

# T THEATRE TOPICS



NOVEMBER 2024 • VOLUME 34 NUMBER 3

# THEATRE TOPICS

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press  
in cooperation with the Association for Theatre in Higher Education

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# THEATRE TOPICS

ISBN 1054-8378

November 2024 • Volume 34 Number 3

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For up-to-date pricing information, please visit the journal webpage at: <https://www.press.jhu.edu/journals/theatre-topics>.

Address subscription inquiries to the publisher:  
Journals Publishing Division  
Johns Hopkins University Press  
2715 North Charles Street  
Baltimore, MD 21218-4363  
Phone: (410) 516-6987 Fax: (410) 516-6968  
Toll-free orders: 1-800-548-1784

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*Theatre Topics* is a peer-reviewed publication committed to publishing original scholarship written in accessible, well-defined language addressing a wide range of subjects, with an emphasis on articles that reflect the intersection of theory and practice. *Topics'* readership includes theatre educators, practitioners, and scholars. Subjects of interest include theatre practice (acting, design, directing, dramaturgy, playwriting, etc.), theatre pedagogy, advocacy, and applied theatre. The journal is published three times a year (March, July, and November) and is sponsored by the Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE). It is indexed in the Humanities Index Complete, Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature, Education Index, IBZ (International Bibliography of Periodical Literature covering all fields of knowledge), and MLA International Bibliography.

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Postmaster: Please send address changes to *Theatre Topics*, Journals Publishing Division, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2715 North Charles Street, Baltimore, MD 21218-4363.

Printed at Sheridan Press, Hanover, PA. This journal is printed on acid-free paper. The paper in this publication meets the requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (Permanence of Paper). ∞™

Cover and front matter design: Tekla McInerney.



## Association for Theatre in Higher Education

### *Our Position*

The Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE) is a comprehensive nonprofit professional membership organization. Founded in 1986, ATHE serves the interests of its diverse individual and organizational members, including college and university theatre departments and administrators, educators, graduate students, and theatre practitioners. The Association's web site is [www.athe.org](http://www.athe.org).

### *Our Vision*

An advocate for the field of theatre and performance in higher education, ATHE serves as an intellectual and artistic center for producing new knowledge about theatre and performance-related disciplines, cultivating vital alliances with other scholarly and creative disciplines, linking with professional and community-based theatres, and promoting access and equity.

### *Our Mission*

To support and advance the study and practice of theatre and performance in higher education.

### *Our Goals*

- Goal One Promote theatre as an essential component in higher education and as a lifelong tool for learning.
- Goal Two Position ATHE as a global participant within higher education.
- Goal Three Continue to develop strategic and sustainable partnerships to advocate for and advance the study of theatre and performance in higher education.
- Goal Four Support the professional development of ATHE members.
- Goal Five Develop strategies for sustaining the administrative and organizational viability of ATHE.
- Goal Six Continue to diversify participation in every facet of the organization including membership, programming, scholarship, and governance.

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# Each Other's Harvest: 2024 Roger L. Stevens Address to the College of Fellows of the American Theatre

*Benny Sato Ambush*

**Abstract.** Benny Sato Ambush's Roger L. Stevens Address to the College of Fellows of the American Theatre, delivered April 21, 2024, at the Kennedy Center Skylight Pavilion in Washington, DC. This version of his speech has been lightly edited for readers.

On June 26, 1996, with his characteristic soft-spoken but polite directness, August Wilson, in his opening night keynote address titled "The Ground on Which I Stand," blew up the Theatre Communications Group National Conference at Princeton University. With eloquent, poetically crafted bluntness replete with insights, indictments, and hopes for a better future, he criticized oversights in our practices and the presumptions of white cultural sovereignty. Standing as a proud unapologetic race man working in a field plagued with inequality, dispossession, and truncation of possibilities that beleaguer our nation, Wilson probed into the blind spots of American theatre, advocated for more funding for Black theatres, and gave voice to valid concurrent cultural realities operating with their own rules. He called for redress.

