing the homeless body for the first time, and we reflect on the way we have chosen to *not* see that body on the street), but also in the homeless audience members. For those who have experienced homelessness, witnessing familiar stories on a public stage can be a new and empowering experience: as one observer stated after seeing a performance, “Thank you for not forgetting about us.”

Seeing, Facing, Understanding

The way the audience is asked to participate in zAmya’s performances also provides them the opportunity to see in new ways. Halfway through *Ten You Win/Ten You Lose*, the actors break the narrative line and ask the audience to participate in an exercise. The actors pose statements such as: “I know what it’s like to be homeless” or “I am scared of homeless people,” and audience members are asked to stand if they agree with the statement. The audience member’s field of perception, then, is transformed not only through the witnessing of personal experiences enacted onstage, but also through their actual participation in this impromptu story circle. It is surprising to see who in the audience has experienced homelessness, and it is surprising that they do not fit the stereotype many of us have of “the homeless” in our heads. In the performance that I documented in July 2007, some of the actors (who also participate in this exercise) stood for the statement “I am scared of homeless people.” This statement later opened a space for audience members to disclose fears in the talkback, an important step toward facing and understanding the ways in which our habits of seeing form our actions. If the performance can give housed audience members a way to confront and dispel their own fears about homelessness, then their way of seeing homeless people can be transformed. This is what Lecia means when she says she wants to turn “homeless” from a word (or a problem) back into a person. This new way of seeing is achieved in performance through an intimate and vulnerable encounter, through asking the audience to mark their beliefs or experiences by moving their bodies in space. As Lecia says, “The answer is in your body.” The “stand to agree” exercise defies the safety that sitting anonymously in a dark theater affords the average theater-goer.

Finally, new seeing is provoked in zAmya productions not only through an embodied experience, but also through an affective one. Larry Brown discusses the activist function that emotion has in performance:

When the actors perform, they’re actually putting themselves out there . . . What I, we’re, really trying to do is, yes, touch the hearts of other people so they, kind of like, feel that too, rather than just see it . . . you go “Oh! I can really understand now, I feel what that person felt.”

In Larry’s example, the feeling that occurs in performance helps audiences see in new ways, it helps them to “really understand,” or as art scholar Simon O’Sullivan would say, it helps to switch the register. Feeling also helps people connect, and via that connection to really *see* each other. This is why theater is a particularly useful activist site. If Larry and the other actors can make audience members feel, and understand, then they have already succeeded in effecting social change. If audience members are *then* inspired to take action as a result of that feeling or resonance, great, but that’s not the job of the theatrical event. That is the job of people who see

differently as a result of the theatrical event. Theater's job is to switch the register, and this should be considered "real" social change.

Again, I don't want to suggest that concrete results should not be a desired effect of activist performance. There are multiple tangible results that zAmya has brought about. Lecia told me that audience members now carry granola bars and bottles of water in their cars to distribute to the homeless, and that homeless cast members have gotten jobs and housing through their acquaintance with other members of the Project. She mentioned a graphic designer who took on pro-bono design work for a national organization promoting affordable housing after sitting in the audience at a zAmya show. Another previously homeless actor served as a resident artist for a local high school and helped direct their yearly touring show, as a direct result of his involvement with zAmya. Two formerly homeless actors are now on the advisory board for the Project. These kinds of quantifiable examples go on and on.

Exchange in Intimate Territory

However, most of these important changes could just as easily have been the result of activism that does not involve theater. I believe that the unique effectiveness of activist *performance* lies in somewhat more nebulous (and intimate) territory. Lecia told me that there was a period when she was having some personal challenges that kept her from coming to zAmya rehearsals. One of the actors finally called her and said, "Nobody here is giving me a straight answer. Are you OK?" She wept, because she realized that she needed these actors as much as they needed her. In this moment, the Project really embraced a mutual, rather than a one-way, type of caring; this was being-with, rather than doing-for, and it was happening *to* Lecia as well as being initiated by her. It surprised and humbled her. The caring bond between Lecia and this other actor developed because theater rehearsals require a courageous revelation of the innermost self, our fears and aspirations, while engaged in a community encounter; in other words, theater involves an intimate social exchange. Devised theater requires participants to give their own stories and their own histories to the script, to give their own bodies to the art. This is a high-stakes giving, and we see each other differently after engaging in such intimate exchanges. As we can see from Lecia's example, this kind of theater not only changes the register of the audience, but also that of the actors and directors. zAmya is not about the change that the housed can bring to the homeless, but the transformations that occur across the board when people engage in a personal and creative endeavor with the common goal of raising awareness.

It is the degree to which a theatrical event provokes new seeing (rather than the way in which a performance is able to change laws, for instance) that should be considered the criteria for success in activist performance. Intimacy, produced either through an embodied or an affective encounter, is one means by which activist performances such as zAmya's can provoke new seeing. Donald's monologue in *Ten You Win/Ten You Lose* asks me, as audience member or as creative collaborator, to see differently. It asks me to see Donald, rather than "a (formerly) homeless person." Furthermore, seeing Donald is an intimate encounter because it means that Donald can see me as well. My own new seeing exposes me. I can't hide in the anonymity of a darkened auditorium, or a more privileged economic class; I can't just write a check and feel that I've done my part. I have to engage in a relationship, and this relationship changes me. And that's the point at zAmya. Homelessness is not a problem to be solved, it is an opportunity for us

all to treat each other with more respect. That is why zAmya's T-shirts, instead of saying "Let's end homelessness," say "Stop staring. Start seeing."

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