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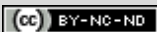
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PORTFOLIO: Grand Performances

Building Self and Social Ties through Theatrical Performance

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Grand Performances

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For people who perform at the richly historic Grand Opera House of Oshkosh, Wisconsin, narratives attach to place (Basso 1996); they build memories and shape understandings of self and community. The Grand, built in 1883, has ridden waves of economic prosperity and decline, changing as the city itself has changed (de Montigny 2010). Residents call it a “treasure” of Oshkosh, an “anchor” in the downtown while a few call it a drain on public money.

Today, beautifully restored, the theater intertwines itself into the lives of Oshkosh residents. Memories abide of youthful experiences attending films and performing in high school musicals. Older residents continue to perform, attend shows, and volunteer. An active community theater draws people to the stage, some for the first time, some over and over again.



One “Oshkosh on Broadway” performer said, “I would never have thought of myself as being an onstage person back in high school. I was too timid, too shy . . . It wasn’t until some of the folks in the Kiwanis said, ‘You can sing. Why don’t you come up on stage with us?’ that I decided to give it a try, and, hey, I found out I can do it, and I do enjoy it.” For him, the liberation from “normative constraints” inherent in the anti-structure of theatrical performance allowed for such self-transformation (Turner 1982: 44-48).

A woman recounted this revelation:

I thought, I’ve always wanted to get back on the stage at the Grand, and I was about 50 by then so I wondered if I could still remember lines. I played a part in “Steel Magnolias” with tons of dialogue. It was hard . . . We had two great nights . . . The third night I skipped six pages of dialogue! Backstage, people were frantically trying to decide if they should turn off the lights, enter, wondering what to do? [Another actress] onstage with me helped get us back on track. I tell people, it was like being in a jet plane going down. Pure panic! But people in the audience said they couldn’t tell. It was really amazing. But anyway, that’s an experience I will not forget on the stage of the Grand. It was awful...and it was wonderful!

While it may have been “awful,” she learned about her own determination to memorize lines and carry on through adversity. She discovered the intersubjectivity (Turner 1982) that saved the plane that was “going down.” She enveloped *communitas* and the “intensity of performance” (Schechner 1985: 110) in the following:

You know this wonderful thing that happens. You’re kind of in a bubble that whole time. And you love each other, you and the other people in the cast. And you depend on each other. It’s a team thing. It’s an interdependent thing . . .

You're part of a group, but you're out there alone, and you have to produce, or it lets everybody down including yourself. I think that type of experience for kids is just irreplaceable . . . It becomes very important to you in your memory.

Memories emerge behind the scenes as well, outside the focus on performers that lies in Schechner's performance sequence (Schechner 1985: 16). A long-time volunteer told this story.



Every time we had a show, my husband and I . . . ran the bar . . . Well, then one night, during a performance, people are in the restrooms, and . . . somebody said, "Oh, my God. There's water bubbling up in the men's room." There's a drain in the floor, and the water is bubbling up out of there. . .

Well, it was almost at the end of intermission anyway. . . And every time somebody would flush the toilet, it would start to bubble. Well, we finished the show, and then we're trying to figure out what to do about this. And [the stage manager] said, "Well, we gotta get a plumber." And I said, "I'm not authorized to call a plumber." . . . I said, "We can't just leave this. If it gets worse," I said, "The whole downstairs could flood." At that point in came [the city manager] with a friend of his. I said, " 'Oshkosh on the Water'

[the city's motto] is one thing, but the Grand under water isn't gonna cut it. . . He said, "Get somebody out here now." I said, "O.k." So we called Roto-Rooter, I think, and they came out. . .

Well, in the meantime, we decided, well, we're not leaving. So I was there, my husband, a couple of our really dependable volunteers . . . I said, "O.k. people, it's going to be awhile." So we ordered pizza. . . We broke out the beer and the pop. We're sitting in the lobby having pizza and drinks when the Roto-Rooter man came. . . Well, my husband's down there, and he said, "Don't stand there," 'cause when he took this thing off, the water just shot out. . . We mopped up, and we all finally went home about one o'clock . . . But all those crazy things that would happen that you don't expect. I mean you're a volunteer. You're not getting paid to do this. But my whole life was the Grand.

Such experiences and stories grow out of personal and intimate engagement with the Grand Opera House. Involvement in theatrical productions in this beautiful, historic treasure of Oshkosh lends meaningful material to memory and personal history, builds ties with others, and fortifies the self.

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PHOTO CREDITS

- ❖ Joe Ferlo in *Les Miserables*, 2014.
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