The crowd in the large McCarter Theatre exploded in frenzied flurries of heated reactions, splintering into huddled clumps of like-minded groups scattered everywhere. This went on deep into the night.

It didn't take long for me to notice the siloed nature of these discussion clusters—separate and boiling over. Later that night, I approached John Sullivan, executive director of TCG at the time, and requested to organize an impromptu session outside of the conference schedule, volunteering to facilitate such discussions in which willing participants could talk *to* each other instead of remaining isolated in silos. John agreed, and we carved out some time the following day under an open-walled tent top on the Princeton University green, not knowing if anybody would show up. I expected the session to last for about forty-five minutes. Over fifty people came, and we went on for nearly two hours, until we were compelled to conclude for our return to regularly scheduled programming. A follow-up session the next day likewise lasted close to two hours, with an even larger attendance, until we were once again forced to stop.

Here's what took place: In close quarters, a demographically mixed group of people resembling a multicolored Benetton clothing ad (remember those?) engaged in meaningful exchanges to address the areas where the field was stuck. We slogged through hot-button issues: color-blind casting vs. color- and culture-conscious casting, the failure of language to accurately represent our intentions, the politics of inclusion, and approaches to accomplishing a more perfect pluralism in our work. The discourse was emotional, sometimes explosive, even painful. Opinions and experiences differed widely. But the splintering from the opening night morphed into a cross-sectional jam session tempering resentment, mistrust, and anger. Where there was no agreement among the brave and courageous participants, there was at least the airing and understanding of opposing views. Fear abounded, but it did not paralyze. We found that we were not each other's enemies. The real foes were the challenges of racism, sexism, classism, ageism, ableism, antisemitism, homophobia,

xenophobia, habituated thinking, investments in hierarchies and institutional infrastructures that keep all the isms and phobias in place, willful ignorance, stubbornness, and a lack of generosity. Like ingredients in a gumbo, we marinated with each other. "The best way out is always through," wrote poet Robert Frost (70). Such an effort requires "all hands on deck" in communicative communion across difference.

### **We Are Each Other's Harvest**

A lot has happened since then, including the burgeoning of the internet and the invention of social media that changed just about everything.

During the 1990s, the American Theatre intentionally experimented with diversification, which was inspired by a wave of regional nontraditional casting symposiums begun in the 1980s and fueled in part by ongoing identity politics of the 1960s counterculture and human rights movements that attempted to break from the old paradigm-thinking that came before. The universality of the particular that Wilson exhorted in 1996 has now expanded to include multiple, intersectional identities of gender, sexuality, neurodivergence, and increasingly exact ways to self-identify. In 1903, W. E. B. Du Bois declared in *The Souls of Black Folk* that "[t]he problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line" (15). I believe the essential challenge of the twenty-first century is managing the complexities of identity.

I see today's ground of the American theatre as a dynamic negotiation among multiple identities and ideologies, in multitudinous ever-slivered slices of being and labels, vying for acknowledgment, authenticity, and authority to tell their stories, and in great need of reliable, sustainable funding to support their work. The list of challenging isms and phobias now includes gender binarism, Islamophobia, and transphobia.

Since the 2020 summer of racial reckoning unleashed by George Floyd's murder, women and underrepresented BIPOC and global majority workers have visibly achieved leadership positions in philanthropy and in historically white workplaces more than ever before—with checkered outcomes. A generation earlier, the first wave of similar trailblazing breakthrough leadership in those venues, of which I was a part, likewise had checkered outcomes. Consistently throughout and often unheralded, historically marginalized theatre workers successfully served their communities at legions of ethnic- and identity-specific theatres with far less financial support and media attention—as have the more than six thousand locally focused community theatres in the United States ("Community Theatre's Impact").

