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## Audience Engagement in Theatre for Social Change

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**ABSTRACT** This report from the field describes some of the author's methods of audience engagement as a means of social engagement, discussing the implications for practice. The report invites dialogue with the reader about the usefulness of audience engagement and ways it can be manifested before, during and after performance. Theatre is a vibrant and valuable tool for sparking dialogue and inspiring action around challenging social topics. Audiences who are engaged in the process of the performance beyond the standard role of passive spectator are more likely to be motivated to deliverable endeavors post performance. This report from the field offers four brief case studies as examples of audience engagement and includes pragmatic techniques for using theatre as a vehicle for personal and social change through audience engagement. It explores how artists can galvanize and empower audiences by creating experiential communities pre, during, and post-show. Drawing upon examples from high-quality international theatre projects written and directed by the author, the essay investigates and describes the work of The H.E.A.T. Collective including *My Heart is in the East* (U.S., U.K. and Europe), *The FEAR Project* (produced in the US, India and Czech Republic), *Emma Goldman Day* (U.S.).

**KEYWORDS** Theatre, creative leadership, audience engagement, social change, participatory art, expressive arts, therapeutic theatre, experiential learning, drama therapy, dramatic arts

*Don't expect the theatre to satisfy the habits of its audience, but to change them.*

- Bertolt Brecht (Willet, 1957)

It started with a curtain call. I must have been seven. My mother took me to a play at the high school where she taught. I witnessed these cool teenagers rock the stage with violent and romantic conflict. Then afterward they all held hands and smiled at each other. They bowed. I wanted to be part of that unified field.

Out of artistic necessity, I go to the theatre frequently. Sometimes the play leaps off the stage and grabs me in the gut or the heart or the brain. Sometimes I am moved to tears or belly laughs. Sometimes the experience changes how I see a situation, what I think about it, and what actions I will take when I leave the theatre. But more often I feel sequestered far away from the action, the **fourth wall**, which is a theatrical term describing the invisible barrier between the action onstage and the audience, is thick and impenetrable before me. I am amazed, impressed, disappointed or furious but have no way of engaging directly with



**Figure 1.** Post show audience—Brno, CZ

Photo: Barbara Herucová. Used with permission.

the experience. I remain mostly unchanged, and therefore have no impulse to make moves to change my life or the society around me. When I am engaged in a play before, during and/or after a show, I feel more connected to the experience. When I am engaged with the play, the performance itself becomes more meaningful to me artistically, intellectually, and personally. Because I thrive on interaction with artists as an audience member, I make audience engagement a priority in my own theatre work.

My effort to engage audiences has extended beyond the play into pre and post show events. I now always include a post-show discussion in any production I build. When the audience intermingles with the artists and each other there is a greater potential for long lasting impact.

In addition to the inspiration gained from the compelling action of a performance, the influence of theatre can also be a healing one. As a practitioner and a scholar, I have often asked myself: can theatre be a therapeutic experience for audiences? As a result of practising audience engagement my answer is a resounding Yes. I have become more acutely aware of the power of theatre to effect psychological well-being. There is an innate healing function in theatre that goes all the way back to its origins in human culture. (Snow, 2003). Audience engagement is one way of enhancing the healing experience.

The practice of audience engagement is the central thrust of the H.E.A.T. Collective's custom. The H.E.A.T. Collective is my theatre company that uses a bricolage of methods: Healing, Education, Activism and Theatre in workshops, events and performances to lead and inspire both personal and social change. The H.E.A.T. Paradigm is a way of seeing theatre as a creative process that includes healing, education and activism through the lens of high-quality theatre. I incorporate the practice of paradoxical curiosity (Lederach, 2005) respecting

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complexity, seeking something beyond what is visible, and discovering what holds apparently opposed social energies together. By engaging audiences, we can explore how the creative process helps to bring about social change and transform human relationships. I also use performative ethnography. By merging performance and scholarship, the personal becomes political. Language is both transformative and embodied. Aesthetic craft is balanced with heuristic knowledge and truth (Sprey, 2011). To truly find “power with” instead of “power over” we can use audience engagement to demystify the chasm between on stage and off.

