

Rose Oser:

I took many notes during the Comedy Convening. These are the things that I wrote in really big letters or underlined multiple times: Privilege, Dick Jokes, Vulnerability, Taste, Blazing Saddles. Last one is important because I've never seen it and I guess I should. A lot of our conversation was about the theatRE industry. We talked about how we gotta convince artistic directors, funders, and other industry gatekeepers that comedy is worthy. YES BUT I guess I wonder if comedy even wants to hang out in serious places. Some smart person in the room said that comedy is meant to lower, to make something more accessible. Some other smart person in the room said that comedy is meant to upend institutions and question systems. For me, comedy lives in the world of improv and sketch and shitty theatres where people can have a drink or five. Some other-other smart person in the room told me that I'm in my 20's so I don't know I'm an alcoholic yet. Fair point. But more to the point, what do we want comedy to achieve, and where is the best place for comedy to do it?

Jon Kern:

[EDITOR: Shortly after the HowlRound meet-up, Jon Kern fell into a time portal and was flung into the year 2033. Using Future Technology and the Suspension of Disbelief, he was able to send a cryptic message back to Peter Nachtrieb the First on the state of comedy in the theatre/theatre at that moment.]

Save...save all. Polar bears forced to oceans...bred with great whites. Shark bears on land! Shark bears in the White House! Shark bears on Broadway! Only want red meat and...revealed family secrets. Met my Future Self. Time paradox. He so broken. A husk of ghosted imagination and neurotic rage...frothing that he once had to know the term "incel" when "asshole" would have sufficed. Me ask me about comedy. Me said "Jokes. Funny. Comedy. These are three different concepts blended and blurred by subjectivity. 'Comedy' can lack jokes and be funny, or have jokes and lack funny. 'Jokes' can be nestled in drama as much as comedy as much as a mix of both. 'Funny' can be strange or comforting or provoking or nihilistic. More than style, what matters is being moved, being made to feel, and thus transformed from intellect into emotion." So bored I punched myself. Give me Sharkbears! Save...the last...donut. Save...

Very wise and profound.

[EDITOR: that's how Jon ended his dispatch. "Very wise and profound." We aren't sure we agree and we kind of presume he wrote those words first and just assumed whatever else he wrote would merit that description, but then again he sent a message through space and time. So we felt we owed it to him not to make cuts. Trust us: there was a debate.]

Sean Daniels:

I was deeply inspired by the comedy convening.

As someone who has worked in multiple theatres where I watched us struggle annually to find “small cast comedies” and “charming holiday shows” - and yet when we finally had some commissioning money, didn’t ask for those, but instead focused on things that allowed the theatre to feel woke, even though we all knew the theatre would never actually produce them.

WHAT? In what other industry do you clarify a revenue based need and then decide it doesn’t look cool enough to get you three of them?

But I was mostly struck by my own role in holding it all back - how we all perpetuate that comedy is a second class citizen. Everyone in that room had an incredible amount of craft and rigor when it came to making jokes. They all had spent decades identifying the musicality that comes with any well timed joke or situation – and yet when people asked about our next comedy, we all acted demure. As though even we believed it was a second class citizen and didn’t want to be thought of as overly invested in such a crude art form. We all admitted we often down played multiple productions and box office success of comedies – as if it wasn’t real work, as if exploiting one of the few things our art form does that other can’t (600 people laughing at the same time) isn’t real theatre. As if joy wasn’t a value of our field or us personally.

Then again, it’s not just us – no one wins an Oscar for being amazing in a comedy. How many Genius awards go to people writing hilarious scripts? How many awards are there for great comedies? (I think the answer may be 0)

So, like all change. I realized it needs to start with me. We only produce new work and we produce a lot of comedies, and yet even I tip toe around being overly proud of them because I’d like to be thought of as a real artistic director. But it’s time, time to admit loudly that joy is a core value of ours, and that we respect the true craft it takes to write a joke that can still be funny when the playwright isn’t there to explain it.

Also, I brought my 4 month old baby to the convening – and sometime she slept, and sometimes (especially when we were livestreaming) she really wanted to talk – and you know who was awesome about it? Comedy writers – so who knows, maybe they’re funny AND decent people after all. I wouldn’t have guessed that.”

