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Epic Fail: A Field Guide to Failure and the Art of Civic Engagement

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## ABSTRACT

My dissertation is an autoethnography, tracking my experience creating the *Great Chicago Fire Festival* for and with the City of Chicago. The production was a nearly unprecedented collaboration between an arts organization and a major municipality. It involved 7 different city agencies and 3 federal departments; more than 6000 city residents assisted its construction and it drew over 50,000 spectators for its finale performance. As an historic document, I draw upon primary sources to track and reflect upon my personal experience balancing the needs of the many stakeholders. Special focus is given to the ways that the practical constraints imposed by our government partners presented themselves over time and how those forces and our responses to them ultimately exerted a powerful influence on the shape of the final production. In explaining the choices and how and why they were made, a literary apology takes form that illuminates the moral and aesthetic judgements upon which the festival was built.

The 2014 *Great Chicago Fire Festival* was widely considered a spectacular failure and became a political flashpoint. Where the dissertation serves as a field guide is in its diagnosis of the causes of that failure and the nature of the media turmoil that followed it. Here the dissertation incorporates a series of secondary sources to provide an analytical framework and reveal very practical guideposts for future practitioners. Analyzing reporting structures within city government reveals counterintuitive paths to minimize regulatory impingement. J. Mark Schuster's discussion of 'urban ephemera' helps illuminate the conflicts that surfaced between community stakeholders and city officials concerned with promoting a particular image of their city and ultimately provides a means of avoiding aspects of those inevitable conflicts. The extensive research of Yochai Benkler and Marshall Ganz about forms of social organizing illuminate the unseen consequences of early public positioning. In the end, my analysis of the failure of the *Great Chicago Fire Festival* serves as proof of the old adage that failure is our best teacher.

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## INTRODUCTION

This dissertation is a piece of advocacy. I advocate for a certain form of theater, one which I will come to call civically engaged theater. This form harkens back to theater's origins (open air productions, festivals, pageants, and ritual) but is itself wholly new. It is a participatory form, one that actively blurs the boundaries between makers and spectators, between product and process, between subject and object. It is a form of theater aimed at building not narrative or theme or beauty, but relationships. It is a living, breathing form of theater that exists not on a stage, or even a street, but in the collective experience of a citizenry. Ultimately, I argue, it is a form that realizes theater's highest potential, both aesthetically and politically.

Theatrically, this piece of advocacy wears a mask. The dissertation presents itself as a forensic analysis of a large scale public failure. The "crime," as it were, was a failure to deliver on the promised culminating moment. For the week prior to October 4, 2014, three Victorian houses floated in the middle of the Chicago River with signs on them beckoning to the audience: "Come watch me burn!" with the date and time below. When the appointed hour arrived, however, the fires did not light. "Epic Fail" is a deep and many-tiered investigation into how the 2014 *Great Chicago Fire Festival* came to such a risible conclusion.

Why didn't those houses burn? How had this piece of civically engaged theater failed to deliver to the 16 collaborating community-based organizations from seven different Chicago neighborhoods, along with nearly 6,000 people from all walks of life, the young and old, the wealthy and the impoverished, voters and the previously incarcerated? How had it succeeded in gathering over 50,000 to its inaugural event and failed so spectacularly? How had it navigated six different city agencies, from Streets and Sanitation to the Chicago Fire Department, and three federal agencies (the Coast Guard, the Army Corps of Engineers, and the Environmental Protection Agency), and somehow failed to successfully light a wood house on fire?

The answers to these questions will serve to further two important conversations currently taking place in and around the field of public art.

The first conversation is nicely framed by Shannon Jackson and her collaborators Johanna Burton and Dominic Wilson in the introduction to their collection *Public Servants: Art and the Crisis of Common Good*.<sup>1</sup> They open with a reference to Jurgen Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, in which the public sphere was "extolled as an arena of vibrant exchange and as a fundamental precondition of cultural and political critique."<sup>2</sup> This is the vision of the public sphere that excites many practitioners of civically engaged art. As Jackson *et al* point out, it is also a hotly debated view of public space. Habermas' conception of the public sphere has been revised by a series of post-structuralist thinkers until we are faced with very contradictory views of the vitality of debate in the public sphere. As Jackson *et al* write, "The 'public' may be celebrated as open engagement, and yet, in the very next breath, it may be castigated as bureaucratic state control. From one perspective, publicness is about freedom, but from another, it is the embodiment of constraint."<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, a vital debate surrounds many city-sponsored arts festivals like *The Great Chicago Fire Festival*. In “Arts Festivals in the City,” Bernadette Quinn sees a mismatch between the explosion of arts festivals in cities around the world and the amount of thought put into them.<sup>4</sup> Quinn points to widely divergent views about the economic effectiveness of such festivals. If such festivals are being produced to provide distinction to cities in an international marketplace, Quinn calls out research that demonstrates that as often as not they have the opposite effect of further homogenizing the urban experience.<sup>5</sup> So when Quinn asks: “Could not urban policy-makers be persuaded to conceive of arts festivals in terms of quality of life, cultural and social outcomes and not simply in terms of their economic and image creation outcomes?”<sup>6</sup> the forensic analysis of *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* provides at least one well-documented answer.

The second conversation is much more prosaic, but no less important. It is held mostly among aspiring practitioners seeking to understand the mechanics of collaborations between artists and municipal governments. As municipalities have become convinced of the economic value of vibrant public spaces and lively streetscapes, a series of funding strategies have developed to promote them, and the funding has promoted a wide array of strategies. Creative Placemaking, Tactical Urbanism, Participatory Planning, Urban Acupuncture, Livable Streets, Pedestrian Centered Planning, and Pop Up Galleries are all burgeoning practices that seek to deploy culture to activate public spaces and promote citizen engagement.<sup>7</sup> Little attention is being paid, however, to the mechanisms that oftentimes determine the form these strategies will ultimately take. The municipal codes and public policies, and the disposition of those that enforce them, was as powerful a variable in the final form of *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* as

any other. As much as budget size and festival concept, the formal and informal collaborative arrangement between the artists and the city shaped the event. A careful analysis of *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* can serve to bring attention to the important formative dynamics between artists and the municipal governments that are increasingly turning to them to generate tourism, economic vitality, and what those in the creative placemaking industry call “vibrancy.”

If more can be learned from mistakes than success, this study should be an excellent teacher. Dissecting this particular manifestation of civically engaged theater will reveal its inner workings, the skeletal structure and the musculature that moved it. As I probe each system for the fatal flaw, I hold that system up against a presumed model, searching out telling variations and analyzing them. What was the nature of the collaboration with the City of Chicago and how was it established? What were the regulatory frameworks that grew out of that relationship, how were they arrived at, and how did they determine the final shape of the production? How were the coalitions built and how sturdy were they? What engagement strategies were deployed, why, and which established firm foundation? In the course of the analysis, an operational model reveals itself side by side with a specific, inevitably flawed, example. What unfolds, almost inadvertently, is a field guide of sorts, in which common pitfalls are named and identified, and endemic paradoxes are highlighted and explored.

As a study of the failure of *The Great Chicago Fire Festival*, “Epic Fail” serves the field by providing first hand, detailed historic data and analysis of a nearly unprecedented collaboration between an arts organization and the government of a major United States metropolis. But this is only its surface value.

When the mask comes off, I am writing not as an analyst, but as an artist. And I am not focused on the failure of a particular work, but on the potential of the form itself and its ability to forge coalitions, empower communities, affect and shape the image of a city, and, ultimately, to create meaning. This is where “Epic Fail” is a piece of advocacy.

There is a passage in Krzysztof Wodiczko’s “Strategies of Public Address: Which Media, Which Publics?” that captures the struggle of a thoughtful, critically engaged artist practicing in public spaces.<sup>8</sup> He begins by calling out a kind of “bureaucratic exhibitionism,” what he identifies as “liberal urban decoration.” Since the 18th century, bureaucracies have treated the city as a “monstrous public art gallery,” seeking to “enrich” the public domain with “the most pretentious and patronizing bureaucratic-aesthetic environmental pollution.”<sup>9</sup> Nor, however, will he concede to the idea promoted by many situationists that spectacle has become all consumptive, annihilating the possibility of truth and meaning—as Wodiczko calls them: “apocalyptic visions of urban design and environment suggested by Jean Baudrillard in terms of ‘cyberblitz’ and ‘hyperreality.’”<sup>10</sup> He takes issue with Mark Guillaume’s characterization of the contemporary downtown as nothing more than “a ‘signal system’ for touristic consumption.”<sup>11</sup> In the end, Wodiczko finds a path. His essay is a piece of advocacy. He is writing within the situationist agenda. He is seeking a meaningful form, one capable of revealing and subverting the insidious and manipulative reach of capital. It is still possible, Wodiczko insists, “to establish a critical dialogue with state and real estate architecture. . . . Not only is it still possible, it is urgently needed -- that is, if we are to continue the unfinished business of the situationist urban project.”<sup>12</sup> Wodiczko’s answer is a specific kind of public monument, a memorial built from the

memories and experiences of ordinary people and unavoidably broadcast into high profile public places.

Ironically, this is likely to be the greatest contribution of “Epic Fail”: not to speak to the nature of the failure but to testify to its successes, to hold up *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* as an example of a form that builds on the situationist urban project.

When Nicolas Bourriaud coined the term “relational aesthetics” in a catalog for a show in 1995, he was seeking to define a new artistic movement that he saw developing that circumvented the grasp of capital.<sup>13</sup> He followed up with a book on the subject in 2002. Bourriaud’s *Relational Aesthetics* established an aesthetic theory that accommodates the receding importance of the artistic artifact and provides a new foundation for performance and ephemera.<sup>14</sup> Bourriaud saw “an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interaction and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space.”<sup>15</sup> Relational art, he insists, “is not the revival of any movement, nor is it the comeback of any style. It arises from an observation of the present and from a line of thinking about the fate of artistic activity. It’s basic claim—the sphere of human relations as artwork venue—has no prior example in art history, even if it appears, after the fact, as the obvious backdrop of all aesthetic praxis.”<sup>16</sup> (44).

Indeed, this is where *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* targeted its work: on building unexpected connections and relationships where the social fabric had been ruptured. It never intended to produce an artistic artifact; it wasn’t going to change the physical contours of the cityscape. It was an ephemeral event targeting the experiences and relationships that constitute the city. As I worked on *The Great Chicago Fire Festival*, hanging in my office, above my desk,

white against a black background, in all bold caps, was a quote by Jacque Ranciere, that referred to Bourriaud: “Art no longer wants to respond to the excess of commodities and signs, but to a lack of connections.” Not on the version hanging above my desk, but in the book from which it is drawn, the quote continues: “As the principle theorist of this school [Bourriaud] writes: ‘by offering small services, the artist repairs the weaknesses in the social bond.’”<sup>17</sup>

I pulled the Ranciere quote from a *Documents in Contemporary Arts* collection entitled “Participation.”<sup>18</sup> The passage was highlighted and called out by the collection’s editor, Claire Bishop, a British art critic. Not coincidentally, it was Bishop who is often credited with bringing the art world’s attention to this new form with an ArtForum cover story. The first paragraph of “The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents” catalogues a variety of works from around the world that reflect a “recent surge of artistic interest in collectivity, collaboration and direct engagement with specific social constituencies.”<sup>19</sup> As Bishop writes, “This mixed panorama of socially collaborative work arguably forms what avant-garde we have today: artists using social situations to produce dematerialized, antimarket, politically engaged projects that carry on the modernist call to blur art and life.”<sup>20</sup>

It is into this third conversation, about meaning-making and participatory art, that I believe “Epic Fail” may make its most valuable contribution. *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* was conceived within the situationist project and it stands as one of the largest scale projects in that vein. The contours of the failure revealed in “Epic Fail” turn in on themselves and, to my eye, reveal instead a success in form and practice. “Epic Fail” outlines a viable “social practice,” as Claire Bishop would call it.

I call *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* “civically engaged theater” and see it as a subset of what Bishop identifies as “social practice.” Mask off, the effort of “Epic Fail” is to describe a theater practice that fulfills its potential as a shaper of cities.

The methodical and comprehensive search for the cause of the failure of *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* unexpectedly reveals an outline of how a civically engaged theater piece can create meaningful participation in ever widening spheres. It shows how, at the culminating event, those spheres of participation become as prominent a part of the theatrical experience as the production itself—indeed, become inseparable from it. And further, I argue, what is experienced is not a theatrical event, but a moment of togetherness, of *communitas*, that reconfigures the attendants’ understanding of place and what’s possible in it.

The flipside of failure is aspiration. To understand where something missed the mark, one must have clear view of the target. In searching out the origin of the failure, I almost inadvertently reveal the source of its strength. In the effort to understand the scope of the failure, I reveal the full range of its potential.

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Wearing the mask, I am the perfect forensic analyst. To the extent that there are records and artifacts and primary data, I have them. To aid in my analysis I have email and correspondence and journal entries. I have budgets and official reports and drafts of reports and budgets. I have photographs and video and meeting notes and agendas.

As much as it was anyone's, *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* was my project. I conceived it; I raised money for it; I gathered a core team of collaborating artists and engineers and social organizers to facilitate it; I advocated for it among the city's political leaders and civil servants. I sat in most every pivotal meeting, both official and informal. I know the confusion that sat behind pivotal decisions. I know that a decision was taken not to cover those houses in tarps, to protect them from getting too wet. I know why it was taken and how it affected their flammability. I know the battles lost and won and the way that those fights shaped the final product and affected its outcome. I know that the reason the only fuel on the barges were four small propane canisters was the result of hours of infighting and procedural spats with the Chicago Fire Department. No final report on *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* would be replete without that information.

Of course, this intimacy with the project is a double-edged sword. I know *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* the way a parent knows their child, perfectly well and not at all. I have the data but not the perspective. My knowledge about *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* is distorted by love and ego and shame. It's skewed in equal parts by guilt and pride, and by identification at a nearly biological level. There's a reason that doctors don't operate on their own children. I am not capable of objectivity. "Epic Fail" is not a coroner's report, it is a eulogy and like any good eulogy, it seeks to create an acute sense of loss.

Where that intimacy may undermine my job as an objective analyst of the failure of the festival, it strengthens my real project. I don't have a critic's luxurious distance. My advocacy is grounded in the real, material experience of a practitioner. Even its most theoretical musings are tied to the actual.

Moreover, it doesn't emanate comfortably from the halo of success. This is not a nostalgic exercise. The comfort of the present is not feeding a glorification of the past. The sting of failure is still fresh. This is advocacy heavy with the weight of loss and, to my mind, that makes it a more rare and credible voice.

