June 2017

To the Muddy Flower Theatre Troupe,

Fathers, Brothers and Sons

I’m asking you…

Will we ever learn?

Fathers, Brothers and Sons

I’m begging you

Which way should we turn?

(Cj Shailor)

First allow me to congratulate all of you on your hard work, both personal and artistic, that you brought to bear on William Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*.  The Bard’s plays are always a monumental challenge for actors, directors and audience members – this play perhaps even more so.  It was evident from your performances that you took this challenge on with focus, intelligence and dedication in telling the story. A story that you then shared with those of us privileged enough to witness it, thank you.

I commend you on your individual journeys as well.  I believe that actors who don’t grow as humans - interpersonally, emotionally and intellectually through the rehearsal process merely present to their audience a hollow telling of a story that would be better told by simply being read.  But Shakespeare’s plays were written to be spoken and his characters to be heard.  When his plays are brought to life with the combination of power and care that you have given *The Merchant of Venice*- lives can be changed; not only from and within the themes and language of the play-  but also from the empathy created between the actors performing their roles. It was precisely that energy that moved me during my 2 days in your space.

I have been attending (and at times participating in) Muddy Flower Troupe performances since their inception. I have also been teaching and directing theatre for over 30 years so ‘I know from whence I speak’.  After the first performance, I shared with you my thoughts regarding your performance, again the type of feedback that I do almost every day in my practice as a theatre artist.  You have received congratulations and commentary from educators, theatre practitioners and audience members regarding your work as well.  Perhaps most importantly, you have received the wisdom and the challenges of your director, Dr. Shailor, who is a world class scholar, actor and director of Shakespeare.  There is little that I can add to the well-deserved accolades that have come your way over your 3 performances.  So, I would like to speak to the other things that I witnessed this year and believe are of equal importance to be recognized.

Most of the years that I’ve seen Muddy Flower performances I’ve documented your them with the intensity of a director taking notes in rehearsal or shot documentary footage or at least been active in the talkback sessions.  This year was different.  Because of multiple constraints on the process my role this year was unique. I found myself more concerned with the ‘count’ (and folding) of your costumes and props in and out through security. I joined the strike after each performance that was shared by all of you (in shifts so that each of you would have the opportunity to speak with your audience). My instinct was to help all of you and my brother as I could. During these times, I could interact with many of you one-on-one and discuss your performances. I found your questions about your roles and your acceptance of my comments regarding your craft thoughtful and wise. Tiny little things in the grand scheme but ultimately - of epic proportion. And there’s the rub…

That is what is the most important and fulfilling thing for me working in the theatre…how we have one another’s backs, always trying to remember that ‘The play’s the thing’. It is as simple as not rolling your eyes when your scene mate misses a line and helping them find their way back to the truth of the scene.  Or making sure that a fellow actor has their prop (or even better when you ‘create’ a misplaced prop on stage). It lives in the singular interactions between all of you when you celebrate one another’s victories. When you offer kind, well intentioned and constructive thoughts and ideas to one another… and accept those kindnesses and that knowledge with an open heart. At any given moment being a Father, a Brother or a Son. This is what I witnessed both pre-and post-performance as well as backstage. The spirit that something mattered beyond yourselves. Not only that, but the palpable feeling that everyone understood that any and every choice they made, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant, was integral to the whole.

For want of a nail the shoe was lost.

For want of a shoe the horse was lost.

For want of a horse the rider was lost.

For want of a rider the battle was lost.

For want of a battle the kingdom was lost.

And all for the want of a horseshoe nail.

(Proverb)

Every character in this play carries both a burden and a responsibility to themselves and others - as we all do. It is ultimately up to each of us as individuals to make those choices with an awareness and consideration as to how they will affect other people.  We yearn to answer the biggest questions in this lifetime yet personal evolution comes in the smallest of answers… Was it asked for? Is it kind and healing? … Will we all be better for it?  That is what theatre teaches us. By breathing in the knowledge that every little thing we do has the potential to make all of us better …happier. Never is this unveiled to us better than through the shared experience of co-creation.

If this letter isn’t too bumper sticker / self-help book for you yet …think on Jesse Jackson’s quote “*Never look down on anybody unless you’re helping them up*”. This is when we become human, in the belief that the smallest human unit is 2. When- *the quality of mercy is not strained*. When we can trust that those we work with are facing the same direction that we are – we can go farther, dig deeper and climb higher than we ever thought possible. Plays give us the terrain to explore but the true journey is internal and the sweetness of success is walking it together.

My brother began each performance by quoting Ophelia, ‘*We know what we are now, but not what we may become’.* Personally, I have no idea where my journey will take me but I can imagine it a little more clearly with my brother by my side - and a script in my hand. When we read aloud our voices dance and when we wrestle with ideas we grow. I can’t speak to the complexity and the challenges you all face at this specific time in your lives but I saw firsthand the brotherhood you have built through the process of creating a life on the stage.

From this day to the ending of the world,

But we in it shall be rememberèd-

We few, we happy few, we band of brothers

 (Henry the V)

I write to you today to express both my gratitude for being invited to your performances of *The Merchant of* Venice and to congratulate you on your dedication to the art of theatre. If it’s not too bold of me, I’d like to think of myself as an honorary member of your troupe - it would give me immense pride and future inspiration.

Peace to you my brothers,

Christopher Shailor

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