Lila Rose Kaplan:

“I’m Tired of All This Drama” aka The Comedy Convening was a little different from what I imagined it would be. I suspected we’d dive deep into discussions of comedic craft and the development of comedies. (Which we did.) I expected we’d commiserate about the treatment of new comedies by the American Theatre. (Which we did quite vigorously.) I thought we’d make each other laugh. (Happened for sure.) But what I didn’t anticipate were soulful conversations about comedy’s purpose and power. Comedy is dangerous. Comedy is beautiful. Comedy provides a much needed release. Comedy connects us in times of profound disconnect. I left the convening with a renewed sense of purpose.

Dustin Chinn:

I had two prevailing takeaways that bookended The Convening. The first was a lack of a running definition of what makes a play a comedy. Our differing standards and aesthetics are generational, informed by relationships to popular culture, technology and training. Some attendees and the keynote made an appeal to the classical definition a la Aristophanes, yet I can't remember a contemporary non-musical/parody play in recent memory that had a "happy" ending.

My second takeaway was a deepening sense of how economics and class shape the biases and politics of theatre programming. I didn't expect that the suggestion to cede dead playwright slots to the living would be so controversial. And trying to come up with a database or Kilroys-esque list felt more arbitrary the longer I wrestled with it. The desire to be taken seriously as a comedy writer by established theatres isn't the same struggle as gender parity or greater racial/ethnic representation.

That said, my personal passion remains the same, the recognition that I'm having serious discussions even when my delivery is ridiculous. And that's about as academic I can get about the work.

P.S. big ups to those snack cakes.

Wendy Macleod:

A room full of funny playwrights grew serious when we discussed issues of representation and we had more questions than answers. Can an able-bodied playwright write a disabled character? What if they're working with a disabled actor on the project? Can a playwright of color write characters of a different race or ethnicity? Does research make up for the gaps in firsthand experience? Do we have to limit our characters to those that align with our own identities? Do white playwrights or male playwrights have to stop writing altogether to make room for other voices? Is there room for social justice comedies?

Julie Dubiner:

I remember seeing The Name of the Rose - I don't actually remember when I saw it. I think it was right before I went to college and my life became organized around being a member of the improv comedy troupe. We took comedy very seriously. We believed in the power of "Yes, and." We believed in the power of a point driven home through metaphor and laughter. And, as I drifted away from pure comedy into theatre work, my memory of the movie became a little hazy, but I remember the monks being killed for laughing. It's lost a little to time (and I even read the novel!), but it was all to make sure that Aristotle's Poetics of Comedy remained....lost.

Would anything be different if Christian Slater and Sean Connery had been able to save the library at the abbey?

I'm not sure. How could I be sure?

In my time working at theatres, comedy and laughter has been held in lesser regard than the weep inducing plays, although my belief in the power of a point being driven home through metaphor and laughter has never wavered. It is a strange thing to see the disconnect between the theatre programmers and the audiences. Forgive me if I am trapped in generalizations, but are there artistic directors who love the funny? Purely love the funny? We all want to be relevant, and have theatre be relevant, and how is it that comedy in all its forms is not held in higher regard? Is there anything more communal than laughing together? If there are any artistic directors who love the funny, I am looking for a job. Or if a theatre is looking for an artistic director who loves the funny, I am available.

I find myself wondering why (Generalizations again. Sorry, not sorry.) we don't like our audiences, or trust our audiences, or feel ok about giving our audiences joy or a point driven home with a laugh. And then we have the nerve to wonder why those audiences are dwindling. Over the course of my derailed career, comedies done well have sold better than depressing shows. There is room for both, to be sure (yes, and), but why is it that every season planning process I have been a part of reaches a climax of confusion as the season falling into focus is filled with all the sad, serious stories and we have to scramble to find a comedy or a musical or both. And then the depressing musicals get tossed in, and we leave no room for joy. Or a point driven home through metaphor and laughter.

Is it a prerequisite for artistic directors to hate joy? Was the murderous monk some kind of proto-artistic director?

Let us pretend they saved the library and that those monks did not die in vain.