That this is a personal story does not mean that it lacks rigor or methodology. The first thing a community organizer learns is to own and share their personal story. That's how trust is built. But knowing your own perspective is only the first step. The next step is much more difficult, it is the rigorous practice of listening. As Soyini Madison puts it: "We don't stop at our mirror reflections, but recognize the resonances that ripple and expand to a thinking about thinking 'a metasignification' that inherently takes our contemplations and meanings further out, beyond our own mirrored gaze."<sup>21</sup>

Methodologically, I borrow heavily from the work of Madison. In her book "Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, Performance," she builds on the theoretical framework laid out by Dwight Conquergood's concept of the dialogical performative in order to outline a powerful path for the autoethnographer. As a professional creator of performance, this framework has deep resonance for me. For Conquergood, the dialogical performative is a self-reflexive act that allows the self to enter into dialogue with itself and its subjects.<sup>22</sup> It reveals to itself its positionality, its subjectivity, and, most of all, its openness. The dialogic performative necessitates listening, and as such, it is generative, capable of participating in the constant becoming of self and culture. Madison sees the possibility that writing itself can be an act of dialogic performance, and in "The Dialogic Performative in Critical Ethnography" she outlines a methodology and ethical foundation for achieving it. I have followed it closely.

“Epic Fail” is an autoethnography. It is deep and rigorous look at my experience making *The Great Chicago Fire Festival*. It carefully reads the social context in which I made *The Great Chicago Fire Festival*. It inspects the large-scale government and non-profit systems through which I was moving to make them; it carefully tracks how those systems influenced me and, both directly and indirectly, shaped the festival and my disposition toward it. “Epic Fail” observes the way that the different cultural communities into which the *Festival* entered altered and affected the ways that we spoke and thought about it, altering both my perception of it and its potential, but also its form and content. I reflect on the ways that a wide array of social customs pulled the *Festival* in many directions until it found a particular form around which they seemed to converge. I have worked hard to listen and observe and reflect in an open and deeply honest way.

In general, artists are comfortable in the realm of the personal. It is oftentimes the deep dive into the personal that serves as fodder for their art. My own work pattern is very different. My interest has been in facilitating the voice of others. I create platforms on which others can stand; amplifiers through which others can be broadly seen and heard. That’s what *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* wanted to be: a massive public platform on which others could stand and speak and become and, in so doing, change the dynamic of their community, neighborhood, and city. Ironic, then, that in order to share this grand ambition, I have to reveal myself so completely. No more ironic, I suppose, than that the failure of *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* should be the best testimony to its successes.

## CHAPTER ONE

### All In

"You are a trouble maker."

The speaker was Ra Joy.<sup>23</sup> At the time Ra was the head of Arts Alliance Illinois. From their website: "Arts Alliance Illinois is the state's leading voice for the arts and arts education. Through advocacy, research, and collaboration, we give voice to a creative state."<sup>24</sup> I admired Ra and the work he was doing in the world. I wanted him to like me. I wasn't sure this was a good sign.

It was May 12th of 2014. Redmoon Theater, where in one form or another I had been artistic director for over 20 years, had just begun our community engagement processes for the *Great Chicago Fire Festival*. We were scheduled to visit Ra's Bronzeville neighborhood for a kick-off event some time later in the month. I didn't know if he was even aware of the endeavor.

We had been called to the table as a part of the Chicago Community Trust's "On the Table" initiative. Similar meetings were being held across the city. "On the Table" was

organized by the Chicago Community Trust to gather people "from all walks of life and socioeconomic circumstances" to share "ideas for building and maintaining strong, safe and dynamic communities."<sup>25</sup> Our gathering was hosted by another pillar of philanthropy, The MacArthur Foundation,<sup>26</sup> and the guests at our particular table were drawn primarily from Chicago's performing arts community.

One way of understanding the range of cultural organizations represented at the lunch would be to place them along a single line representing geographic distance from downtown. At one end of the line would be the officially ordained and tax incentivized "cultural district."<sup>27</sup> From there, organizations could be plotted onto the line as a function of their distance from the cultural district. So at one end we would find Goodman Theater which acts as an anchor to Chicago's "theater district".<sup>28</sup> At the other we might find the Albany Park Theater Project, so named for the location of their 25-year residence in that ethnically diverse neighborhood on the northwest side.<sup>29</sup>

Without much replotting, this same line would also accurately indicate budget size and top salaries for executive leadership. It would also likely represent an accurate read of the relative age of the institutions and the median age of their leadership and, in all likelihood, of their audiences as well.

That same line also reveals a clear and well-established, though rarely addressed, social hierarchy.

So deeply entrenched and understood is this hierarchy that it served as the unspoken speaking order at the luncheon that afternoon. The head of cultural giving at the MacArthur Foundation started things off with a kind of stump speech citing MacArthur's track record in

supporting Chicago's great cultural institutions and calling out their accomplishment and aspirations. When she was finished she handed it over to the Executive Director of the Goodman Theater who thanked MacArthur for their support and vision and then spoke about new plans to expand their civic engagement.... And so it went, on down the brightly invisible line.

I spoke in the middle of the pack. This conformed to the model. At the time, Redmoon was a mid-tier institution located 22 blocks from the cultural district, with leadership in their mid-forties and a relatively young audience counterbalanced and stabilized by an older patron base.

I'm not sure what motivated me, but I chose to challenge the implicit hierarchy.

Watching the conversation unfold around the table, I realized that the same line that so accurately described geography, social stature, and institutional stability, would also fairly describe the range of strategies for addressing the gap in cultural opportunities. The downtown institutions practice a kind of "trickle down" theory of culture. They create or present canonically recognized "great work" and then facilitate and subsidize access to it and, at times, to the techniques, processes and facilities that yield it. At the other end of the line, those furthest away from the downtown cultural district and the least resourced, sit the organizations committed to providing local residents with the opportunity to explore and express their own stories.

So the Goodman Theatre website boasts that they are now the first theater with a facility dedicated entirely to practicing "arts as education." At the Goodman they "expand their reach" by calling people to their premiere facility at their downtown location.<sup>30</sup> Albany Park Theater Project is a company of neighborhood youth. They gather at APTP (as it's often called) to write,

direct, and design their own productions. People come to their storefront theater from all over the city to see their productions.

The further from the street, the higher the status. Literally and figuratively. There is the physical distance from curb to stage. The more steps it takes to get from the street to the stage, the higher class the institution. That experience of distance is powerfully magnified by custom. The valet service, the box office, the coat check, the bar and lobby area, the usher, the double air-lock entry threshold accented by a dramatic change in lighting, the assigned seats, each adds a kind of perceptual cushion between everyday life and the theatrical experience. With the lowering of the house lights, the sanctuary has been sealed shut and the curtain can rise. The real life of the city is far, far away.

This is what I said, or tried to say. Why, I wanted to know, is "great art" the art that is so far removed? Does that really make sense? Isn't it actually far more interesting to make art of this very real world? Whether you are pursuing beauty or powerful social insight, isn't it far more challenging, and likely far more rewarding, to do that in and among the world and its people? How amazing would it be to see something that revealed truth and beauty where it was rarely found? How beautiful and surprising and powerful if we could see art participating in social change at the very moment of its presentation? So that art and action blend into one another to become a singular individual whole? How fantastic to create the possibility for neighborhood expression downtown, to blur the lines, to see and hear from the rarely seen or heard. How moving and validating and affirming would it be to hear the voices and experience the imaginations of those whom our culture so readily discounts? Wouldn't that be great art? Wouldn't that reflect a powerful and meaningful insight into our culture, our city, and ourselves?

I was almost finished: "What if the MacArthur Foundation could be a truly visionary leader, facilitating a new form of work, one that is engaged with rather than removed from the very real, very confusing, quite amazing and complicated real life of the city?"

The cultural zeitgeist has shifted, I argued. The new wave has arrived. It is crashing to the shores of American contemporary culture. Within the art world, the recognition being thrown at artists like Rick Lowe, Mel Chin, and Chicago's own Theaster Gates is testimony to the hunger for new forms of socially engaged public work.<sup>31</sup> The academy, too, has turned its attention to this work. Harvard has added a department to their Graduate School of Design called "Art, Design, and Public Domain".<sup>32</sup> A special position in the University of Chicago's Provost's office has been created for Art and Public Life.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps most significantly, civic leaders and the funding community have very pointedly turned their heads in this direction. We once had to fiercely defend our desire to sit equally in what had been identified as two distinct spheres (art and social action). Now this combined interest has become a new and fashionable standard. "Placemaking" has become part of the cultural vocabulary and now has a juggernaut funding organization behind it in the NEA/Private partnership ArtPlace.<sup>34</sup> In pop culture the rise of the flash mob, video graffiti, and the widespread embrace of street art all reflect a similar hunger for art that reaches into the public square and grasps our everyday lives. When was Chicago's foundation community going to catch up? When would we drop this completely Old World status structure? Art for the Wealthy is Great Art and Art for the Masses is Entertainment at worst and Charitable at best? When will the MacArthur Foundation accept that the canon of Western Civilization is being productively challenged by art generated and presented outside of our venerable Institutions which still consume the vast majority of MacArthur Foundation's

cultural allowance? Art by graffiti artists and urban planners and spoken word poets, in backyards and public parks and....

It was someone else's turn. I needed to give it over. I can't remember what was said after me, but I'm sure it was not unlike what I'm sure that the other people around the room heard me say: "My thing is the most important thing! Look at me! Fund me!"

After the meeting, as people were filing out the door or gathering around the funders for one last solicitous "Thank you", Ra found me at the elevator. He stood too close. "You are a troublemaker," he said. I tried to read his face. Was this a compliment or a criticism? I had been called a troublemaker most of my life, but only recently had I understood it could have a positive connotation. How did Ra mean it? I couldn't tell. I know him much better now and know that he was being entirely supportive, but I love that at the time he left it inscrutably vague.

On the way back to the office, I replayed the conversation in my mind. Was I being truthful or angry or self-promoting or belligerent? I really had no idea. All of the above? Most likely.

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To many, I'm sure that it looked like Redmoon wanted to have it both ways. We wanted the credibility, stature, access and stability of a critically acclaimed arts organization, and we wanted to challenge that orthodoxy with alternative work in public spaces created collaboratively with neighborhood-based community organizations. We wanted all the traditional benefits of success while having the creative latitude of an outsider.

Of course, we did. There should be nothing surprising in wanting it both ways. More surprising and worthy of note was the degree of expectation that accompanied it. Wanting it both

ways was a fundamental building block. It was a core belief that one fed the other. Great art would be engendered by real work in the community. Real work in the community could be solidly built on the foundation of great art.

An early meeting with a prominent funder, Sarah Solotaroff of the Chicago Community Trust, called out the conflict that would come to define us, a conflict that we could barely see and refused to accept: "Sounds to me like you need to decide if you are a performing arts troupe or a community organization."

We had come together as lovers of theater. We were young, a few years out of college. Each of us had some professional experience and a whole lot of education. We believed in the theater as a transportive medium, an empty box that could become anything, hold anyone, and take you anywhere. We were students of the craft from a variety of backgrounds, from different disciplines and from different schools within each of those discipline.

We thought we were forging a new way, a combination of robust physical action, stylized movement, puppets and masks and mechanical contraptions. Together we marveled at the way that theater craft could transform *papier mache* into a living being, a swinging ladder into a bell tower, a lithe twenty-year-old in a mask into a stooped hag. We leaned into it the implicit contract between audience and theater-maker, stretching the spectator's belief with puppet and mask and transformational object, rewarding their generosity with wild retellings of narrative classics.

At the same time, we wanted to be citizens. It was important to us to be contributing members of our community and to weave our enterprise into our lives and the lives of our neighbors and friends. Making theater had brought us together and we weren't surprised to see

that it brought our community together. In our working and poverty class neighborhood, we watched as the most unlikely friendships and alliances grew up around our process. We saw that theater was the object around which new and unexpected conversations arose and that out of those conversations, exciting work came into being.

So we pursued both paths simultaneously. We didn't see any conflict. We were focused on the craft of theater making. The better we were at our craft, the better we seemed to be at creating transformational theater events both inside and outside the theater space. Sometimes we made shows on stages in theater houses for a paying audience. Sometimes we made events in public spaces for whomever was there. Sometimes we collaborated with highly accomplished professional artists and sometimes we worked with people who had no experience in the arts at all. Most interesting was when we mixed it all together.

There was a period of little conflict or tension. We were young and we were living largely outside the traditional economy of non-profits. We were a largely volunteer based company. Everyone had days jobs. The little grant money we received went directly to support the material costs of our programming. We did as much as we could with whatever we had.

Blair Thomas founded Redmoon with his Organic Theater production of *You Hold My Heart Between Your Teeth* (1989). Redmoon Theater was officially incorporated some months later with Laurie Macklin, a choreographer and dancer, as a co-founder. In the early years, Redmoon was influenced by a swirl of exciting and diverse voices. My childhood friend Claire Dolan led a few shows when she was in town. She brought with her years of experience working with Bread and Puppet Theater in Glover, Vermont, where she spent half her time. Claire's

aesthetic, pace, and social vision were a driving force and a constant inspiration.<sup>35</sup> Redmoon's annual *Winter Pageant* was very much born under that influence. Jessica Thebus and Tria Smith both led projects, sometimes in collaboration with one another, sometimes with others. Tria had gone to Oberlin College with Blair and Claire. She was powered by social agenda and a performer's sensibility.<sup>36</sup> Jessica, too, had a particular social vision and an impulse toward visual storytelling, but much more from a director's perspective.<sup>37</sup> Robert Rolston and Michael Culligan, who at that time formed the music group Math, were key forces, Michael both as a musician and painter and Robert as much for his music as his preternatural and incongruent gift with children.<sup>38</sup> Jeff Dorchen and Mickle Maher, who were key forces of Theater Oobleck, were also huge contributors to Redmoon's narrative sensibility.<sup>39</sup> It was all very fluid and quite dependent upon who was in town, who was busy with another project, and who could financially afford to give up their paid work for a period of time.

Tria was the pivot around which many of the key relationships turned. She had reconnected me to Claire whom I had known since I was four years old but lost touch with after graduating from high school. Jessica and Tria had studied theater together in high school at the Piven Theater workshop and then Jessica and I found each other at Northwestern University. When I left that program in 1991, Tria introduced me to Blair. He was wearing a top hat, reaching out from the top hat in front of his face was a stick. Dangling from the stick was a carrot.

It was December of 1991 when I first met Blair. Redmoon had been in existence nearly two years and already it had attracted a following of artists and patrons. Together they had mounted a version of *Moby-Dick* on the beach, a backyard shadow show in the Chicago

neighborhood of Pilsen, and a small puppet show that played in a patron's living room entitled *The Suitcase, The Apartment, and the Refrigerator*. Laurie and Blair had already split, realizing that their partnership was more conceptual than real, and Blair was looking for a partner to help stabilize a thing that was very much in flux.

At the time, there was virtually no structure to Redmoon. Blair had signed a lease on a small storefront on West Armitage, in Logan Square. It was filled with *papier mache* puppets, some hand tools and raw materials. Off to the side was a small office with a desk and a phone. In the top center drawer of the old oak desk was a checkbook whose register was illegibly scrawled in pencil. Some weeks later, when I scrutinized the register, I determined that they had survived for two years on just over \$19,000 and countless favors from countless friends.