Audience engagement requires a focus on community building as we experience in Forum Theatre. This work involves the audience to change their world by engaging in social action on stage. Boal called the technique simultaneous dramaturgy (Boal, 1995). All of these methods help to build Socially Engaged Theatre that carries impact for audiences while insisting on meticulous beauty.

My first awareness of audience engagement happened when I was 18 years old and attended a Theatre in Education conference at UC Santa Cruz; they presented programs that were changing people’s lives by using art to enhance education and- there were dancers working with drummers getting deaf children to dance to the vibration of the drums. There was a theatre company teaching history to high school students with improvisation and character development, there was a company bringing ritual to audiences by educating them about Native American practices. In each case the audience was entering into the performance.

Theatre is a sacred and ancient art form, which has served to empower and galvanize communities since pre-history. However, in modern society with the onset of the industrial cinematic and now digital age, audiences often go to theatre to relax, and forget their lives and their bodies, taking a passive role in the entertainment experience. Instead of embracing and embodying the action of the play as something personal and necessary to their own lives, they remain removed from it and judge it from a distance. When a good theatre production is generous and brave and offers itself to the audience, there is a probability for emotional and intellectual engagement. Shakespeare’s theatre had a profound impact on its audiences. Reaching the crowd (both groundlings and nobles) was at the heart of its purpose. Theatrical creations can potentially heal, inform, comfort, provoke, activate, open minds and hearts. But when the audience is invited to engage physically, emotionally, and intellectually through planned and/or improvised involvement, the power of theatre expands to include both, a deeper awareness of and empathy for humanity, and a real potential for positive change.

### **Three Case Studies**

My work has been called collage and magical realism, paradoxical, and multilayered. I like contradiction. I like when people and places and things that shouldn’t be together crash into each other and a kind of unity is born out of the wreckage. One day I was in high school taking my daily ride to school on the 22 Fillmore bus. I was bouncing along squished up next to two people: A Tall Black Drag Queen bedazzled and decked out in a hot pink jumpsuit and a Tiny Elderly White Woman with blue hair covered by a thin hairnet. I thought to myself how far away these two people are from each other from such different worlds. Just as a thought

occurred to me, the bus swerved and jostled the Drag Queen and one of her giant rings got caught in the hairnet of the Little Old Lady, and for the next few minutes their worlds were one as the Drag Queen gingerly picked her rhinestone ring out of the hairnet. I think I have been writing some version of that story ever since. Audience engagement allows me to embrace the paradox and invite people to talk about it. As an example, I will briefly outline the use of audience engagement in three of my ongoing projects, namely:

*My Heart is in the East*—My Heart is in the East a play about Muslim and Jewish relations across the centuries.

*The FEAR Project*—The FEAR Project is an ensemble piece recreated for every performance based on interviews with community members and audiences.

*Emma Goldman Day*—Emma Goldman Day is a community event that consists of three plays, three discussions and three meals.