We're not in the Promised Land yet, even with increased targeted funding now available for a fortunate few BIPOC theatres. But things have improved. Our language and our cultural sensitivities have evolved. What we used to call multiculturalism and pluralism pivoted to intersectionalism, antiracism, decentering whiteness, acknowledging implicit bias, decolonizing curriculum, and democratizing program content. Wilson's 1996 demand for respect, acknowledgment, accurate representation, and more equitable funding for Black theatres has found a current expression in the We See You coalition's living document "BIPOC Demands for White American Theatre," published in July 2020, and in similar living documents throughout the nation.

As has been our country's historic pattern, cultural attitudes can be stubbornly resistant to change. A bone of contention is the rate of change—how far to go, how fast, and who the faces of the change agents are. Even the idea of the need for change is contested. Some theatres have imploded in their attempts to shift paradigms, some perhaps too quickly. The field sometimes eats its own—not a pretty sight. Progress throughout US history tends to lurch forward after long gestating periods of foment, only to then encounter vociferous backlash and pushback.



The world of theatre is not immune to the maladies our country is suffering from now. We are in yet another two-steps-forward, one-step-back retrenchment, with brazen attempts to reverse decades of human rights and progress in all aspects of civic life in the colliding cauldron of culture wars. Opposing views of reality and of visions of the future are as American as apple pie. Our catastrophized, polarized world faces grave threats to the very foundations of the American experiment. This push-and-pull tension is an unnerving stress test of our democracy: loud, messy, volatile, and even violent.

In spite of recent hopeful glimmers, our theatre ecosystem has yet to fully rebound from a once-in-a-century pandemic that exposed preexisting weaknesses in our not-for-profit business model, which for some time had not been working as it once had a half-century earlier. We are witnessing disruption, contraction, resizing, institutional failures, course corrections, and a litany of challenges undoubtedly familiar to you since the end of emergency government pandemic recovery assistance:<sup>1</sup>

- Skyrocketing production, labor, materials, insurance, and energy costs in an inflationary environment
- Shifting philanthropic priorities and funding cuts
- Patrons aging out, priced out, choosing to stay more at home with streaming options, home food deliveries, online shopping, avoiding crowds for lingering fear of contracting COVID-19
- Declining subscriptions, donor fatigue
- Staff burnout, labor shortages, talent drain
- Decision-makers wrestling with what to produce that will sell as audience tastes and habits evolve, with the right to fail seemingly more difficult to maintain
- Unaffiliated freelancers, particularly hard hit, seeking ways to keep going
- Educators grappling with how best to prepare young people for a changing industry
- Theatre staffs starting to unionize

We are on this uneasy ground together, at times together apart. We hear of a battle for the soul of the nation by adversaries pointing accusing fingers at “those people” destroying the country, using the exact same words “those people” use. Marvin Gaye sang it a long time ago, “Make me wanna holler, throw up my hands” (“Inner City Blues”). But I’m not throwing up my hands, and neither should you. We are interconnected. **We Are Each Other's Business** as we tackle how to adapt and endeavor to imagine new skill sets needed to navigate the maze of shifting paradigms, as we tried to do under that tent top at Princeton.

Amid the trepidation and angst are rigorous hope, resilience, and steely determination to overcome. Some theatres are doing okay. So for the change-agents, truth-tellers, rabble-rousers, soothsayers, rebels, generative thinkers, healers, and dreamers among you still in the game with the energy and vision to forge onward, here is what’s on my mind, with some recommended “to dos” as we reach for a commons on today’s ground of the American theatre:

- Theatres have always been up against it and have survived prior crises, adapting to their times. Some run their course and cycle out, while new ones are born. It has always been thus. The storytelling expertise of theatre remains a vital human social contract for those wise to its value.
- The ancient Greek root word for theatre is *teatron*: the “seeing place.” We go to “seeing places” to see the world anew. Proclaim the cultural importance of going to the theatre—the gymnasiums for human development, centers for the enlargement of human understanding. We too must see the world anew. The paradigm has shifted: we cannot go back.
- As the “seeing place,” the theatre is uniquely equipped for this moment. Playwrights and theatremakers—the deep-feeling-and-thinking poet-sage-philosopher-dreamers that we are—have always addressed the embroilments of humanity and the problems of the battered

heart, rendering meaning from confusion, alchemizing misery into majesty, shining light into the darkness, lending clarity to chaos, enabling empathy, making visible the great questions and vital matters of the time for honest debate in the public square, showing ourselves in the Other, and illuminating what could be as well as showing what is. Entertaining the masses, afflicting the comfortable, comforting the afflicted. This is still our “reason for being.”