When Tria introduced us, Blair was a week removed from Redmoon's First Annual *Winter Pageant*. He was standing among a series of musical instruments: a bass drum balanced on a folding chair, a bugle, and a desk top full of noise making devices. In addition to conceiving and directing the show, he had tasked himself with composing and playing the soundtrack. Blair had designed, if not built, most all of the objects and puppets in the show and was therefore also responsible for their repair and upkeep. With his tuba wrapped around him and a cardboard carrot bobbing comically in front of his face, he smiled and asked if I wouldn't like to act as a director for a bit. As was his inspiring way, he welcomed whatever came his way and channeled it as best he could. For the next week we gave shape to a show I could not have imagined a week earlier. We worked with a wonderful fluidity, stepping in and back as the show required, sometimes reworking scenes, sometimes discarding huge chunks and starting from scratch.

The fluidity of this collaboration was best exemplified in *Long Live the King* which we wrote and rehearsed in the intense heat of the summer of 1998. It was during *Long Live the King* that I learned to say this to incoming performers and designers: "Blair and I are co-directing and designing. This can be confusing. We may very well give you overtly contradictory direction, maybe within minutes of one another. We are comfortable with that, excited about it even. We trust you will point out the contradictions so that we can discuss them openly, figure out the different impulses and what they reflect, and come to consensus about them. This is an exciting part of our collaborative process. We are confident that this open dialog, sometimes through and with you, makes the work deeper, more textured, and ultimately better."

*Long Live the King* was performed in and around a 26 foot tall steel frame tower that was built onto the back of that same farm cart. It marked the beginning of a shift from puppetry to gadgetry. We had used simple machines (levers, pulleys, cranks) before, in service to the puppetry. Here, for the first time, we used them on a grand scale as both a narrative force and a source of spectacle. This had a powerful effect and was, for me, a tremendously gratifying turn because it put the human form back into the center of our performance style. Among other things, this seemed to open up exciting opportunities for our annual Halloween spectacle.

The tower traveled laying on its side on that same single axle farm trailer that we had decked out for Art in the Parks, an initiative of the Chicago Park District that sought to enliven underutilized public parks with arts programming. The show began with the raising of the tower. It was hinged to the base of the cart and, with the help of a winch, we would pull the base from the vertical position slowly toward the cart floor. At a certain critical moment, the weight would no longer be pulling the tower back to its horizontal position, but would instead bring it crashing

down to the surface of the cart. At the show's start, though, the base of the tower was perpendicular to the stage floor. It was there, against the vertical wall of the tower's base that a young maid stopped and watched as a balloon tied to her baby carriage floated up into the sky and away. The string had been cut by a character dressed all in black and carrying a scythe: Death. While the maid watched the balloon, Death ran to the winch and began to furiously crank.

The ratchet sound of the crank caught the attention of the Doctor, a character dressed in all white with a medical bag and thick glasses, who stood at the far perimeter of the park. The Doctor looked to Death and Death looked to him. They froze for a moment, eyes locked across the distance. And suddenly the Doctor was running at a full sprint toward Death. In response, Death redoubled his cranking and, as he did, the tower moved closer and closer to the tipping point. At this point the audience had fully absorbed the situation: as the balloon distracted the Maid, the tower was being cranked to the point at which it would come crashing down atop the baby carriage. The Doctor was going to execute a life jeopardizing rescue attempt. At the final moments, the music took us into slow motion and the Doctor dove dramatically across the stage, pushing the carriage to safety before the tower crashed into position, shaking the entire structure, tower and base alike. As the Doctor rose to brush himself off and adjust his glasses, Death slunk off disappointed.

The Doctor was played by Frank Maugeri. I found Frank in 1996 at the *Frankenstein Parade* on Navy Pier. It was 98 degrees in the shade of our staging tent. The humidity was oppressive. We needed someone to march in the Victor Frankenstein puppet. This meant climbing into a very complex backpack. Connected to it were all the features of the puppet: a helmet attached to a pole that ended at the mask representing the doctor's head; two additional

poles sat at hip height and each was each connected to a paper mache hand; the white cloth tent that had been painted like lab coat. He never hesitated. Even as we tightened the chin strap down to the point of jaw immobility, he nodded his assent. About halfway down the parade route, I notice a trail of water behind the doctor puppet and lifted its skirt to see what was happening. Frank was chugging away, vigorously operating the arms and turning his head intentionally, and dripping sweat behind him. He hasn't slowed down since.

Frank moved through most every position available at Redmoon, including a few that he originated. He ran our free Kid's Art Class for a few years and, along with Tria's Dramagirls program, created the prototype for the current Youth Spectacle. He was our first shop manager, a role supported by a pivotal grant from the Joyce Foundation, another mainstay of the Chicago arts funding community.<sup>40</sup> He served as our first Marketing Director (even if he didn't have the title, he did have the responsibilities). He directed a *Winter Pageant*, a school touring production of *Old Man and the Sea* (2000 and 2001), which, along with Jessica Thebus, he further developed and retitled *Salao: The Worst Kind of Unlucky* (2002) for Chicago Shakespeare Theater. He was Associate Artistic Director for many years during which time he continued to create brand-defining theater shows like *The Cabinet* (2005). He was also one of our most distinctive and commanding performers, drawing such memorable characters as Boss Man in *Sink, Sank, Sunk* (Tom Ping Park, 2004,) a show he also co-directed. By the theater's close it was largely Frank's aesthetic, in our marketing as well as our productions, that people identified as Redmoon. In 2009, when I took leave to become Artist in Residence for the City of Chicago, Frank became Artistic Director. When I returned, Frank became Producing Artistic Director and

I was Executive Artistic Director. No matter the titles, we worked together to create the artistic framework of Redmoon until it closed at the end of 2015.

That we were trying to create work out of doors, presented us with constant practical challenges. These were expected. Not as expected were the social stigmas attached to creating work in public spaces.

Where an artist presents her work is an important decision. It houses the work, providing its immediate physical context. More than that, it provides the work's greater social context. The venue provides the frame through which a work is seen. It is never neutral and always powerful.

As a study in perception and context, *The Washington Post* famously sent the world famous violinist Joshua Bell into a subway station to play a \$3.5 million violin. He played Bach's "Chaconne," considered one of the most difficult and complete pieces of music ever written. He played for roughly three hours.

To some, the response of the commuters was surprising. When asked what he thought the response might be to Joshua Bell's subway performance, Maestro Leonard Slatkin, director of the National Symphony Orchestra, predicted subway congestion. Maestro Slatkin imagined people gathering in numbers as great as 100 and donations in excess of \$175. The entire episode was recorded by hidden cameras. Over a three-hour period, only seven people stopped for any length of time. 27 people made donations, most on the fly. Bell, considered one of the world's finest violinists, took in \$35, or .000,001% of the purported value of his violin.<sup>41</sup>

The story became a viral phenomenon. It is still popping up in my inbox from time to time, mass emailed by a friend of my mother's as a "stop and smell the flowers" story. But to

those of us working in public spaces, Joshua Bell's unimpressive "take" is no surprise whatsoever. Performing without an established venue is a serious handicap.

Each and every design feature of a venue has been deeply considered and engineered so as to highlight the virtues of the art within it. In a museum of fine art, it is all about lighting, the color, tone and, texture of the walls, the quantity and quality of the space around the work. It's about the curatorial text that may or may not accompany a work, the sonic environment, the humidity and air quality. In a concert hall, acoustics are king, with every consideration given to the most pure conveyance of the sound from the instruments to the audience's ears. A theatrical venue considers acoustics, sightlines, and the audience experience from box office to cushioned seat. The finer the circumstances, we believe, the more focus a patron can give to the artwork.

A subway station provides no such consideration.

One needs to learn to perform in a subway. The same techniques that can compel an orchestra hall may not win over a subway station. Conventional wisdom suggests that the techniques needed to take a train platform are crude and lack the subtle virtuosity that can mesmerize D.C.'s Kennedy Center. I don't buy that. Either experience can be dumbed down and fall into the worst form of spectacle. Style can always win out over substance, no matter what the venue or occasion. What makes an event substantial, however, can be vastly different from medium to medium. As someone who has practiced in both scenarios, my experience is that both practices benefit greatly from virtuosity. If Joshua Bell had been standing on a red velvet podium, with a scaffold of theater lights above him and a real-time video screen showing close ups of his fingerwork, you can bet the response would have been quite different.

A simpler intervention might have been to post a sign. If hanging above the performer had been "The Kennedy Center presents Joshua Bell", the results would have been quite different. A sign would have signaled to commuters the cultural value of the performance. That's the power of a brand. What photograph adorns the splash page of a website is a not an insignificant matter. It is an imprimatur, lending value from a well-established record of success to its contents. As you can be sure would be present at the Kennedy Center, it spells out the person manipulating the violin is Joshua Bell and is considered one of the world's finest violinists.

My first encounter with Redmoon was in the subway – not literally, but a fair parallel. Twelve musicians and actors and some giant puppets were performing on the lakefront early one morning in 1990. They were performing a puppet opera adaptation of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*. The characters of the story were played by actors wearing “pole puppets”: a pole strapped into a backpack held a giant *papier mache* head measuring around three feet in diameter. The performers were entirely visible underneath these giant floating heads. They moved along the beach in fairly simple choreography while also singing the lyrics to the songs which told the story. Blair Thomas, Redmoon's co-Founder, played the tuba and led a small brass band. *Moby Dick* itself was a giant windsock, inflated by the breeze rushing into its open mouth, and carried by three singers, each hefting a pole with a vertebral ring onto which the sock was sewn.

The day I saw the show, the wind was fiercely blowing from north to south. So when the whale headed north along the lakefront, it was a full and gorgeous, its whiteness contrasting the ever-changing horizon line behind it. The image was only augmented by the intensity of the

puppeteers beneath it as they worked with all their strength against the wind, digging their feet into the sand with each labored step. The pink dawn sky brought the blue faces of the characters in pursuit of the whale closer to us. The wind blew the strains of voice past us and away, barely audible.

The crowd that gathered was like me, a sympathetically minded group of friends, interested in the people involved and the art they were making. As in the subway, a few passersby may have reoriented slightly to take the production in for a moment, but there was no more commitment than that.

The whole thing was a massive ephemeral gesture. It was there for a moment, rising to an unexpected grandeur and then gone, an incidental blip against the comparative eternity of the Great Lake. It was one of Redmoon's first events, performed four times, always at dawn and at a different beach along Chicago's lakefront.

By most any account, Blair and I were an unlikely pair, but among his many strengths was his openness and ability to gather people to him. I had just mounted a large-scale adaptation of Federico Garcia Lorca's early puppet plays.<sup>42</sup> I worked with Claire Dolan, who was woven into the group of people working on Redmoon's shows. There was no decisive conversation between Blair and me, no formal decision taken; it just made sense for us to all work together and so we did. In the early years, we made dozens of ephemeral events together with a fluid group of collaborators, improvised parades through neighborhoods, shadow shows in abandoned lots, pageants in public parks; there was even a multi-media show in a patron's living room. They were experiments in form and intervention. We didn't care about an audience at that time. We

were focused on learning, learning about our form, about one another, about the way that it acted in the world.

At the time, we were just fine playing our violin in the subway. It didn't much matter if anyone stopped to listen. We were just learning how to play.

Redmoon's storefront studio was in a residential neighborhood, down the street from Chase School, the neighborhood K through 8. Back then we were still working primarily with masks and puppets, mostly constructed from *papier mache*. That meant that our work materials were the stuff of a particularly messy and wild art class: strips of paper, clay, buckets of wheat paste, chicken wire, plastic wrap, cans and cans of donated house paint, and a screw gun that was never where it was supposed to be. We were a magnet to the kids who passed us everyday on their way to or from school.

It simply made no sense to ask them to go away – not ethically, not artistically, and not practically. They became our first interns. Together with them we re-purposed those big blue heads from *Moby-Dick on the Beach* (1989) into the *First Annual Winter Pageant* (1991). They became a massive three headed monster whose vicious tyranny over a "Town of Innocents" had to be ended by a single arrow from the "Blessed Bow of an Angel". The show was made and performed by community members and aspiring artists like ourselves. Our friends came, their parents came, some others came. It was reviewed and appreciated and eventually became a wildly popular annual tradition that sold out week after week.

It was on the strength of that work and work like it that we were awarded our first commission in 1994. The Chicago Park District had begun a new initiative, called "Art in the Parks," which aimed at bringing artists and arts organizations into public parks identified as

particularly under-utilized and in neighborhoods with limited cultural offerings. These were far flung parks in some of the poorest and most underserved communities in Chicago. For many of us, that program was a crash course in urban poverty. With this commission, we created an interactive show that played out of a fold out stage built onto the back of an old single axle farm trailer. There were stilted basketball players, television heads, cardboard dogs with articulated jaws and wagging tails, a series of Emergency Medical Technicians with doctor bags full of fantastic and horrifying instruments.

It was all very derivative of Peter Schumann's famous Bread and Puppet Theater, only with an urban twist.<sup>43</sup> Following their model, we were prepared to roll into a park and engage dozens of volunteers in order to make a show for hundreds. Each performer was prepared to take his puppet series and work with up to 10 volunteers to create a short performance choreography. The ballplayers choreographed a series of passes and a dunk; the doctors performed an increasingly ridiculous battery of tests on a volunteer from the audience; the dogs walked in a circle, sat together, rolled over in sync, and ultimately took a simultaneous and comical dump. The individual acts were sewn together through music and an emcee. It wasn't formally sophisticated but its action in the world was dynamic. We could feel the medium's potential. It could be formally sophisticated and socially meaningful. We felt we could, at one and the same time, make an artistic contribution and a social one as well.

One day on the way back to our storefront studio, our caravan took a wrong turn into the Robert Taylor homes, a notorious public housing project on Chicago's West Side. Enticed by the sight of the puppets strapped to top of the van, a few hecklers taunted us into getting out of our vehicles and doing an improvised show for them. People abandoned their basketball games and

left the steel playground to gather and watch our puppet spectacle. For an encore that afternoon we put on stilts and wore our basketball player puppets on our backs and improvised stilted puppet game of hoops.

We were excited. The Robert Taylor homes was the ultimate testing ground. And we discovered that the show did what it promised it would do. It was well-devised show, and it was able to spontaneously incorporate volunteers and still draw an audience and keep them. But nobody cared. Nobody noticed. To the Park District, we were just another form of paper plate mask making. If not us, the slot would have been filled by someone else, a storyteller, a one-man band, a generic craft station. Nobody was taking us seriously.

At the time, it felt as though we were doubly cursed. We were working in a folk medium without irony in public spaces. This was not likely to warrant serious consideration. The medium was mostly disrespected and the social enterprise was largely discounted. To most, puppetry was for kids or the stuff of bad television shows. More than that, the effort of using art to gather and empower people, while noble, was not often considered the act of a serious artist. The largely unspoken but widely held prejudice, still present today, is that outreach is reserved for the second string, the unproven or unworthy. Art as social action is largely seen as a compromised form of art as formal expression.

