

Using Theatre to Engage People in Public Health Discourse that Inspires Real-World Change

Seth Rozin 21 May 2012

InterAct Theatre Company is a theatre for today's world, dedicated to producing new and contemporary plays that explore the social, political and cultural issues of our time. The company sees itself as a kind of "public square," utilizing theatre as a tool to promote civic engagement and stimulate dialogue around the most pressing, complex and compelling issues we face in contemporary society.

In its 24-year history the company has produced numerous plays that explicitly examine issues pertaining to public health, including *The Elephant Man* by Bernard Pomerance (1989), the tragic true story of John Merrick's challenges as a creative, British dreamer afflicted with the rare, grotesque and debilitating disease neurofibromatosis; the world premiere of *Under Yelena* by Buffy Sedlachek (1998), about two Soviet scientists charged with researching the impact of radiation at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant after the infamous meltdown in 1986; the world premiere of *Man Measures*

Man by David Robson (2001), the story of two American Jewish doctors who volunteer to help refugees during the Kosovo war in the mid-1990s; *Going to St. Ives* by Lee Blessing (2002), about the mother of a brutal Central African dictator (à la Idi Amin) who visits a British eye doctor in London, hoping to solicit poison with which to kill her son for her country's greater good; *Rosemary* by Jim O'Connor (2003), about the iconic Kennedy family's sequestering of the mentally disabled oldest sister, Rosemary; and *Blue/Orange* by Joe Penhall (2005), the story of two British psychiatrists who battle over the diagnosis and treatment of a schizophrenic man who believes himself to be the son of Idi Amin. Many other InterAct plays have explored ideas and issues more peripherally related to public health, such as poverty, homelessness, rape, adoption, sexuality, violence, war and incarceration.

Two of InterAct's productions stand out as being particularly impactful with regard to public health, going well beyond the normal theatre-going experience of seeing a thought-provoking play.

In January/February of 1996, InterAct produced the Philadelphia premiere of *Lonely Planet* by Steven Dietz. Inspired, in theatrical metaphor, by Ionesco's *The Chairs*, and in content by the AIDS epidemic, *Lonely Planet* is a charming, funny and ultimately moving play about two gay friends: Carl, a flamboyant man with an unusually vivid imagination and multiple, ever-changing occupations; and

Jody, a cautious and thoughtful man who has insulated himself in his map store, afraid to venture out into the world and get tested for AIDS. As the play evolves, Carl shows up in the store time and again toting increasing numbers of chairs, and delivering outrageous yarns, both of which irritate Jody. That is, until we (and Jody) learn that the chairs belong to friends of theirs who have died of AIDS, and Carl is trying to memorialize them in some meaningful way. As the map store steadily fills with chairs, Carl gets Jody to finally confront his fears and get tested. Jody learns that he is HIV-negative. But upon returning to his store in the final scene, Jody finds Carl's favorite chair sitting in the store.

Following a decade of AIDS-inspired plays, *Lonely Planet* was unusual in that it never mentioned the disease by name, and it was explicitly and exclusively about friendship (as opposed to romantic and/or sexual relationships).

InterAct produced *Lonely Planet* at a time when AIDS was firmly rooted in the public's consciousness, and early on in its planning InterAct sought to reach out to the community in a unique way to maximize the impact of the production. One of the play's requirements was to fill up a store with dozens and dozens of unique chairs. So, through partnerships with a number of AIDS and gay-related organizations we invited people to donate chairs that belonged to loved ones who had died of AIDS to the production. The response was overwhelming. We received

over 50 donations of every kind of chair imaginable: kitchen chairs, armchairs, dining room chairs, porch chairs, church seats, love seats, ladderbacks, even a toddler's high chair. Donors were invited to come see the show and experience their loved ones' chairs on stage in a living memorial, just as the play was intended. At every single performance there was at least one, if not several, patrons who would involuntarily gasp or cry or point when their friend's chair appeared, imbuing the theatre-going experience with extraordinarily personal meaning for some, and enhanced awareness for all.

In a very different way, InterAct achieved significant community impact with its world premiere production of *Reinventing Eden* by Seth Rozin in March/April of 2006. *Reinventing Eden* revolves around an eminent geneticist, Jonas Tuttle, whose cutting edge research in biotechnology has rendered him a leader in his field for more than two decades. His wife, Lizzie, has sacrificed her own career goals to care for their oldest son, Pauly, who suffers from an inherited mental disability. Jason, the younger son, returns from a volunteer social work mission in Africa to celebrate his father's winning a prestigious prize. But upon Jason's arrival, Jonas reveals that he is being investigated for an allegedly unauthorized gene therapy experiment he conducted on human embryos 25 years earlier. Through the investigation, as well as scenes from Jonas and Lizzie's past, we (and Jason) learn that the experiment-in-question was conducted on Jason, in

utero, to prevent him from suffering the same affliction as his brother. This revelation rocks Jason's foundation, catapulting him into a crisis of identity and an abyss of "survivor" guilt. Jonas must now grapple with the public and familial fallout of his actions, while remaining adamant that scientific inquiry must move forward at its own pace.

This taut family drama explored the personal and political implications of genetic engineering, an activity which, while far less controversial than cloning, will prove to be much more relevant to virtually everyone in the industrialized world in the next couple of generations.

In conjunction with the world premiere production of *Reinventing Eden*, InterAct hosted a free, public panel discussion entitled *The Implications of Genetic Engineering*, which was attended by over 100 people. The panel was moderated by Art Caplan, Director of the University of Pennsylvania Center for Bioethics, and featured an impressive set of discussants: James Wilson (Professor of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania), who is best known for a pioneering yet tragic gene therapy experiment, and who participated as an active consultant on the writing of the play; Father Tadeusz Pacholczyk (Education Director of the National Catholic Bioethics Center); Paul Rozin (Professor of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania); Lee Silver (Professor of Molecular Biology at Princeton University and author of the book *Remaking Eden*); and playwright Seth Rozin. The two-hour event

engaged the largely lay public audience in a lively, high-level discussion of the ethical, political, psychological and theological implications of gene therapy.

Perhaps the most compelling comment of the afternoon came from Dr. Wilson, who had attended two performances of *Reinventing Eden*. He relayed his revelatory experience witnessing the personal side of the science he deals with so routinely on a clinical level, and how many of the myriad familial, personal and identity conflicts presented in the play had never occurred to him. And this comment, in a nutshell, encapsulates the ultimate value of InterAct's oeuvre: revealing the often-unanticipated or difficult to imagine human expressions of, and responses to, our continually evolving world.

Seth Rozin is the founder and Producing Artistic Director of InterAct Theatre Company in Philadelphia, as well as a freelance director and playwright. He is the recipient of the 1999 Barrymore Award for Outstanding Direction of a Play, two Playwriting Fellowships from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, and the National New Play Network's 2007 Smith Prize, as well as being twice named Best Director by the Philadelphia Inquirer.