- The communal nature of making and attending theatre is a viable antidote to the country’s current epidemic of loneliness, disconnection, and isolation, which a growing body of research shows is linked to high rates of depression, suicide, anxiety, addiction, fear, paranoia, and other physically harmful conditions. Theatre is a healthy amelioration. Proclaim this from the mountaintops.
- Theatre is not one-size-fits-all. Relevance depends on who you are and regional context. What is not important to you is important to others. Learn your audience and figure out what works for them while attempting to lead them.
- Learning to accept and make room for the many demographic changes upon us *is* America’s unfinished twenty-first-century drama. The many “wes” are here in great numbers. They are not going away.
- Work with people where they are and go from there. Expect friction, but as the late US Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg said, “Fight for the things that you care about, but do it in a way that will lead others to join you” (“Radcliffe Day 2015” 1:05:20–34).
- As my Indigenous friends have taught me, while you work to solve short-horizon problems, work to positively impact seven generations out (“What is the Seventh Generation Principle?”).
- Short-term, push for more humane, balanced work-life conditions, for helpful reforms in performance union policies, and hugely personal to me, for sufficient rehearsal time—my biggest lament about how we currently make theatre.
- How about we loosen our grip on the debate about appropriating the stories of others? It has become an overly narrow purity litmus test; identity politics turned upside down. Yes, care, diligence, homework, and consultation are required when working outside one’s lived experience. But by definition, artists are curious about the whole world. Allow them to pursue their interests. Lynn Nottage wrote Black, white, and Latine characters in *Sweat*. Why can’t a white playwright do the same? Had Louis Gossett, Jr. stayed in his lane, he would not have won his Oscar for the film *An Officer and a Gentleman*, playing a part not written for a Black man. And Denzel Washington wouldn’t have had the career he has had. A pendulum swing to a more balanced posture seems to me a necessity. *You* decide whether you *should* work outside of who you are. Being told “you can’t” and “thou shalt not” runs counter to what art is. Employment issues—who gets hired and how often—are a vital, related, but separate matter.
- At the same time, consciously recognize and celebrate color, cultural and intersectional differences as enriching values that can add resonance. Color blindness is a fantasy that confuses. I *want* you to see me as me.
- Eschew anyone’s cultural imperialism.
- Affinity spaces are necessary and provide safety and fortification. Do not fear them.
- Pure escapist entertainment is part of our menu. Leaning into it is not a defeat. Today’s zeitgeist hungers for it while the world is aflame. Leading and listening at the same time is a constant challenge. Figure out what works where you are.
- Working locally and in collaborative community partnerships is a secret sauce for a shot at sustainability, especially when crises hit.
- Move beyond a scarcity mindset that views the gains of some as something taken away from you. Adopt more *we* thinking instead of *me* thinking. Share the wealth.