After emptying the trailer of puppets and restocking them, Blair and I sat on the stoop and reflected. We needed to make a theater show. We needed an undeniable epic. If we garnered critical praise and the attention of arts community, it would validate our enterprise and we could take that momentum out into public spaces with greater effectiveness and legitimacy. We needed to make a massively ambitious show inside a traditional venue. We needed to make something

that was going to be seen by an art going audience and would demand critical attention. It should be an adaptation of a classic novel, we decided, something of undeniable seriousness, ideally a literary masterpiece. It was a business plan, a strategy. By establishing our art credentials in a more accepted venue, we would create more opportunity and audience for this work in public spaces. We decided to give *Moby-Dick* another go; this time on a stage, with lights and sound equipment and wings and even a fly system.

One of the currents running through Redmoon Theater's *Moby-Dick* (Pegasus Players, 1995) was a strategic and methodical dismantling of popular misconceptions of puppetry. If our work was to resonate in the world of art, it had to demonstrate the sophistication of the medium. It had to undercut the perception of puppetry and a naïve folk form. The show started with hand puppets oversimplifying an incredibly complex narrative with reductive silliness. From there we told the story four more times, each time allowing for greater and greater complexity and abstraction. With each telling we changed the puppetry style, along with the narrative focus. The production started with a goofy hand puppet reduction of Melville's great story but it ended in a collision of puppetry styles and scales, self-referential and undeniably grand and sweeping.

"This is the story of a man and a whale." A performer stood on a coffin downstage left. She wore a puppet on each hand. The whale on her left hand opened its big mouth and reached over to engulf the head of the puppet on the other hand. "The whale wins." Ishmael, the stories first person narrator, had just appeared from a coffin which had floated across a giant 'sea' of black parachute fabric, an epic image generated by eight unseen puppeteers carefully manipulating and handing the coffin to one another before feverishly crawling to their next

location. Tria Smith played Ishmael. When she finished the short puppet show, she placed the puppets into the coffin and pulled out an ornately painted ceremonial mask with hemp rope hair and thrust her face into it. She then proceeded to pull this sea into her coffin, close the lid and stand upon it again. From that post, atop the coffin that had saved her life, she narrated the remainder of the show.

The second pass at the story added much more detail, selecting eight key narrative moments and depicting them with small bunraku puppets and miniature sets that were brought in and out of a flat proscenium arch which had flown down from the flies. The puppets were roughly hip height and fully articulated; they possessed a girth and weight and lifelike motion. Three puppeteers, in traditional bunraku style, dressed in all black and worked in tight coordination to animate the puppets. It was as though each of the puppets was accompanied by three shadows who scrupulously attended to their every movement. Simultaneously spooky and alarming, the effect suggested the ineluctability of the story, the powerful sense one gets from Melville's novel that aboard *The Pequod*, individual agency had been annihilated, that the motions of both the ocean and the ship were somehow following a predetermined arch toward a fatal conclusion, controlled, as it were, by forces beyond the reach or consciousness of the individual players.

Blair played the mono-maniacal Captain Ahab in the next telling of the story. Like all the other actors in the play, we saw him process across the stage in a complex and heavily mannered choreography to accept his mask from the guts of a ten-foot whale. As the proscenium that held the Bunraku puppetry of the second part lifted, the whale entered from stage right already harpooned. Manipulated by two poles, each operated by a single performer, the puppet circled

the stage, slowly, apparently propelled by the momentary muscular thrust of its massive fluke. The whale grew weak and lay on the floor. Ishmael approached the whale unceremoniously and reached her hands down toward the whale's underside and ripped open the puppet to extract an ornately painted mask. She held the mask in the air and, using language adapted from the novel, described the character that the mask would come to represent. It was a highly ritualized moment, accenting the rituals of performance as well as the ritualized violence of whale hunting.

Once the characters were masked, Ishmael stopped narrating, masked himself and joined the onstage action. Whereas before the actors had been moved into action by the narrator's voice, here they seemed subject to the lights and the music. The action began to swirl around the narrative moments. The scenes would rise and fall out of a foundation of choreographed movement. Maps fell from the flies as a bed rolled on from stage right with Pip, the cabin boy, sleeping in it. As Ahab moved toward the bed, painted cardboard flames thrust up and down out of slots in the bed, surrounding Pip who began to thrash back and forth. Ahab peeled through the maps to pull Pip out of the flaming bed and to carry him offstage. At the same time, the Harpooners came on from the opposite side, moving in tight formation, thrusting and pulling and bobbing their over-sized, helmet headed, masks. So it proceeded to a climactic conclusion in which all the scales collided and intermixed.

While the 25-foot-long Moby Dick puppet circled the stage, a masked version of Ahab struggled with a kicking and thrashing miniature version of himself. While the whale puppet tightened its circle, the battling Ahabs were joined by a third, a giant version standing over 10 feet tall, who embraced them. On the opposite side of the stage an intricately crafted miniature of The Pequod bobbed and spun and sank.

People loved it. It was a critical and popular hit.<sup>44</sup> Martha Lavey, who had recently been named artistic director of the Steppenwolf Theatre came and offered us a slot in her next season's calendar. She became a life-long mentor.<sup>45</sup>

By some accounts, it was the imprimatur of Steppenwolf in 1996 that put us on the cultural map.<sup>46</sup> Of course, that's over-simplistic. We had just mounted a very successful production of *Moby-Dick* at the Pegasus Players<sup>47</sup> and for 5 years prior to that we had been performing in local theater festivals, in streets and parks, and on beaches throughout the city. To the powerful community of cultural arbiters, however, we were a relatively unknown and confusing organization. The opportunity to perform at Steppenwolf, and the stature that accompanied it, did a lot to make that confusion more attractive than off-putting.

An artist's career must be managed. There is a social value to each artistic presentation and one of the most overt signals of that value is its venue. The hierarchy of venues is well known and fairly undisputed. Venues have status and that status is transferred to the art within them as fluidly as it flows from the quality of the art to the venue. It's a carefully managed and monitored relationship between art and institution and audience and critic, each party playing an essential role. It is a highly intricate social system not unlike high school cliques. To the outside eye, the tables of a high school cafeteria will likely seem uniform and indistinguishable. To the student, it's a complex system of social signaling and posturing that leads to a very clear understanding of who sits higher on which social ladder, where crossover can occur and where it is absolutely prohibited.

Broadway carries a cache, no matter the venue, but there are certainly distinctions within that class. Broadway speaks to commercial viability. Institutions like Brooklyn Academy of Music (popularly known as “BAM”), and the Wexner Center for the Arts (“The Wexner”) and Chicago’s Museum of Contemporary Art (“the MCA”) have high art performance credibility. Steppenwolf carries a lot of cache. It does not have the intellectual stature of the MCA or the establishment credential that accompanies regional theaters like the Goodman. It has something different but no less valuable. Steppenwolf are the upstarts: started in a church basement; named after a rock and roll band; known for its visceral performances and raw emotion. Steppenwolf is the established outsider, the iconic rebel, its cultural value confirmed by the ensemble's television and movie fame.

As the first outside company to ever perform on the Steppenwolf stage, we had been anointed, or at least we could cast it as such. Pitched right way, it was instant credibility.

We didn't understand the opportunity at the time. Jane Sahlins did, and so did Joyce Sloane. Jane Sahlins was the founder and CEO of Chicago's International Theater Festival. If you saw a great international theater production in Chicago during the 1980's or 1990's chances were that Jane had something to do with getting it there. Joyce Sloan was a producer at Second City. They were good friends, lovers of theater, and admirers of Redmoon. So when we called Jane and told her that we had been invited to perform at Steppenwolf, she got us together with Joyce Sloan for a conversation. That afternoon, sitting at a small white Formica table in Jane's kitchen, they spelled it out for us. This was a very real opportunity. With some strategic thinking and some well-placed introductions, we could build a real company. We could transform our

fledgling operation, still reacting to every opportunity without any real overarching plan, into a legitimate organization.

And so it was. With Jane's help, we were introduced to arts patrons and began to be invited to parties and power lunches. Jane put together a "steering committee" to help guide us and to win us new friends. More days than not, we had a lunch or coffee with some new potential friend, or some old friend to try to win their support. Before long we were throwing an opening night benefit to raise money for the production and we were being invited to apply for grants that were previously out of reach. It was all very invigorating and fast moving. We understood that this was a defining moment. Literally. Because suddenly we were being asked questions about who we were, what we did, and what we wanted to do. People wanted us to have answers. What was our vision? Where did we see the company in five years?

We needed to get organized. We needed consistent answers to those questions. We needed a mission statement, an organizational chart, a recognized board of directors, an exciting schedule of upcoming programming. If people were to care about us and, especially, if they were to express that care and belief in dollars, we needed to be able tell them what it was exactly that they were caring about and supporting.

Thus we began the insidious task of self-definition. Over the next few months we wrote and rewrote our mission statement numerous times. We drew up three- and five-year plans, organizational and artistic. We hired our first employee, a managing director, who would be responsible for all development and marketing and administration. We devised a new logo, created a filing system, bought a computer, and began a mailing list. We created long term programming plans, business goals, organizational charts. *Moby-Dick* had been the result of a

collaboration fluidly led by Blair and me. The two of us were the ones having the meetings, writing the mission, strategizing the next steps, and raising the money. We cast ourselves as the leaders. We took titles. Drawing from George Wolfe's *The Public Theater*<sup>48</sup>, Blair took the title Producing Director, and I became Artistic Director. "You have the leather jacket," Blair told me. "Artistic Directors have leather jackets. I don't own one." In 1995, it seemed both accurate and insightful.

In preparation for our Steppenwolf debut we devised a year of investigation into the story of Mary Shelley's 1823 Gothic *Frankenstein* and the cultural mythology it spawned. This experimental process brought us together with numerous populations and into many different venues, both public and private. We arranged to work with high school students on a summer work program out of a local social service organization. At the same time, we led a summer 'institute' for students of the School of the Art Institute. We watched an apparently endless stream of movie versions of the story, from Andy Warhol's *Flesh for Frankenstein* to the futuristic sci-fi 'Frankenstein, to Roger Korman's bloated and incomprehensible *Frankenstein Unbound*. We read the Classic Comic, watched *Scooby-Doo*, ate Frankenberry Cereal, and collected innumerable images of the monster from pop culture to high art. We talked about the themes of creation and rejection, about parenting.

In the end we worked to create two public parades. One parade would take place on Navy Pier, Chicago's most heavily trafficked tourist destination. The other would process down North Avenue through pre-gentrified Wicker Park, not yet a haven for boutiques and cafes. We would deploy the same puppets and effigies, the same band and the same music, but with different

choreography and to very different audiences. We worked together every day for six weeks. We crafted large scale effigies and a parade sequence focused on the brutal treatment of the monster. We sculpted a number of large heads: a mayor, a doctor, a monster, a series of masks. We devised a hat for the mayor with an arrow that vacillated between 'yes' and 'no'. The monster was based on the Boris Karloff character in the 1931 James Whalen movie, with bolts coming out of its neck, tall and long-headed. It took a team of six to wheel him down the street and to turn his head using a pulley system. We made a series of winged 'fire birds', from cardboard and paint. We assembled a band of four drummers, two trombones, a tuba, and a saxophone that no one could hear and we took to the streets.

The parades were a chaotic explosion of movement and color and noise. More than anything, we had a great time together, in process as well as in parade. What affected me most was a simple thing. We had been accompanied down North Avenue by a police escort. A single car rode ahead of us with lights flashing, and another followed behind. There were police at the intersections, stopping traffic and signaling us through. To the teenage kids on the work study program this was near incredible. They were more moved by the presence and collaboration of the police department than the thousand or so smiling spectators. On some immediate and deep level, it turned things upside down for them. It was as though it had never occurred to them that the police might be on their side. That their work, their thoughts and art, their chaotic expression, could be officially condoned – that it could warrant street closure and police cooperation – surprised and moved them.

In the fall of 1996, we began the more detailed process that would render a final show, based on the same source material, for the Steppenwolf Studio Theater, as it was then called. In

this second phase, we looked more closely at the construction of the story and the performance style. We worked off a storyboard and an 'action plan' that had been developed out of the previous months of exploration. In this way, we began to define a rich and edifying process for the development of our work. The first phase happened in public spaces, working with non-professionals, community representatives of the immediate neighborhood in which the presentation would take place. It was an explosive investigation of the narrative material slated for our next show. It was a loose and playful exploration of the populist veins of the narrative, yielding whimsical and ingenious thematic storytelling angles, as well as fun and immediate material expressions of the story. That playful period of expansion would be followed by a 'closed door' workshop phase in which some of the discoveries of the first phase were to be developed further and given more nuanced attention and critical scrutiny before being manifested in an indoor venue of high repute.

In this way, we satisfied our social urge to do public work, to work within community, and to offer a means of expression to people for whom that was a rare and valued opportunity. At the same time, it fed our theater art by creating a long and polyvocal approach to the building of a narrative that would then be mounted in a traditional venue where it could receive the kind of scrutiny and critical attention that art deserves. We chose to interpret the commercial and critical success of Redmoon Theater's *Frankenstein* as a validation of our process.

When we presented to funders and patrons, this working process was as point of pride and distinction. We would alternate our time between the social mission of our work and the purer artistic mission of the work, satisfied that each fed the other. The better we got at our art, the better we became at facilitating the community voice in persuasive and spectacular ways.

The deeper our community collaborations, the more varied, textured, and grounded our theater shows became.

In a world still digesting Brexit and the election of Donald Trump and the general rise of populism on both the right and left flanks, it feels a lot easier to argue for the benefits of addressing the gulf between the cultural elite and pedestrian reality. It was a much more difficult argument in 1995. That these two different worlds have little appreciation for one another has become a choral lament. We were bridging that gap. We were acting as a bridge between the reality of our working-class neighborhood and the high art cultural scene.

As easy as it is today to see that our political reality will benefit from a more fluid dialogue between the street and the ivory tower, to argue that such a dialogue will benefit the cultural elite remains obscure and difficult.

In 1998, just after mounting *Long Live the King*, Blair left Redmoon.

"Too many keys," he said holding up a massive ring holding keys to our shop, our office, the church where we ran our neighborhood arts programs, the locked boxes in which we kept our tools at both locations, the drawers where we kept our financial documents and cash box. I knew that it also had the keys to the used step van we had recently purchased, the one that was already exhibiting transmission problems, as well as to the keys to the apartment building storage where we had stashed his hand puppet theater stage that wouldn't fit elsewhere. I felt the keys dangling from my belt loop get heavier. "Too many keys." I understood completely.

It was true. We were running an organization, a sizable one. That had never been the intention. We had set out to be artists, not bookkeepers, managers, and fundraisers. As the

organization grew, we had to continue to redefine it. We were young artists and our vision was in a state of constant evolution, but the non-profit ecosystem required clarity and consistency and predictability. We were being asked to fix a thing in flux. With each new artistic impulse, there were organizational reverberations and it was up to us to transform the organization accordingly. We had to create new rhetoric, new systems, bring on more people, find more money. Feed the beast.

Our artistic ambitions were big and bold. The same summer than Blair left the company we had been dreaming of a putting a show on a barge and floating the barge down the Mississippi River, playing in river towns all the way down.