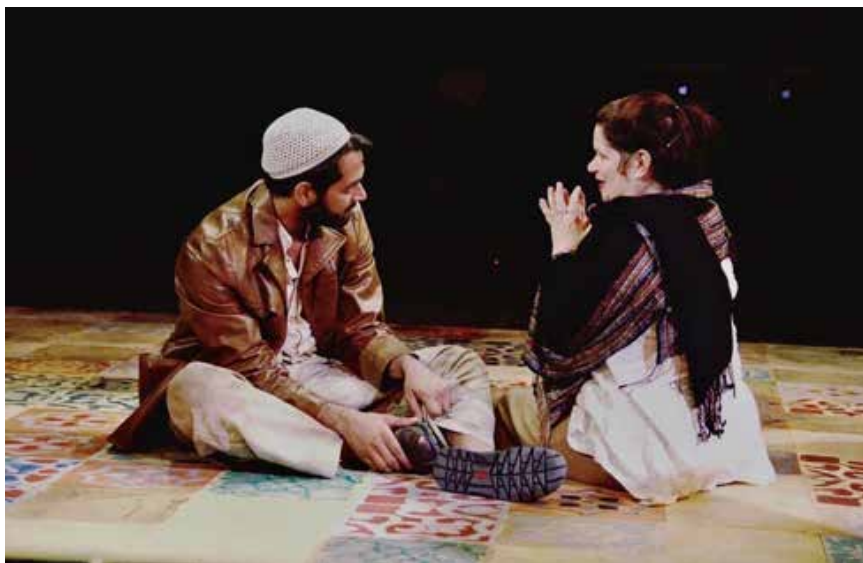
### **My Heart is in the East**

The process of writing *My Heart is in the East* changed my life. Combining my own experiences of working in Iraq with an Arab street poet, and my deep research about a period known as La Convivencia (the Co-existence) when Jews, Muslims, and Christians lived in relative peace due in part to poetry contests. The story from present day Iraq merges with the story from Medieval Andalucía. Both are about unity slowly growing out of violent paradox. My intention for the post show experience is to bridge the world of the play and lead the audience and artists into the current times, right where we are now.

*My Heart is in the East* is a play about Muslim-Jewish relations taking place in modern day Iraq and 11<sup>th</sup> Century Cordoba. The post show experience is unique and just as important as the play itself. As they enter the theatre the audience is randomly given one of four different index cards with different prompts (For example: A. Yellow: Homonym; B. Pink: Contradiction; C. Blue: Rhyme; D. Green: Two Languages) After the play (which runs about 90 minutes) the Poetry Ushers come on stage and instruct the audience to get into groups according to their card color. They are told that actors will be out in 10–15 minutes and that's how long this group has to come up with one line of poetry about the issues in the play using their card's specific prompt. While they are writing trays of olives, grapes, almonds, and dates are passed around. The Poetry Shepherds circulate among the groups to encourage the short poems. The Contest happens when the actors emerge and ask each group to read and then everyone judges the one-line poems and chooses the prize that each group receives: The Olive Prize, The Grape Prize, The Almond Prize, or The Grand Date Prize.

After this jovial (and sometimes very beautiful) icebreaker, we announce that night's guest (each performance will have a speaker from the community – experts on peacebuilding, history, Jewish and Muslim relations, poetry etc.) who speaks for a few minutes about their work and then leads a short discussion about the issues in the play. One audience member stated:

I entered the theatre, crossed my arms and sat back, thinking OK show me! The raw emotion, and the depth of the subject matter made me sit forward. After the play



**Figures 2 (top) and 3 (bottom).** *My Heart is in the East*, La MaMa, New York, June 2017  
Photos: Edward Morris. Used with permission.

I had to talk with other audience members to write a line of a poem- we laughed, I came out of myself even more. Finally, we had a group discussion with a Muslim scholar to talk about the issues of the play, and then I really felt like a part of a community. I couldn't believe how closed I had been only two hours earlier and how connected I felt now. (personal communication)

## The FEAR Project



**Figure 4.** The FEAR Project, Prague, CZ, February 2016  
Photo: Thomas P Krakora. Used with permission.



**Figure 5.** The FEAR Project, Kolkata, India, December 2015  
Photo: G.D Birla Sabhagar. Used with permission.

The FEAR Project is an experiment in performative ethnography and community service. The artists involved serve the communities with whom we are collaborating and for whom we are performing. We gather research and stage it. The result is not verbatim theatre, but it is sourced in testimony and truth. Doing this project, I learned how to make an audience into a community and a community into a play. This is not “community theatre” it is theatre of

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the community, a high quality professional theatrical experiment that aims to move, provoke, inspire, excite, and heal.

The FEAR Project is a play based on interviews about fear. It contains choral poetry made from verbatim interviews, as well as direct address monologues, and realistic scenes. The FEAR Project aspires to create an atmosphere of restoration by giving people a chance to communicate about fear in a safe space.