- Every sector of the theatre ecology seeks sufficient reliable capital to financially support its theatremaking. Organize and lobby together for more funding. On March 25, 2024, the US Bureau of Economic Analysis released data stating that the GDP for the arts and culture nonprofit and commercial sector topped \$1.1 trillion in 2022, generating over 5.2 million jobs ("Arts and Cultural Production"). Our arts sector deserves more than the \$207 million that our government funds the National Endowment for the Arts with your tax dollars ("National Endowment for the Arts Appropriations History"). The multiple sectors that comprise our theatre ecology—professional not-for-profit theatre, commercial theatre, community theatre, Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA), academic theatre, and freelance artists—must work together, instead of in silos, to find cooperative synergies for our mutual benefit and to state our case for robust federal investment in us as an economic imperative that we *earn*. All-sector efforts tackling these issues have been launched, such as the Midnight Oil Collective (New Haven, CT) working with the Yale University Innovation Summit and the venture capital community. A recent sign of hope: a congressional bill called Supporting Theaters and the Arts to Galvanize the Economy (STAGE) has been proposed that would pump \$1 billion annually into theatres through grants administered through the US Department of Commerce's Economic Development Administration (Paulson). We need to help them get it passed.
- Speaking of TYA, if we want audiences "seven generations out"—or even one or two generations out—we need to bring TYA closer into the heart of our work, or otherwise risk whole generations who will see no reason to advocate for allocating their tax dollars to any kind of theatre.
- To the scholars and educators of the Academy, kudos for your frontline work in reimagining theatre training for a fast-changing industry. You nurture the fresh agile minds of tomorrow's leaders who will need to be adept at using new technological tools, including game-changing AI. I hope you are able to help train scrappy, financially literate, entrepreneurial mindsets who will build on your generation's know-how with new skills they will develop for their era.
- Retirees? It's not *retirement*, it's *reinvention*, right? You are a formidable brain trust of expertise and experience. Your wisdom is needed. If you have a little more energy in your tank, and the interest, join efforts to help the field strategically and tactically create new models of doing and of cultural production. Join a theatre advisory council, become a board trustee, offer master classes, be a mentor or a coach, vote for legislators who support and advocate for the arts. And of course, go to the theatre.
- And to end my "to do" list: Grace goes a long way in smoothing troubled waters.

The central metaphor in Athol Fugard's *"Master Harold" . . . and the Boys* is the world's people dancing on a ballroom floor, learning how to avoid collisions and escape the limitations of life with hope, connection, and possibility (45–47). The character Sam dreams of "a world without collisions" (47). He calls for people of "magnitude" (18–28). Be a person of magnitude.

A common ground requires attention to the common good. Do so from your pen, through your acting, singing, dancing, composing, choreographing, designing, technical applications, teaching, managing, and producing.

Rumi, the thirteenth-century Persian poet and Sufi mystic, has been interpreted by US poet Coleman Barks in the lines, "Out beyond the ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, / there is a field. I'll meet you there" (36). That field, for me, is the seeing place called theatre, the profession that chose me, the best school I know.

Woven throughout this address, you've been hearing from the poem "Paul Robeson" by Gwendolyn Brooks, the first African American to receive a Pulitzer Prize, in 1950, for her poetry collection *Annie Allen*. In summation, I leave you with her words:

... we are each other's  
harvest:  
we are each other's  
business:  
we are each other's  
magnitude and bond. (496)

Thank you for the honor of speaking before you. All Our Relations.

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BENNY SATO AMBUSH, veteran SDC professional director, institutional theatre leader, educator, published commentator, and consultant, is the artistic director of Venice Theatre (FL). Formerly producing artistic director, TheatreVirginia (Richmond); producing artistic director, Oakland Ensemble Theatre (CA); interim artistic director, Rites and Reason Theatre Company (Providence, RI); associate artistic director, American Conservatory Theater (San Francisco); co-artistic director, San Francisco Bay Area Playwrights Festival; PEW Charitable Trust/TCG director-in-residence, Florida Stage (Manalapan); associate artistic director, Anna Deavere Smith's Institute on the Arts & Civic Dialogue (Harvard University); director, Institute for Teledramatic Arts & Technology (California State University, Monterey Bay); senior distinguished producing director in residence, Emerson Stage, Emerson College's Department of Performing Arts (Boston). He has numerous professional regional theatre directing credits and teaching/directing credits at MFA, BFA, and BA training programs. He received his BA from Brown University and an MFA from University of California, San Diego.

#### Note

1. Compiled from articles, conference reports, meeting discussions, commentaries, news reports, personal observations, and lived experiences since emerging from the COVID lockdown.

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