With those big ambitions came infrastructure and with that infrastructure came responsibilities, responsibilities that manifested themselves in keys: Keys to lock up the tool cage; to barely reliable pick-up truck; to the shop; to the file cabinet with the cash box and check book; to the building where we had an office and to that office; keys to the church where our community programming was held and to the closet in that church where our stuff was stored.

There was another truth behind Blair leaving. Blair and I split along mission lines. There was an unrecognized tension between our theatrical work and the larger scale community-based work. Our union split along those same lines. Though his first act was to enter a Buddhist Monastery to study and to take his vows and become a monk, it didn't take long for Blair to start another theater company. Blair Thomas and Company was sharply distinct from Redmoon in two telling ways: first it was named after him and was to follow his vision and his voice; and second, it was committed to "chamber puppet theater," small, tightly-crafted shows that would play in art museums and other prestigious venues. With Blair's departure, Redmoon went in the opposite

direction. I doubled down on our civic engagement. Our annual Halloween parade, once a four block parade through the Logan Square neighborhood, became a collaborative venture involving nearly a dozen different community organizations. We launched an effort to create a new outdoor spectacle each year in an under-recognized public park.

To my eyes, our split reflected a divide that had been growing for years without our full recognition, one that had been identified in that early funder meeting, the divide between our community-based work and the professional theater productions.

Each year, we created new theater work for theatergoers, original works and heavily stylized and puppet centered adaptations of classic stories like *Frankenstein* and *Frankie and Johnny* (Steppenwolf Theater, 1997). At the same time, we were creating a range of work for public spaces with a very different audience in mind. These were community interactive events, parades and pageants and one off urban interventions. They were made for unintended audiences, for friends and neighbors and passersby, for those who would likely never spring for a high-priced theater ticket.

The two enterprises were grounded in similar aesthetic impulses and practices. Both were driven by a highly visual style that pulled from re-appropriated ancient theater technologies. We were using robust physical action reminiscent of mime and circus and clown; we deployed many of the tropes of medieval pageantry and of 18th century mechanical spectacle; we were very interested in mask and puppetry and how it intermixed with live music.

A few of us were taking the lessons from one medium and applying it to the other and creating a powerful cross-fertilization between the two. The public performances honed our craft. It demanded different but complementary skills. Performing in public spaces taught us how to

quickly grab a viewer's attention and how to quickly establish a contract with our audience. Working in non-traditional venues forced us not to rely on lighting to open and close a scene or to draw focus.... Our work on stages likewise fed the stage work. For the few of us who were practicing in earnest in both venues, it was deeply empowering. But we were the exceptions. Most felt the need to choose one practice or the other.

Many of our more skilled collaborators were not interested in tackling the complications inherent community engagement. These artists were focused on developing their individual artistic voices, on honing their skills and practicing their craft. These artists wanted the controlled environment of a theater in which a more nuanced practice could be developed and read and appreciated. They appreciated the social mission that brought us into streets and parks and beaches and neighborhoods. They often showed up to lend a helping hand, but they understood, as did we all, that working outdoors meant that a majority of their time would be spent on things other than art making. They would be asked to lug things back and forth, set up an arena, get there and back, help to clean up afterward.... Working in unconventional spaces almost necessarily meant a series of mechanical and tedious tasks and most of our core performers chose to put their limited time and energy toward productions that would provide them opportunities for more focused practice of their skills.

Our collaborators for the parades and pageants and community collaborations tended to be people committed to the social mission of the theater. They were willing and even excited to work with a group of amateurs, to deal with the strange and oftentimes unaccommodating performance environments. Nobody enjoyed freighting the stuff around, loading it in and out of trucks and vans, through parks and beaches, but some were able to see it as part of the process

and embrace it. Oftentimes these were people in alternative careers who wanted to maintain connected to the arts. They were arts educators or social activists with a history in the arts or lawyers who had maintained an arts practice. There was also a steady stream of young artists just starting out in Chicago who wanted to see what we were doing and exercise their craft, no matter what the scenario.

The difference was magnified by a structural momentum toward the traditional theater work. The indoor work fit into a well-established conventions. There was a known and fairly inflexible economy built into the traditional theatrical enterprise. Pay scales, rents, fees related to theatrical productions were established and standardized. In addition, assuming a reputable venue, indoor work would be reviewed in the local papers. Those reviews would have impact on ticket sales and grant applications and general cultural cache. We couldn't skimp on our indoor productions, so they became relatively well-funded and robust.

On the other hand, the work in public spaces had no conventional path to follow. We set our own standards. If we were fortunate enough to get them, reviews did not impact sales because the events themselves were most often free to the public. We had much more flexibility when it came to the outdoor work. We were making our own rules. So we stretched every dollar and pushed way too hard.

Without even realizing it, the institution bent around these realities and we developed one set of more qualified, professional artists who engaged the theatrical work and a second group of generally less experienced artists to make the public work happen. The problem was that expertise weren't developing. People passed through Redmoon on their way to somewhere else. They performed in a couple or three shows and then found themselves unable to continue. The

community centered work was a labor of love, demanding too much from everyone involved. We burned through people at a surprising clip. We had unknowingly become a revolving door for the well-meaning community minded artist.

The organization evolved to reflect these two different standards. Our more finely tuned performers and artists were engaged in the theater shows while a second tier of enthusiastic and generally younger artists and performers committed to making our work in open spaces. Our audience fell out along similar lines. Our larger donors and patrons of fine art were likely to only see our theater work, despite their interest and belief in our mission to bring work into public spaces. The advocates for our community-based work were most often activists and social workers and community organizers.

Despite ourselves we had grown two separate companies: one committed to traditional theater work and the other toward more publicly minded projects. Two organizations meant twice as many keys.

Blair took a few months to close down his participation in Redmoon. We created a goodbye ritual for him. Each person gave him a small memento of their time together. I gave him a model theater I had crafted out of a wood door I had saved from our first shop. He gave me a ring full of keys.

Running a non-profit can be a window into some of the best of what humanity has to offer. I got people at their best, at their most well-meaning and selfless. Whether donors or volunteers, board members or staff, the people who chose to give to Redmoon sought to make their city a more just and beautiful place. They were at their aspirational best.

Redmoon survived only because of a consistent flow of human kindness. We were dependent on the beneficence of philanthropists, the wisdom of pro bono consultants and counselors, and on an endless stream of volunteerism at every level. While other arts organizations rely on philanthropy to keep them afloat, few could boast the kind of engaged donor base that sustained Redmoon.

I knew most of our donors and volunteers. I had personal relationships with many of them. Over time some have become close friends. They were generous and amazing people who believed in our mission and wanted to help us grow and prosper. Whether people were giving hard earned money or gifting family wealth, whether they were providing high end expertise or coming to help us paint our walls, these were acts of willful generosity. They were inspiring and heart-warming and a source of genuine hope and faith.

Nonetheless, I struggled with cynicism. Too often I allowed the narcissist in me undermine my experience of the culture of generosity we had created. I felt burdened by the lack of rigor and consistency that seems baked into a volunteer economy. I resented the mechanics of non-profit management.

More than anything else, I came to hate raising money. In a culture so enamored with capitalism and so enamored with "the intelligence of the marketplace", raising money is infantilizing. Dress it up as you will, in the end it is still asking people for their money and more often than not it feels like begging. At least it did for me, but I lacked the particular kind of entitlement that I have seen be so effective in other leaders of arts organizations.

The entire fundraising enterprise is filled with uncomfortable paradoxes. At least it was in our case. We wooed our donors and patrons with a critical reputation built upon finely tuned

adaptations of classic stories presented in some of Chicago's finest and most widely recognized theaters. At the same time, we pitched ourselves to the donor community as a populist theater working in the public arena and using our theatrical skills to foster community and invigorate democracy.

There wasn't anything disingenuous about this duplicitous strategy. It grew in direct response to the real feedback we got from our patrons. It was absolutely necessary. The work in public spaces lent heart and honesty and appeal to the theatrical work, but the public work couldn't stand on its own. It needed to be buttressed by professional credential. Without critical reviews and the association with the cultural cache of established artistic venues, the public work was mostly overlooked or, worse still, dismissed out of hand as "hippy nonsense" (to quote a skeptical funder).

The theatrical enterprise validated our work in public spaces. So, we created an intentional strategy to reinforce our artistic reputation with carefully timed events in high profile theaters. It was part of our business plan. These productions remained our best opportunity to garner critical acclaim, reinforce our cultural cache, and reconnect to the arts patrons and funders who constituted our funder base.

In 2000 I was confronted by two board members who told me that they had concerns, or had "heard whispers of concerns," that our artistic reputation had suffered with Blair's departure. They gently speculated that perhaps Blair was the real artist and I was... the speculation ended there, with an incomplete sentence. Our 2001 production of *Hunchback* was the response. It sold out its run at Steppenwolf, did a short domestic tour of mostly midwestern cities, and ultimately garnered a rave review in the *New York Times*.<sup>49</sup> That seemed to quell those particular concerns.

It speaks to my spiritual limitations that I allowed such moments to get under my skin as much as they did. This was not simple insecurity; it was practical. The two board members and their friends whose concerns they were voicing represented tens of thousands of dollars. If their faith diminished, presumably so would their donations. As a responsible agent of the organization, I had to take those concerns seriously. I didn't feel comfortable writing off the \$20,000 that those voices represented.

As is the case most everywhere, in the arena of nonprofit arts the wealthier the speaker, the more loudly their voice is heard. A friend of mine is the head of physiology at a major university. He is researching Parkinson's. Even there, in a field of objective data and empirical evidence, presumably insulated by the heft of institutional stability, he tells me that he and everyone else in the field revolve around two or three wealthy family foundations and how the disease is progressing in each of the patriarchs who founded them.

I resented letting the tastes and limitations of the wealthy distract me from what I thought was more interesting and powerful work. I knew that we had an important contribution to make to our city and to the theater community, and I wanted to get to it. I wanted to make the work. I wanted to create the objects, conceive the events, find the next great location, meet the next inspirational neighborhood-based organization. I didn't want to be spending my time constructing arguments for the importance of the work. It felt like a terrible waste of time.

Every couple of years, I would allow a development director or a critical mass of board members to convince me that I needed to sit down and construct a more clear and compelling case. I would take a few afternoons in a neighborhood cafe and try to think it all through.

There is a code that we in the cultural community use. It changes regularly to match the current political rhetoric. So whether the particular vocabulary used is "building communities" and "safe neighborhoods," or a more current and higher form of rhetoric like "civic engagement" or "social practice," or even something more retrograde like "diversity" and "outreach," we all know what we are talking about: strategies for addressing the terrific gap in cultural opportunities between the haves and the have-nots.

So in the 90's we rejected the framework of "community outreach," which was the dominant rhetoric of the time, but spoke about "community empowerment" which was the incoming framework. In the aughts, we highlighted our "collaborations" and spoke about "deep partnerships." In the 2010's, we began to incorporate the language of "placemaking." We spoke about "community engagement" and incorporated the current thinking about public spaces, third spaces, and the public square.

But instead of actually thinking anything through with any real critical rigor, I would struggle for a short while and then descend into resentment. I could only see it as an elementary school exercise. Like when the teacher asks what a certain literary passage might mean. Hands shoot up all over the room. It doesn't take long to learn that the trick is not to get distracted by the content of the passage itself or by your own thoughts about it. To get the gold star, I learned long ago to think of the teacher and what she thinks the answer is. Recall what she was saying immediately prior to asking the question. How had she framed the question itself? That's the winning strategy in the classroom, and in my experience, it's the winning strategy in grant-writing and fundraising in general.

So while I might start my work in earnest, looking at our goals and process, I was quickly distracted by thoughts of what "they" wanted to hear. Thus, almost without my noticing, I would entangle myself in cynicism and end up adapting our previous self-definition to conform to the dominant or ascending rhetorical framework of the day.

After Redmoon closed, I was recruited to participate in a funder-initiated project. The funder was interested in shifting the traditional funding paradigm. They wanted to step back, to allow communities to set their own agendas, to assess their own needs and create or identify programs that may address those needs. So the funder called together community leaders for a paid three day retreat. There were some team building exercises. Some introductions to the neighborhood and its perceived assets. And then the attendees were asked to work in groups to propose initiatives. I saw it happen. Though they knew the funders hoped to challenge their own orthodoxy, these community leaders, with years of experience in their fields, put their accumulated wisdom to the side and began to guess, like schoolchildren, what the funder wanted to hear. It was explicit. I heard it said any number of times, on one form or another: "I just want to get those funds released. Whatever it takes. We'll worry about the rest later."

It's difficult not to let a rapt audience convince you that you have something important to say. I have suffered this particular form of self-deception. I have read the attention being paid me to be genuine interest when it was much more likely a function of power. I have been uncomfortably surprised to note that removed from my direct sphere of influence, I am considered less funny, less wise, and generally less worthy of serious attention.

Power is insidious and its physics are difficult to calculate. More than that, to the powerful, taking true stock of the coercive mechanisms of power is a truly unappealing prospect.

It's all just terribly uncomfortable. Who wants to live in recognition that every smile and chuckle and lean is likely born of untrustworthy motivations? No one wants to have to think that their stories are less interesting and their jokes less funny, that their charm less irresistible and their charisma less attractive.

This is why the rich and the powerful create cliques and clubs and generally only hang out with themselves. If they are at all self-reflective, they recognize that they can only truly trust their interactions among those of similar stature. Everyone else wants something from them or is at least worthy of circumspection.

The funders who had called us all together were entirely sincere. They wanted nothing more than to understand how best to get funding into the hands of the people who needed it most. But they couldn't see how power relationships were distorting everything. It didn't matter how many times the funders insisted that they were looking for genuine answers, that they were open to anything the neighborhood was ready to endorse. It didn't matter that they insisted that they wanted to shake it all up, that they were seeking to acknowledge the depth of knowledge and experience in the room and that they were ready to admit to the faultiness of previous assumptions. The people in the room had made careers out of complying to funders' standards. They had spent lifetimes accommodating the wealthy. They knew that no matter the sincerity of the inquiry, the best answer is always the answer that the inquirer wants to hear.

It didn't take me long to understand what a gift I had been given in the form of Nina Schroeder and Alicia Mullen. Between the two of them, they led Redmoon's Board of Directors

for nearly a decade, from 1998 to 2006. They weren't interested in anything other than letting Redmoon be Redmoon as fully as it could be.

Fundraising can be infantilizing, and in the worst way, but like so many things, the corollary is also true. One of the best parts of leading nonprofit is watching it receive the kind of love and support usually reserved for the most fortunate of children. So it was with Nina and Alicia.

In 2002, Alicia was our Board President and Nina was the immediate past Board President. Together they recognized the need to mount a fundraising campaign aimed at bridging the divide between our artistic enterprise and our civic impulse. The Bridge Campaign, as it was called, put funding in place for three important initiatives that would facilitate the merging of our high artistic standards with our site specific, community based work: First, it raised funds committed to hiring a professional administrative staff, and thus liberate the artistic leadership to apply themselves more fully to artistic production; second, the campaign allowed us to move from four different facilities (shop, office, storage, community programming) to a single building; and most importantly, the Bridge Campaign created a 'spectacle fund' to help support the creation of outdoor, site specific work at the highest artistic level.