The interviews consist of 13 questions that are asked by the participating artists to a broad and diverse population in the community in the following order:

1. What are you afraid of?
2. Who are you afraid of?
3. Where are you afraid?
4. How do you react to fear?
5. How do you conquer fear?
6. What is the enemy?
7. Who is the enemy?
8. Where is the enemy?
9. How do you react to the enemy?
10. What do you do to conquer hate?
11. Who is the stranger?
12. What is home?
13. How do you feel about your country right now?

Each FEAR Project process evolves in the following way, once the interviews are collected I construct a Choral Poem out of the verbatim interviews. We (the company of artists) have a reading of the poem and an in-depth discussion. I then write the rough draft of the play with the choral poem as well as scenes and monologues. We then move into a period of rehearsal: character development, staging etc.

Each performance includes pre-show interviews and a post-show discussion with the audience. At the beginning of each show the actors spend about 15 minutes interviewing the audience with the 13 questions. The interviews from the audience are recorded on yellow paper and embedded into that performance. When the yellow paper appears, the audience tend to lean forward knowing they are now hearing their own answers.

The FEAR Project inspires collaborative action for the artists, the interviewees and the audiences. We find our way through fear in the radical intimacy of socially engaged performance. We as theatre practitioners can encourage an imaginative exploration of even the darkest truth to facilitate transformation. We are not afraid, even of fear. The project has so far been successfully developed and produced in three countries: India, The Czech Republic and the U.S. An artist commented:

What was most interesting about the piece was the response it created afterwards in the discussion period. When we heard there would be a discussion after, we almost

didn't attend it out of fear of such things. What a paradox! I'm really glad we overcame this fear and went there, cause the play just got another dimension for me. After hearing all these different feelings and views from the play it really got me thinking. I was a bit shocked, a bit shaken. it made me realize this will never be a closed topic and it shouldn't be for anyone. (M. Cizkova, personal communication, February 2017)



**Figures 6 (top) and 7 (bottom).** Emma Goldman Day 2016, TheatreLab, New York. Photos: Theo Cote. Used with permission.

Emma Goldman came into my life at an early age when I was cast as her in a play. She has been my spirit guide and inspiration ever since. I named my first child after her. I spent years and years researching her work and life And I wrote three plays about her. I channeled her voice through my voice and her body through my body.

Emma Goldman Day is a dream come true for me. We have produced it every March for three years for Women's History Month. Through the experience of seeing three plays,



participating in three guided discussions and sharing three meals with food that reflect the play they've just seen, the audience becomes completely engaged in Emma's story, eventually shouting praise at her and booing the villains that thwart her.

The three plays explore the life and work of the infamous anarchist Emma. The plays cover four decades beginning with *Love, Anarchy and Other Affairs*—one actor, one night in 1901 in an apartment in Chicago (in the first play) to *The Snake and the Falcon*—in which four actors tell the story of Emma's deportation in 1919 at the hands of J. Edgar Hoover, and finally *Nobody Is Sleeping* performed by six actors and several puppets, which depicts Emma's last four years on the front of The Spanish Civil War.

H.E.A.T first produced the plays together in staged reading form at The Emma Goldman Trilogy Happening in March of 2016 in honor of Women's History Month. The plays and the discussions were vibrant, fascinating and enhanced by the wonderful actors, panel members, audiences, and helpers who helped build an amazing community experience. We served food, hot tea, shots of vodka, and Spanish wine to compliment the conversations about serious issues: revolution, immigration, American history, free love, and economic justice. People who stayed for all three plays and discussions got special gift bags "Emmasary Prizes". An audience member said:

If you want to understand how theatre builds community, look no further than the Emma Goldman Trilogy Happening: An incredible day that provoked thoughtful conversations and connected people through the inspiring life of Emma Goldman and the vibrant storytelling of Jessica Litwak." (J. Rasmussen, personal communication, March 2016)

