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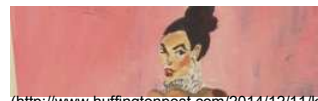
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New Play Development: Death By Talkback

Posted: 03/25/2013 2:24 pm EDT | Updated: 05/25/2013 5:12 am EDT

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Maybe you've been there as a playwright, as I have, many times. Maybe you've been there as an audience member. Maybe you've been there as part of a system of "new play development." Maybe it's been working against the creation of vibrant and exciting new theater. I am speaking of the Talkback.

I've seen developing playwrights end up twisting their work into pretzels, blowing them up, and trying to put Humpty Dumpty together again, all because of a comment somebody made in a Talkback. Leaving aside the debate over which style of Talkback is best, take a look at what social science has to say about the practice.

In Tali Sharot's well-researched gem of a book about the human mind, *The Optimism Bias: a Tour of the Irrationally Positive Brain*, there is an illuminating discussion of an experiment that seemed to me quite relevant to a discussion of the theater Talkback. Let me quote it at some length, so you can see for yourself. From page 21:

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Studies show that thinking too much can lead to suboptimal judgments. In one study, participants were asked to choose, from available options, an art poster to take home. One group of participants was asked to list the reasons why they liked or disliked the posters before making up their minds. Another group of participants was allowed to make only snap judgments. When probed a few weeks later, those participants who had made quick judgments expressed greater satisfaction with their selection than participants who had taken the time to consciously evaluate the options.

What's going on? Why does thinking more lead to poorer choices? Conscious assessment of the options caused people to focus on certain aspects of the posters, at the expense of other, more critical aspects. The features that received the greater weight were the ones most easily verbalized. Other elements, such as an emotional response to the poster, were not as easily accessible for introspection and verbalization and thus were more likely to be ignored in the deliberation process. When participants took the posters home, those aspects, the ones they had not really been able to put a finger on, turned out to be the most important.

Although it is common to think that deliberation is the finest way to assess which option is best, it may provide us with misinformation. This is because conscious rationalization allows access to only certain data. No matter how hard we try, some mental and emotional processes are likely to remain hidden.

This, in a nutshell, explains why I don't like Talkbacks, even the ones where everyone says they love the new play. Before "new play development" was invented, people wrote plays. Producers put them on stage because they liked what the play had to say, or they thought lots of people would pay money to see it or some combination of both. A new play was taken out of town, and put up in a full production in front of a real, live audience. Director and playwright would sit in the back of the theater and take note of audience reactions, as they happened, in real time.

When did the audience hold its collective breath? When did the laugh land, or not land? When did people begin to squirm in their seats, or cough more, or even fall asleep? What do they say in the lobby? What is their body language as they leave the theater? That's the way we used to look at a play's effect on an audience.

I am sad when I hear friends discuss their new plays in development, roaming from workshop to workshop, being "read" and then "discussed" but never actually "produced." Almost everything I've learned about playwriting after graduate school has come from what audiences have told me while they were seeing my work on stage, in a full (if bare-bones and off-off Broadway) production.

Stuff that gets through the gatekeepers in "new play development" just may be the stuff that is most easily verbalized, rationalized, discussed. But the theater doesn't need more plays for discussion, it needs more plays that are so moving, startling, side-splittingly funny or deeply cathartic, that audiences multiply by word of mouth. Theater is too inconvenient and expensive to exist as a topic of discussion. Plays that get to us at the level of our solar plexus, those plays that produce a great gut reaction, are what we need to keep people coming back for more. And just maybe those plays are being killed in their cradle by too much rational discussion.

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