The "spectacle fund" made possible three large scale site-specific spectacles in three generally overlooked regions of the city. *Sink, Sank, Sunk* (2004) took place in the extraordinary and newly renovated Ping Tom Park, situated at the nexus of Chicago's great transportation systems. *Loves Me, Loves Me Not* (2005) was enacted on the roofs of two buildings that we had sunken into the Jackson Park Lagoons, the one time site of the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. The show was to open the first week of September. Hurricane Katrina decimated New Orleans the

last week of August. Our set looked as though it had been torn from the headlines and our comedy about a reclusive community trying to hide from advertisers had to be entirely reconceived because there was suddenly nothing funny whatsoever that could take place on that set. *Twilight Orchard* (2006) was installed throughout the Jens Jensen masterpiece Columbus Park, drawing people to its hidden wonders.

*Sink, Sank, Sunk* was likely our best show. It took place in Ping Tom Park which sits at a kind of transportation nexus on Chicago's near South Side. Ping Tom Park is between the 18<sup>th</sup> street bridge, the Chicago River, a freight train line, the elevated train (orange line), and a commuter line shared by Metra and Amtrak that runs across the river on a spectacular elevator bridge.

The elevator bridge was our muse. It spanned the river with over 150 feet of double trussed riveted steel is lifted to accommodate boat traffic along the river. There are two massive concrete blocks which act as the counterweight. The entire operation is visible and spectacular. As the bridge rises, the two concrete masses can be seen descending along the steel towers that frame the bridge. At the center of the bridge, on the top rung of the trussing, sits the most unlikely little corrugated metal house. How anyone might get to or from that house is unclear, nor is what they might do in it once there readily apparent.

It was the absurdity of this house against the bulky industrial functionality of the bridge that led us to the story of a Mayor living in a small corrugated metal house perched in the most unlikely way atop a single steel tower. In our story, he is a mayor without a population, a jilted lover whose love loss eventually leads him to psychotic rage and accidental homicide. The

funeral for the victim was a Viking procession down the river, accompanied by fire and rolling chimes.

The funeral was surprisingly effective. It transformed the audience. Where the bulk of the show had been a fast-paced, absurd comedy featuring broadly painted characters and crazy objects, the funeral had an entirely different feel. The audience was drawn to it by the sound of wind chimes and the distant vision of fire. At first only a few were aware, but as it came closer, they stood from their seats and blankets and moved to the river's edge for a better view. There they became part of the show. Suddenly they were cast as the attendees at the funeral. They moved from bystander to active participant.

At any time, our spectacle might be interrupted by one form of traffic or another. A barge, a freight, an 'el'. We were at their mercy. Woven into the performance, then, was acknowledging any such interruption. When the 'el' came by the performers were to stop whatever they were doing – mid action – look to the train and raise their hand in a longing gesture of 'hello'. It was the hopeful wave a child at a passing train, full of the fruitless desire to connect.

We did this for weeks as we rehearsed. It became instinctive. Even in production meetings we'd all stop whatever we were doing to stand and wave. On the final evening of the final performance, the performers stood for the fruitless, but hopeful wave and saw in the train windows, pasted cardboard hands waving back.

We had done it. We had woven ourselves into the city and the city had responded; they had waved back. Attendance was off the charts. Ping Tom Park, where on a crowded day you might find 10 people strolling its paths between the train tracks and the river, was so full of

people that the police felt the need to close it to late arrivals. The first night had probably less than 300 people in attendance. The last had well over 2000.

These site-specific spectacles were shockingly popular. By design they were in overlooked areas of the city, hidden gems in neighborhoods with difficult reputations. That was, at one point, a piece of our mission rhetoric: "revealing Chicago's hidden cultural assets." At most they would run for ten days. There was no protection from rain or from the stagnant humidity of a late Chicago summer. There was no seating. Clean bathrooms were a rarity, plumbing altogether absent. Parking was often an issue, but we were careful to choose sites with decent mass transportation options. That people came at all was, more than anything else, testimony to a hunger for a new kind of urban experience and a more adventurous public than anyone had expected.

As well attended as they were by a select group of young and adventurous urbanites, our funders rarely made it. Few saw *Sink, Sank, Sunk*, our 2001 site specific performance in Ping Tom Park. Fewer still saw *Loves Me, Loves Me Not*, our 2002 spectacle in the Jackson Park Lagoons. Not many ever came to the Halloween events. *Twilight Orchard* (2006) happened in the notorious Austin neighborhood and it was the least attended of all, even if we did hold a special donors' evening that started with a reception in gorgeous old ballroom that overlooked the Jen Jensen designed park. In fact, few of our biggest funders ever actually saw the site specific and community collaborative performances that their funding made possible.

The easy explanation is that it was just too difficult and inconvenient to get there, too hard to plan around, too unpredictable an environment for busy people who make plans. The scarier explanation is that it just didn't appeal to them. They were glad someone was bringing

work to these challenged areas of the city, but they were operating on the assumption that like most forms of "outreach" this was second rate work, of limited artistic merit, noble minded, artistically suspect.

Let's be clear, this is not an unfair assumption. It is based on decades, if not a couple of centuries of well-established cultural priorities: Great art resides in great museums (or palatial private residences); great literature is housed in leather bound editions and entombed in great libraries; great food is prepared and presented in great restaurants; great theater is played in grand theater houses. It makes sense. Great work is to be treasured and protected, so one of the most reliable indicators of its value is the heft and grandeur of the edifices built to house it. These buildings are designed to hold it aloft and separated, safe from the distractions and harm of the chaos and mayhem of the real world. In short, the further from the street, the greater the art.

Yet we are in a moment when these assumptions are being aggressively challenged on most every front. Great artists are taking to the public realm, creating work in open landscapes on urban centers, in social practice and interwoven into the natural and built environments. Exciting cuisine is being explored in storefront restaurants, celebrated in international street cuisines, and moved from site to site in a growing food truck movement. Great works of literature are downloaded to phones and read by some of our finest actors into the ears of subway passengers and bus riders. The finest is suddenly available anywhere and everywhere.

Most unexpectedly, the experience of those great works is not always diminished by its mundane context. Sometimes quite the contrary. Increasingly, people are excited about finding unexpected resonances as they take art into the real world. This is the promise constantly

proffered by smart phone advertisers: the playlist that enlivens the everyday walk; a Beethoven symphony unexpectedly scoring street traffic; or even an app that traces Ovid's characters in the stars when held up to the night sky. They are making a pitch, one that sits on us with increasing comfort: Sometimes the experience of art is made all that much better for its juxtaposition with the irrepressibly mundane.

Only theater seems content to stay put. Here in America great theater remains in great theater houses, and at great prices.

With each step down, so goes the perceived quality. Smaller houses generally suggest lower ticket prices and a dip in the reliability of the product. They are closer to the street, have less lobby space, smaller doors and low-profile marquees. It all sends a rarely contested signal: the closer it is to the street, the more experimental the product; the more experimental the endeavor, the less reliable the product, and the less that can be charged. Steppenwolf Theater now has four venues. The largest, where the world-famous ensemble regularly appears, sits through two sets of doors, beyond the box office, through the lobby, and behind the bar. The most experimental, the one now allocated to up and coming companies, is underneath the parking garage. There is no formal separation between the playing space and the single glass entrance that opens onto the street.

So it is not at all unfair for lovers of theater to assume that Redmoon's work in public spaces, while good hearted, was likely subpar and probably not worthy of the considerable effort it would take to have that confirmed. They were glad to support it, glad to make the experience of theater available to others with less access, but they felt no need to make it part of their finely tuned artistic diet.

*Astronaut's Birthday* (2009) lived in both worlds at once. That's why it was chosen to be the cover image on Redmoon's website. It was a public work, but it gained stature because of its association with the Museum of Contemporary Art. Some people paid for the comfort of reserved seats and valet parking, but others stood on the street, or sat in the public park across the way. It was created by professional artists, but they worked in collaboration with students and community members. The museum provided a controlled context for the performers, but the public plaza and surrounding streets allowed for serendipity and surprising intervention.

*Astronaut's Birthday* transformed the façade of the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) in Chicago into a giant projected comic book. The façade of the MCA consists of four floors of windows; each floor has six 11 by 11-foot windows across. We projected onto the top three rows of windows, creating a 33 by 66-foot screen. Behind each of the windows sat two ordinary overhead projectors. Small, hand-illustrated, hand-colored pieces of acetate were placed onto each of these projectors. Images could be cross-faded from one projector to the next by simply lowering a flap in front of the lens of one machine and raising it from the other. At times, all the windows illuminated a single image of a slowly breathing star-studded night sky. At other times, the action swept across the screen, following a comet strafing the earth's surface. All motion was created by coordinating the slow movement of small images from one projector to the next. The choreography of this show was managed by a conductor of sorts who sat out in the plaza and 'called' the show through a one-way communication system to the performers inside. It sounded like a complex game of Battleship: "1a stand by. 2a stand by. 1a go. Counting one, two, three... 1a stand by. 1b go. Seven, eight..."

We worked with a core of professional artists and over a hundred volunteers, interns and students. The performers were drawn from an arrangement with Columbia College. Many of the illustrators were students from the School of the Art Institute working under the direction of Donovan Foote, a professional illustrator. Donovan worked from storyboards developed by Chris Burnham, a wildly imaginative comic book artist whose most recent project, *Nameless*, is getting all kinds of critical acclaim.<sup>50</sup> Frank Maugeri led the project that we had conceived together. Tria Smith wrote the piece.

We had figured this formula out many years earlier with a similarly conceived project called *Galway's Shadow* (1999). That was a much more poetic expression. Where *Astronaut's Birthday* was a giant projected comic book, *Galway's Shadow* was more of a series of woodcuts. The two had very different tempos and feels, but the basic mechanics were the same. We returned to the form because it was full of unrealized potential, both as a form and as a donor cultivation tool.

At *Astronaut's Birthday*, as with *Galway's Shadow*, we gave backstage tours to our donors both before and after the show. The premise was that dedicated fans needed to see the simple ingenuity that brought the facade to life. What we were really doing was much more layered. The museum was closed to the public. There was limited security presence. That the galleries were empty of people and almost totally silent magnified the grandiosity of the building. We were in a temple to high art and it felt that way. Walking donors through its granite halls, I could feel the carefully constructed glory rubbing off and onto us. We did countless such tours and to great effect.

Mayor Daley came to a public showing earlier in the week. I had always thought of our histories as intertwined. The year that he took office was the year of Redmoon's founding. For years, we did an event in an old ballroom in Logan Square before anyone even knew where that neighborhood was. Mayor Daley attended that event during his first term, before anyone much cared about Redmoon. At *Astronaut's Birthday*, he was chatty and relaxed, joking about everything from the weather to pie in the sky plans to partner with a Japanese firm to create a high speed rail line from O'Hare International Airport to downtown. Afterward a few of us wondered aloud about his buoyancy. Optimistically, we attributed it to his enjoyment of the show. On September 11, 2010, the day after the *Astronaut's Birthday* opened, the front cover of the *Chicago Sun-Times* featured a photograph dominating the page with the headline "Redmoon Rising." Tucked off in the upper left-hand corner of the page was a photograph of Mayor Richard Daley and a headline announcing his resignation after 22 years in office.<sup>51</sup>

Now, nearly two years after Redmoon closed, I can see that my resistance to creating a clear and comprehensible defense of our work was entirely wrong.

I needed to slow down. I needed to put together a more comprehensible argument. Not for the wealthy, not to win funds or new powerful friends, but to gain perspective, for myself and for the health of the organization. I needed to understand what I wanted to do and I needed to be able to put it into words. I needed to be able to be precise about what we sought to do. Out from under the pressure of keeping us afloat, I can see that earnest self-definition would have fortified the organization in any number of ways. It would have made the art better. I would have been clearer about priorities with myself and with my collaborators. It would have brought everyone

into a common understanding of our unique project which, in turn, would have facilitated more facile and transparent decision making.

A more precise and authentic self-definition would likely have led to more funding. At the very least, it would have created more efficient and less tortured communication with funders. Instead of dancing around, trying to find the "right answers", we could have been simple and clear and uniform in our responses and await their judgement.

Most of all, if I had worked harder to make a clear, well argued, credible case for our work, I would have become a stronger collaborator. Both within the practice of making work and within the field at large, I would have been able to be clearer with my working partners.

I also think I would have been able to be a better participant in the field at large. As it was, I was unable to articulate what we were doing without standing in opposition to the mainstream. I can see now that without a good, succinct and positive rhetorical frame, one informed by other experimentation in the field, I isolated myself. With better knowledge and more self-knowledge, I would have been able to be a part of a larger conversation about the state of the form. Together we might have been able to help to guide the critical response to this kind of work and even to open up the field.

As it was, I took some terribly self-defeating outsider stance, one that reeked of superiority and righteousness. I attended conferences for theater makers and sat outside the circle, feeling lost but expressing disdain and impatience. I went to convenings for "thought leaders" in nonprofit theater, but feeling little genuine interest in my project, became more gadfly than engaged interlocutor. I wrote bitter, if clever, critiques of these convenings, and sometimes published them, pushing me further to the periphery.

It was as though I was pushing myself into a corner, closing off options in order to force my own hand.

*The Great Chicago Fire Festival* was our final bet. We went "all in." Like most "all in" bets, it was preceded by a series of smaller bets, feints, and bluffs. Fifteen years earlier, in 2001, I remember dramatically saying goodbye to my fellow community of theater makers. We were all gathered in the Park West, for the annual Jeff Citations, Chicago's non-equity Tony Awards. It was packed with young theater makers from all over the city, drinking and laughing and doing their best to live up to their image of what such an event should look and feel like. Redmoon had been awarded 5 Jeff Citations for our adaptation of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Each citation recipient took the podium for a brief list of "thank yous" and so my name had been mentioned any number of times. So when I went in front of the group of 300 or so, I was quite full of myself and our company and its importance. I announced that Redmoon was saying goodbye to the theater. We were taking our talents to Chicago's public spaces.

We loved our city and we loved theater, and the best way for us to serve both was to take our enterprise into the streets and parks and alleys....

In retrospect, I am mortified by what I can only imagine was received as self-important grandstanding. At the time, though, it seemed to me terribly important and bold. We were foregoing the traditional structure, the one that had supported us and provided a foundation for our episodic forays into the public sphere. It felt like a big gamble and I wanted to create as much momentum as possible so that we wouldn't chicken out.

It was too destabilizing. The board meetings during that period were dominated by a new contentious subject: the need for more frequent programming. It took me a while to figure out what this meant. We were doing plenty of work. Each weekend we were out in a new public park. We were parading through our neighborhood. We had several long-term partnerships with community organizations, including a partnership with a local K through 8 public school where we worked with students weekly over the course of the year before mounting a year end spectacle that completely took over their school. There was plenty of programming.