## Summary

One of the reasons audience engagement works is that it increases an audience's experience of being seen and acknowledged by the artists. A. G. Johnson (2006) stated, "Of all human needs, few are as powerful as the need to be seen, included, and accepted by other people" (p. 58). People want to be seen and they crave human connection. Many of us, especially in the West are becoming more divided and cocooned as humans as the result of our excessive use of devices such as cell phones. When I travel on the New York subways I often observe that people are plugged in and are tuned out to those around them. With the advent of mobile entertainment centers, people can have the solo experience of watching movies or television shows through ear buds and virtual headgear. The Western society within which I live seems to encourage less physical interaction and eye contact than was typical when I was young. It is my opinion that before personal technology was so advanced, people seemed to interact with each other more than they do today. Live theatre compels us into human contact, but we can still avoid exchange as much as possible, ignoring the fact that we are IN community when sitting in the middle of one. We can lean away from the people sitting on either side of us, move away from ourselves and reach away from the play, into our seats, OUT of community. We might judge the show, worry about our lives, daydream about dinner, check the digital devices in our

laps, become annoyed at the smells and sounds of the humans around around us. If we are truly involved in the art and story of the play we may become emotionally and intellectually attached to the material. We may regard our fellow theatregoers with a sense of fellowship at the knowledge we are sharing this special experience. On the rare occasion that we speak to a stranger in the interval or have a vibrant conversation on the way home, the experience becomes even more memorable. But still we may not have not fully entered the experience. Audience engagement provides us with an opportunity to dive in.

Why can audience engagement scare people? To be egged into authentic intimate acquaintance with strangers may be intimidating, and if one has come to the theater for a sense of escape through entertainment, a challenging topic or direct address from actors can even be somewhat aggravating. When the subject matter of a play is intense and has stirred up feelings we often want to run to the local pub and or curl up in bed away from the theatrical environment where we were triggered. With audience engagement we are coaxed into the act of sharing our experience with others and listening to their experiences which may be similar or very different to our own.

For humanity to survive we must find a way to understand, listen, and empathize with each other. Audience engagement is useful to the process of empathy; with this form of work the audience may become a community . It may be a temporary community. There may be longer lasting connection, depending on the nature of the engagement. But no matter the length and depth of the feeling audience members often experiences change from their entrance to the theatre to their exit.

Theatre is a bright enigma, for when the lights go out on the stage the visceral effects exist only in memory. Like sexuality, or the smell and taste of food, the theatre lives in us somatically, emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually only while it is happening. Theatre, at its best and most useful is immediate and urgent, the immediacy of the form often matched by the necessity of content. It is a communal experience. It can wake us up to ourselves. This may be the key to the transformative power of art. Audience engagement increase the potential for transformation.

I welcome further conversation. Please be in touch with me to share your experiences and ideas about the ways audience interaction can manifest and your thoughts about the impact (artistic and political) of audience engagement.

## **About the Author**

**Jessica Litwak** (*corresponding author*) is a theatre artist focused specifically on theatre for social change and community engagement. She is an award-winning playwright and actress, as well as an educator, drama therapist and puppet builder. Her plays have been produced all over

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the U.S. and in Europe. Her articles and plays have been published by HowlRound, Theatre Communications Group, Applause Books, Smith and Krause, No Passport Press, The Drama Therapy Journal and The New York Times. Her plays include *The Emma Goldman Trilogy*, *The Night it Rained*, *Secret Agents*, *A Pirate's Lullaby*, *The Wall* and *My Heart is in the East*. She frequently teaches theatre in The Middle East and Europe, as well throughout as the United States. She is a core member of Theatre Without Borders, the founder of Artists Rise Up New York, and the Artistic Director of The H.E.A.T. Collective ([www.theheatcollective.org](http://www.theheatcollective.org)). She is a Fulbright Scholar. Email: [jessica.litwak@gmail.com](mailto:jessica.litwak@gmail.com)

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