

Festival Theatre for the Artist/Activist

Cerulean

2008

Audiences stand in front of a band at a music festival receiving the sound. Some dance; others just absorb. I've always been ...one of the dancers. When I began to write and direct theatre, I wanted the audience to be moved, to be allowed to respond in some way other than clapping their hands at the end of a scene. I wanted the audience members to play the way they did when listening to a band at a concert.

So I usually included a band in my plays and asked the actors to enter the audience and dance with them, often bringing them on stage at the end. I found that the audience members loved to play and that dancing was a full on response when they enjoyed the production. I began to study festival theatre and create interactive plays that brought the audience into the play even more.

There are many levels to theatre play and a skilled actor or improviser can focus energy and build intensity. As long as they are unafraid, most people can instantly be pretty good players. Recently, the group of players I worked with on some activist plays was mostly untrained, though I felt lucky to have a few skilled actor/improvisers.

This group is called WANLove (We Are Nature Lovers). Our first play was *Zeb Mountain's Complaint*. We wanted to reach people, especially active people and let them know about Mountain Top Removal. We decided to create a festival around our play and to try to get the audience involved in our performance. Our second play *Waste Stream Dream* traveled to the Transformus festival, and we were able to include almost the entire audience in the production in different roles: dream dancers, faerie bugs, trashy humans, trash monsters, hula hoopers, and impromptu band members. Everyone who wanted to play got to play with us, and the entire audience danced with us at the end.

This play was developed to put a dent in the pervasive use of water bottles in our culture. Participating in the play helped the audience to commit to ending their use of plastic water bottles. We think we had an effect for two reasons. One, people from our town who participated carry their own cups with them, and two, people around the Transformus festival were chanting, "Just one cup!" as we walked by their camps.

People attending a festival are usually in play mode. The everyday working world is replaced, and people are more receptive and playful. I love playing with People in a festival setting. For the past two years, I have co-created theatre workshops in the midst of the Bonnaroo music festival With several other theatre artists.

These classes are difficult to describe because each one is different, but all have been incredibly fun. A group of people show up, and after an hour of play, we feel so connected it is hard to let each other disappear into the crowd of 90 thousand. One outstanding day was when we did invisible theatre creating a stir about the high price of lemonade. It was amazing to see how a few people with intent can rally a group to action.

Another day we created a creature we called "Ha, ha, ha 5,000". We were experiencing "group-think" with twenty people who for the most part had never seen each other an hour before. I am amazed by people at play. Their energy is up and their generosity with one another seems endless as they bounce themselves off of one another and send us all to a higher level.



I've always felt more hopeful at festivals and getting to create theatre in a festival setting has been extremely fulfilling for me. I hope to play more and believe the combination of the arts and activism to be manifestly working our world into a new paradigm.

Here are two group games you can try with friends and strangers:

Eye Contact: Stand in a circle. Connect palms with the people on either side of you. Keep contact with them by applying pressure throughout the activity. Look into the eyes of others in the group. Allow communication and then make eye contact with someone else. Begin to move. Allow the circle to move in any way the group desires. Keep hand contact and continue eye contact as the circle moves. Breathe deeply, taking in lots of oxygen. Then, talk about what you felt and how it happened.

Defender/Adversary: Stand in a circle. Silently and secretly choose one person in the group to be your defender or protector; choose another to be your adversary. When everyone has chosen begin to move. (It helps to establish some boundaries when playing outside.) Your objective is to keep your defender between you and your adversary. Try to only see your adversary through your defender, keep them between you and your adversary. Pause the game and ask for a show of hands, "who is happy?" Continue the game trying to get to the point where everyone is safe. (This is sometimes possible, but not always.) End the game when you want. Talk about what happened and how it felt.

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