This was about the absence of theater work. That other programming didn't count. Without reserved seats at high profile theater, our board members were having a hard time cultivating their friends and fulfilling their fundraising duties. They needed the conveniences of a conventional space, a reserved seat, climate control and a nearby restaurant. So back into the theater we went. I collaborated with Charlie Newell and the Court Theater to create a new adaptation of Edmund Rostand's *Cyrano De Bergerac* at the Museum of Contemporary Art. Frank made *Once Upon a Time* (2007) which started at Redmoon Central and ended on the Disney Stage in Los Angeles.

We tried again in 2007, leaving aside the theater space and organizing a series of public "interventions". The idea was that we could gain the stature of association by programming the series into more established events: Lollapalooza, the Taste of Chicago, and high-profile art fairs and neighborhood street festivals. We could still perform in Pilsen at the homeless shelter, or follow the Night Ministry through the West Side and those events would be validated by our attendance at more established public events. Back to the theater we went. Frank conceived and directed *Boneyard Prayer* (2008) and *The Feast* (2011). *The Feast* really hit all the requisite

theater marks. It was a poetic adaptation of Shakespeare's *Tempest*, featuring some of the city's premiere talent and performed at the Chicago Shakespeare Theatre on Navy Pier. It was directed by Jessica Thebus, fresh off her own debut at the Goodman. The reviews were great; the attendance was great; and we gave backstage tours nearly every night to new prospective funders.

I had grown tired of this game.

There was no 'hedge' on *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* though. The scale of it demanded our full attention. More than that, as a part of the bet, we moved our home to a massive warehouse on the river near Chinatown. Anything we made outside could be adapted to the warehouse space and perform to a paying audience there. We would no longer run two parallel streams of programming. We would create one kind of work: public, civically engaged spectacle. The warehouse would be where our traditional theater going patrons could have their accommodations and for everyone else, there would be free work in open spaces. All in.

I love watching the poker players go "all in." They usually stand to push their chips into the middle of the table. They don't even bother to sit back down. If they lose, they walk away. If they win, scoop in their earnings and sit back down, transformed by the victory.

That's not how it went for me. I lost. In poker, I would have walked away right then and there. Real life is never quite as elegant as the games that represent it. So I sat back down and battled for another year and some odd months, hoping to reverse a fate that had been sealed, pretending even to myself that there had been an unseen hedge.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Epic Fail

In 2011, I stood on the stage at The Nantucket Project and spoke about failure.<sup>52</sup> In a grand white tent sitting on the edge of the Atlantic Ocean, with glasses of fresh squeezed juice lined neatly onto tables to my right, I shared a selection of public spectacles and spoke about how each had missed the mark. On the screen behind me, I clicked through images of the project and talked about the long and difficult distance between our image of what's possible and the reality in which we try to achieve it.

My argument was that if we aren't failing, then we simply aren't aiming high enough. Given the scope of the challenges facing us, we need to be thinking Big. We need to be breaking down the established systems and finding entirely new ways of doing things, across the board and down the line, top to bottom. Nothing can go untouched. Given the scale of disruption that is

needed, an expectation of success is crazy. We should be failing constantly. Trying and failing and trying again.

I quoted one of my favorite quotables, Samuel Beckett: "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try Again. Fail again. Fail better."<sup>53</sup> Like most everything that Beckett wrote, I can only claim to have a fleeting understanding of it. I get it, but only for a moment, and then its meaning slips away. I find it compelling and honest and elusive all at the same time. But it sounds great and it looks nice on a page, so I put it into my Powerpoint and against the crisp blue sky behind me, there it sat, projected white on a black screen.

"Inevitably, there are gaps between intention, expectation, and realization," I told the audience. "It is in those gaps where failure lives."

I showed an image of my son in his baseball uniform: "My son plays baseball. Failure is woven into the game. A batter hitting successfully at 30% would likely mean the Hall of Fame. The numbers for a pitcher are even more stark: in the entire 143-year history of Major League Baseball, in nearly 400,000 games, there have been 22 perfect games thrown. Every time up to bat, every walk to the mound, a baseball player has to work for success while fully, rightfully, expecting failure. He's practicing."<sup>54</sup>

My argument was that by not achieving its goal, failure reveals both the ideal and the reach toward it. Both are alive and evident. The artwork is animated simultaneously by the nobility of the effort and the beauty of the ideal to which it aspires. It reveals both the artist's longing and the vision that inspired it.

Effortless success may be cool, but it either masks the difficult of the endeavor or reveals its unworthiness. To me, true beauty lies in the effort toward the ideal. I want to see the sweat. I

stand with the character in Harold Brodkey's "Innocence" when she says: "An acrobat after spinning through the air in a mockery of flight stands erect on his perch and mockingly takes his bow as if what he is being applauded for was easy for him and cost him nothing, although meanwhile he is covered with sweat and his smile is edged with a relief chilling to think about; he is indulging in a show-business style; he is pretending to be superhuman. I am bored with that and with where it has brought us. I admire the authority of being on one's knees in front of the event."<sup>55</sup>

Truth is, I didn't know shit about failure. I was as successful as anyone making art had right to hope to be. That's why I was on that stage. Sure, each individual project had failed to fully realize its lofty intentions, but even the most errant projects had been good enough to assure that I had a chance to fail again. For an artist, that should be the very definition of success: the opportunity to continue to practice.

I realize now that failure was just a clever way for me to present my work and my thoughts about Public Spectacle. It felt more modest and palatable and it avoided the self-satisfied sheen that seems to lay over these kinds of ideas festivals, which often seem to be less about celebrating ideas than gatherings of the like-minded seeking hopeful missives of reassurance.

It's true that I spend a lot of time thinking about those gaps. Calibrating the distance between intention and expectation is essential to sanity. At bat, my son should fully intend to get a hit, but he would be delusional if that were his expectation. If those gaps get too narrow, the work loses the power to inspire. If they are too great, it collapses into pathos.

More than that, it is in the gap between expectation and realization that I generally find my next project. Sometimes it is an analytic process, tracking the failure points and locating which can be mined most productively, but more often I instinctively latch on to a missed opportunity and let that longing blossom into the next show.

Tracking the lapses of each project, then, was a great way to watch the developmental arch of Redmoon's work and its mission and guiding principles. I wasn't talking about failure, I was using the concept of failure to share my work and process. I wouldn't understand failure for another few years.

*The Great Chicago Fire Festival* in 2014 moved my knowledge of failure from abstract to concrete. On October 4th, standing among a crowd of 50,000, I learned the incapacitating gut punch of real failure. Big, terrible, incontrovertible, public failure. Epic Failure.

I keep looking at the chasm between expectation and realization, hoping my next project will appear, but all I see is darkness. This is now what I understand to be failure: when failing again and failing better seems an unlikely luxury.

Watching the people gather along the river, I couldn't help but count my blessings. Again. I couldn't help but count them again. The weather had been awful. I wasn't sure anyone would come. They were coming. By the tens of thousands, they were flowing down the access stairs and along the riverwalk, edying in any elevated area and ultimately gelling into a mass along the river's edge. It was more than I had even dared expect.

A week earlier, I wrote to some of my most committed patrons thanking them and proclaiming that, because of them, we were on the brink of something big. The following is the

note I wrote to my friend Diane who gave the first donation of over \$5,000.00 to Redmoon back in 1995; it was a pivotal moment for the theater. We were looking to hire our first full time staff member, and Diane's gift made that possible.

Hello Diane,

After planning and talking about the Great Chicago Fire Festival for so long, it's actually happening. We're already in the process of dismantling and moving pieces to the river, where we'll be reassembling for the spectacle finale on October 4th. As the culmination of this inaugural festival fast approaches, I find myself thinking more and more of the pivotal role you played in making this moment possible for Redmoon.

Your early support of Redmoon was pivotal to our growth and our capacity to achieve work like this. You were always a believer and I coveted your counsel and support.

I want to express my gratitude to you at this moment.

I think you'd be proud of where this has taken Redmoon. Over the summer, we've been in over 30 different public spaces, capturing the images and stories of everyday Chicagoans' grit and resilience. It's a powerful reflection of individuals, neighborhoods, and the City.

Chicago Magazine just came out with a great article [a preview of the event featuring photographs of the models]; I've attached a copy here. We've also done a short video that presents a tour through our building so you can see some of the work in progress.

What we're creating is unprecedented in the history of this theater and this city; we are honored and excited to have this opportunity to create something transformative. I am hopeful that you, your family and friends will join me on the river October 4 to witness the creation of a new urban ritual for the city.

Warm regards,

Jim<sup>56</sup>

From where I stood, as far as I could see, on either side, people packed the riverfront many rows thick. Crossing the bridge and looking eastward, the same was true. There is a broad stone staircase that swoops up from the riverside to Michigan Avenue. It was filled with people, packed from the bottom step to the top where the police stood blocking further access.

By the time I crossed back to look west, people had taken up perched positions on the stone rail of Upper Wacker drive. They were draped off the bridges, climbing light posts. We were still a quarter of an hour from start time.

It was more than anyone might have expected, way more than I thought possible. It could only be seen as validation of the premise: people are hungry for an opportunity to celebrate their city in a genuine way. They want to witness one another, to share common space and feel a fellowship. In the midst of all the terrible stories of gun violence and corruption and over-taxation and failing schools and dissolute pension programs, there sits an unsullied hopefulness and a love for our city.

I have been to Mardi Gras and felt the vitality of the pulse of the communities in the days prior to the parades. There are backyard rehearsals and costume fittings; there are horns playing in unidentified buildings and rehearsals in community halls and corner lots and gymnasiums. It is a buoy, lifting the city to a higher plane.

I visited Siena before the Palio.<sup>57</sup> The smell of baked bread, of tomato sauce and fried oil permeates the area around the central square. Banners are hung, from windows, balconies, light posts, rooftops. The city feels lighter and brighter even while filling with people. The streets start to fill and the plazas are overcome with activity, with street performance and food vendors and clicking cameras. Music swells out of hidden courtyards along with bursts of laughter and the sharp sound of glasses clinking.

This was the promise of *The Great Chicago Fire Festival*, or at least its intention and potential. As the audience accumulated and darkness descended, as the wind died down and music filled the air, it was a promise that seemed realizable. For a moment, I was gob-smacked.

If there was a moment to retrieve from that night, it would be that moment, the moment just before the whole thing started, before the first words came through the sound system, before the first fires were lit. In that moment the congregated masses at the river's edge believed in their city. And they believed in the power of togetherness and celebration. And whether they could name it or not, they believed in the power of art to bridge difference.

In short time, that belief would shatter and dissipate.

The DuSable bridge was proposed in the early 20th century as a means to join the South and North sides of the city with a grand boulevard. Popularly known as the Michigan Avenue Bridge, it is admired around the world as an example of the Chicago Bascule Bridge. It is a symbol of might and industry and ingenuity.

It was on that iconic bridge, then, that we chose to kick off the closing ceremonies of *The Great Chicago Fire Festival*. Martin Sheen was there, as were the hunky male stars of the popular television series *Chicago Fire*.<sup>58</sup> The governor of Illinois was there, along with the mayor and selected alderman and other civic leaders from the private and public sector.

Standing with these luminaries, holding lit torches were high school students from across the city. Over the previous 6 months they had come to Redmoon twice a week to learn to cut, weld, and grind steel as a part of a paid after school program called *After School Matters*.<sup>59</sup> Alongside their technical training, they were given the responsibility of designing our ceremonial cauldrons and the system that would lower them to the river.

The cauldrons were to hold wood fires which the students had carefully stacked in pyramid form to allow for maximum fuel and air flow.

The students who designed the mechanics to lower the cauldrons kept it simple. They made a cantilevered winch atop a 4 inch by 4 inch steel 'L', clamped to the riveted steel bridge. Steel cable ran from the winch to a spun steel dish filled with meticulously positioned kindling and firewood. They built prototypes, tested them, and finally practiced the entire event on a bridge near our shop with their parents and family members as an audience.

Igniting the fires in the cauldrons was the ceremonial beginning of the Closing Ceremonies of *The Great Chicago Fire Festival*. The students explained the plan to their corresponding celebrity and then presented them a lit torch. They were surrounded by cameras, television and print media and proud parents, all angling for a clear shot. The kids, many of whom came to Redmoon with no building experience whatsoever, some of whom took three buses to get there, and all of whom got dirtier than they ever imagined or wanted, were absolutely luminescent.

Along with the break in the nasty weather, this was one of two signs that convinced me it was going to be a perfect night. To my eyes, that moment validated the entire principle. The spectacle brought people together. It was a virtuous circle: the celebrities and politicians validated the work of the students and the students, in turn, validated the politicians and celebrities, and it was all being captured and broadcast to the city at large by local and national media. At its center was an inclusive cultural enterprise that everyone could own: a public celebration of the city's grit and resilience.

Lowering the flaming cauldrons from the Du Sable Bridge signaled the entrance of kayakers from the east and west. There were to be 72 kayaks, one for each of Chicago's official neighborhoods. Sixteen of the kayakers towed cauldrons of fire to match the ones being lowered

from the bridge. They represented the 16 neighborhoods with whom we collaborated over the course of the summer.

The intention was that eventually all 72 kayaks would pull lighted fire cauldrons because we would be working with every neighborhood in the city. I didn't expect that, but I dared hope. If things went well....

Standing on the DuSable Bridge, it is easy to overlook its most distinguishing feature. Unlike most Bascule Bridges, the DuSable Bridge is a double-decker. It has an upper level that handles most of the traffic across the river, both pedestrian and vehicular, and a lower level, which is used primarily by service vehicles. When the bridge is lifted to make room for river traffic below, its full might reveals itself. Even today, seeing this massive structure split in the middle and rise into the air, leaving four streets on two levels all driving imaginary traffic into the sky, is a spectacle in and of itself. People get out of their cars to gape and take photographs.

On Upper Michigan Avenue they were packed against the railings, draped over them, and in some cases seated on the other side of them. It was hard not to read this overwhelming attendance as evidence of the success of our marketing. For one week, three houses floated in the middle of the Chicago River with large signs on them reading, "Come Watch Me Burn; October 4th; The Great Chicago Fire Festival." The image of those houses and the signs that adorned them was seen on nearly every television station, adorned the local papers, and been recounted on radio innumerable times.

I was on the lower level of the DuSable Bridge wearing an orange rain slicker I had yet to find time to remove. I watched as the cauldrons lowered from above passed me on their way toward the water. I looked east to see the parade of kayaks, illuminated by fire, entering on cue.

Specifically, I was navigating numerous channels on two separate radios. One radio put me in contact with emergency services: police, fire, coast guard, department of cultural affairs, each on a different channel, but also maintaining contact with one channel dedicated for interdepartmental communication. The other radio was for production. We had 11 channels occupied there. The fire team had their own channel, as did the pyrotechnics team, and then there were channels for the technical crew, for the east dock and the west dock, for the lighting designer, the pyrotechnicians, the sound board, a channel for the fire team, one for each of three barges floating in middle of the river, one for the two-shuttle craft on standby.

Channel 7 was for emergencies. It was my channel to have private problem-solving conversations with team leaders, should the need arise. In retrospect, I can almost laugh at my naivete: At the time of the assignment of the communication channels, I considered not having one.

Lower Michigan Avenue was closed to the public. It was one of two communication hubs. The other was in the Michigan Avenue Bridge House where a single representative from each city department were crowded into a single room. Leaning against the riveted steel beams that raised around me like an industrial forest were the chiefs and commissioners and managers. These were the people who in the best of circumstances would do nothing but watch the event unfold, but in the case of the unexpected, these were the people who would have to make decisions and get them executed. Also there, having retreated from the crowds above after

ceremonially lighting their cauldron, were the Chicago dignitaries and Illuminati. The Mayor was there, with his wife and the Commissioner of Cultural Affairs and Special Events along with their key staff.

Of all the power figures there, somehow most prominent in my mind was the man standing directly behind me. He was with four other guys I didn't recognize. They wore blue jackets with the city seal on the breast. The guy behind me was a Grabowski. He worked with the Department of Transportation and he had been given the unusual assignment of escorting our theatrical houses to their final downtown river location.

The houses in the middle of the river floated upon barges that we designed, engineered, and built. They were specifically designed to meet the host of regulatory provisions that governed the planned fire on the river. Each of the three barges consisted of four pontoons crossed and held in proper relation by steel decking.

The pontoons were massive air chambers fabricated from thin gauge sheet steel, rolled and seam welded. The pontoons were sized to carry the weight of the decking and everything we put on top of it: the houses and 800-pound generator hiding within them; the lighting instruments and the cabling; the ignition system needed to start the fires that would engulf the houses and the fire suppression system that could extinguish the blaze should something go wrong; and the various performers and technicians who would occupy the barge over the course of the evening.

A compromised pontoon meant a sunken barge. So each pontoon was separated into four independent air chambers, each seam was checked and double checked and air was being

pumped into each chamber at a low enough pressure not to strain the seams but a high enough pressure to keep water from entering any breach.<sup>60</sup>

The decks were steel framed and topped with diamond plate. They had holes cut into them for drainage, but over each aperture was a tightly woven grate so as to prevent ash or other carbon residue to wash into the river. For the same purpose, there was a short ledge around the perimeter of the barge. That same ledge served as a kind of trough for the cabling that powered the theatrical lighting that would bathe the houses.

The component parts of the barges were made in our shop, but assembled on an old boatyard on the Chicago River just south of 31st street. After assembly, a construction crane lifted the 40' by 24' barges a few feet in the air and then swung them out over the river and dangled it there before gently placing them into the water. It was a shockingly graceful movement, one that unexpectedly brought tears to my eyes.

The crane then placed a generator on each barge and, covering that generator, fitting around it like a sleeve, a three-story house. The houses were framed in steel and shingled with cedar. They were painted a variegated shade of blue, to maximize the contrast with the orange flames that would consume them a week later.

To get the barges from where we put them in the river at 31st street down to the center of the business district in the Loop, they would travel just over 4 miles. The houses were over 30 feet tall. The average clearance height of a Bascule Bridge is 18 feet, meaning that 21 bridges would have to be raised to get the houses into place.

Chicago has the most operating draw bridges in the world. The majority of them are single level bascule bridges built in the early 1900s. They are remarkable feats of engineering.

The bridge is so finely balanced that it takes only a 4-horsepower motor to raise them. When they re-paint the bridges, they have to offset the additional weight on the other side of the fulcrum. They are widely known as Chicago Style Bascule Bridges and were copied world-wide.<sup>61</sup>

Despite the brilliant turn of the century engineering, a hundred years later, lifting a bridge is a major endeavor. The bridges are old and any of a series of mishaps can prevent a bridge from operating smoothly and cutting off a vital traffic artery for hours. In the summer months, the most common of those mishaps is that the swelling of the steel sometimes prevents the two sides from seaming properly upon closure. In this case, the fire department will be called to spray the seam until it cools and closes.

The man assigned to be sure that all 21 bridges opened and closed properly, and traffic was not adversely affected, was the man behind me on the bridge. His name was Glenn. I first met Glenn on the first bridge that was to open as we made our early morning parade. It was 5:30am.

I'm a good 6 feet tall and weigh nearly 220 pounds. I am not accustomed to feeling small. Glenn makes me feel small. He is easily 6 foot 5 inches and broader still than I. Upon shaking his hand in greeting I first brought my eyes up to meet his and then, looking down, I was struck by how his hand nearly wrapped around mine.

I immediately thought of a Grabowski. It is up for debate where the term originated, but I know that I first learned it from Mike Royko. Royko was a Pulitzer Prize winning columnist who came to be considered the voice of Chicago. Royko invented a character named Slats Grobnik who would sometimes pen the daily column for Mike. Slats Grobnik was a Grabowski. An

everyday Chicagoan, the working-class stiff for whom the city should work because he makes the city work.<sup>62</sup>

Glenn did not appear to be half as pleased to be there as me. This was understandable. To me it was a crowning achievement. It had taken countless meetings to get permission to bring these massive ceremonial houses down the river. We had contended with the Coast Guard's concerns about navigability, with the Department of Transportation's concerns with traffic disruption, with our insurance company, with the tugboat captain's insurance company, with a possible picketing from the teamster's union....

To Glenn, it seemed a big waste of time and resources. Or so I imagined. That morning, we quickly ran out of things to say and stood by one another as we watched the barges slowly approach. Finally, he broke the silence: "What is it?"

Glenn led two crews of bridge operators. They were to leapfrog one another. While one crew opens and closes a bridge, the other piles into bright orange city vehicles and drives ahead to prepare the next bridge.

Back in the day, when Chicago was a manufacturing city, the river was in constant use. It was transporting raw industrial materials: steel, lumber, machinery, gravel, and brick. Nothing was more important than getting those materials into circulation. It was imperative that river traffic was uninterrupted, those raw goods were the foundation of Chicago's economy. Built into the structure of each bridge is a bridge house where a bridge operator was stationed 24 hours a day, ready to lift the bridge at any moment of the day or night.

These multi-story brick structures have since been abandoned. Their potential is the subject of much thought and speculation in the urbanist community. One look at them reveals

why. They are tight and powerful little towers that carry the romance of Chicago's manufacturing heyday. They sit at the end of each bridge and offer amazing views of the river looking all directions.

Industrial traffic along the river is relatively infrequent now. The bridge houses have been vacated. So when the bridges need to open, a specially trained crew of city workers descends on a bridge house like a SWAT team. Each crew consists of a team of five. A supervisor, a bridge operator, a communications chief, and two machinists. As opposed to the turn of the last century when stopping traffic along the river was nearly unthinkable, the priority now is vehicular traffic. A stuck bridge would set off a crippling chain of traffic congestion. So the crew works with remarkable precision and is prepared for most any problem that might arise, thus the two machinists.

I was following the parade on my bike and enjoying every moment of it. The day was clear and bright, a perfect September day in Chicago. At every other bridge, I would see Glenn and answer a few more of his questions. At first the questions were confined strictly to the mechanical. How much did the houses weigh? What was the buoyancy of the barges? How were they constructed?

As we approached downtown, a helicopter from ABC News began to follow the barges and passersby were coming to the river's edge to see what the fuss was about. The first thing they saw was not the houses, but the two performers who were perched above them, in small steel crow's nests. One of the barges, the one that would ultimately take the center position, featured two enormous steel truss that would be hydraulically raised at the conclusion of the fires. Two performers, dressed in period firefighter uniforms, were to spray water pumped from the river,

onto the burning embers as a moment of recognition of Chicago's first responders. Upon seeing the news chopper, the men who had fabricated the tusks and engineered the hydraulic system, scaled the 40-foot ladders and set themselves in the perches at the top.

It didn't take more than five minutes for me to get a call from our representative at the Department of Cultural Affairs, who had in turn gotten a call from someone at the Department of Transportation who had seen the footage on the television in his office. The men in the crow's nests needed hard hats and safety vests, and surely they were harnessed and buckled in? Were they members of the union? I assured her that I would take care of it and hung up. What union?

If I had to guess, I think it likely was the hydraulic arms that finally captured Glenn's imagination. They weren't ingenious, especially not to anyone living and working around Bascule bridges most of their lives, but they were an impressive feat of engineering, simple and powerful. More than that, they were surprising and spectacular as they rose unseen from underneath the water.

Whatever it was, by the time we had the barges in place, Glenn's questions became more engaged and sincere. When his work was complete and we were driving the steel spuds into the riverbed, Glenn asked me where his family should sit on the night of the event. I pointed to a spot aligned with the center barge. He looked and nodded his head and walked off.

I felt a disproportionate sense of pride. And accomplishment. The intention had always been to capture the Grabowskis.

As things began to go off the rails, I had nowhere to go. I was surrounded. To my right was the mayor and his wife and their inner circle. To my left were the students and their families

who had built the ceremonial cauldrons and helped to shingle the houses. Behind me were the chiefs, commanders, managers and crew heads, clumped by function in groups of three and four; the police there; fire behind them and looking over the opposite side of the bridge; between them Streets and Sanitation, Special Events, and different crews from Chicago Department of Transportation. Glenn and his crew were standing on the steel girding of the bridge directly behind me, from where he could see his family's seats on the riverside.

Three steamships had made their way down the river, one approaching each of the houses. The steamships were actually dressed up pontoon boats, a theatrical creation that was equal parts steampunk and Thomas the Tank Engine.<sup>63</sup> Balls of fire periodically burst from their smokestacks. The idea was that as they approached the houses and shot balls of fire into the air around them, a signal would be given and our ignition system would be triggered, igniting the houses.

On Channel 3, I heard the fire department "okay" triggering the ignition system. At the base of one of the houses, I saw a moment of orange flame and then not much. I scrambled over the steel girders, through the men on Glenn's team, to the other side of the Du Sable bridge to look at the house to the east. I couldn't see any flame at all there, only a bit of smoke. Back on the other side of the bridge, the bit of orange flame that was there hadn't grown much at all. All it seemed to be doing was illuminating the smoke around it.

I switched my radio to Channel 5, the pyro channel.

On the pyro channel they are relatively calm, too calm for my tastes, given the stakes of the situation. They are checking fuses, one at a time. One pyrotechnician at a time is reporting from each of the three barges. They are counting through the fuses, one at a time, and for some

unknown reason, the fuses have been numbered in some arcane fashion. So it's all just numbers: "2405... okay. 2507... okay. 2610... out."

On the fire channel, the fire department is debating allowing us to use kerosene. They are trying to get the chief on the line. He is talking to the police. Our production team is trying to get the crew over to the little shuttle craft, docked on the north side of the river. Everyone is now fixated on the idea of using kerosene, assuming fire department approval. I interrupt to point out that we don't have any kerosene. Per fire department directive, we do not have any liquid fuel anywhere near the river.

I go back to the pyro channel. They are now attempting to rewire the circuit boxes. I can't understand how they are doing that in real time. Did they bring soldering guns down there? What happened to the wiring system? On barge number 3, one of our more renegade crew members is trying to circumvent the propane ignition system. He has kicked the copper feed tube off the ignition box, releasing the propane to flow freely. He is trying to light it with his Zippo lighter that, against official orders, he's kept in his pocket.

Mayhem.

At a certain point, the audience turned. Their good-hearted patience ran out and they began to grumble. In 25 years of making live events, I have never heard the particular kind of communal groan of disappointment that overcame them.

A crowd develops a kind of singular personality. That is not to say that it is not still constituted by individuals. Nor is it to deny that a crowd may have distinct factions. But just as a

person remains whole even while being moved by several emotions at any one time, so a crowd develops a kind a singular discernible personality that can be read and felt.

For an overly generous period, the crowd was humored and patient. There was a little bit of a sense that they knew it was coming. They seemed to get that nothing this crazy was going to go off without a hitch and even a willingness to accept this delay as part of the experience.

A few half-hearted but good spirited chants broke out: "We want fire. We want fire."

We broke in with an announcement. "Ladies and gentleman we are experiencing some technical difficulties. We ask for your patience."

At this point both radios are exploding with conversation. The television newsman who has been narrating the event will not speak without a written script, so I am dictating the request for patience to the person standing next to him, who is writing it on a legal pad, presumably in order to slide it over two feet. On the "audio channel," I am simultaneously listening to the sound technicians scramble to find some music to cover this prolonged delay. Somehow, they settle on some French accordion music which is slow and generally morose and entirely wrong.

I finish working out the text with the television newsman's assistant and cross channels to the sound guys and ask for something a bit more upbeat maybe. Meanwhile, I can hear on the "fire channel" that the fire department has given permission to our fire team to go out to the house on a boat and douse the base with kerosene and attempt manual ignition. I decide not to interrupt again to remind them that they themselves forbid the presence of liquid fuel of any kind within 100 feet of the houses, that even the gasoline powered boat that "serviced" the barges had been converted to electricity. There is no kerosene or anything else that might accelerate a blaze anywhere close. They will figure that out soon enough, I decide.

The television anchorman came back on the sound system for a repeated request of patience and that was when I heard it: a communal exhale. All the tension that had been carefully constructed during the months leading up to the event was released in one share breath. The interest that accumulated through the ceremonial prologue and the theatrical prelude, the anticipation created by the unintentional delay, the news teasers, the bus-tail advertisements, it all dissipated in a single moment. People started registering the cold damp weather again. Shoulders slumped and conversations commenced. There was some shaking of heads, some laughter. Very slowly people started to leave.

"Thank you for your patience. We are experiencing some problems with our electrical system and will shortly move forward to the spectacular fireworks finale. Again, thank you for your patience, hang on a moment or two and you will be treated to a spectacular fireworks display." It was the best I could come up with, dictated to the assistant who wrote it down for the anchorman. Writing on what? With what? In what kind of penmanship? I never found out.

Most did hang on. And the fireworks were truly glorious, erupting up out of the canyon of the Chicago River against the great Chicago skyline. But it was too late. The celebratory arch had been lost. The 'failure to ignite' had overwhelmed everything that happened before and everything that would follow.

I am traumatized. I don't say that lightly, and I certainly don't say it with any pride. To the contrary, there is more than a little shame attached to the admission, but there is no other way to put it. The signs are undeniable.

Over the years, my work has been rewarded with critical acclaim and accolades. It has also been the subject of scorn and antipathy. Unlike most of my peers, I never got worked up about the reviews or the reception of any particular piece. One of our early pieces at Steppenwolf was met with particular antipathy. The *Chicago Reader* published a review in which they called it "art with a capital F".<sup>64</sup> I thought it was funny.

Yet here I am obsessing about the public lambasting of *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* some two years later. I take no solace in the success of that following year, *The Great Chicago Fire Festival 2015*. I am not at all buoyed by the fact that the funding community came out in support of it, that it 'sold out' in a matter of days, that our neighborhood partners committed to the second year without hesitation, or that generally the next year's *Great Chicago Fire Festival* was widely seen as a great success. No matter.

The failure of the first *Great Chicago Fire Festival* lays over every interaction and colors most every consideration. It wakes me from sleep and pops unbidden into my head at unexpected and debilitating moments. And when it comes, it comes with all the emotional ferocity as it had on the day of the event, undiminished by time. With increasing frequency, I can dodge it. I can see it coming and get out of the way. More often, though, it surprises me and when it does, it is a body dropping gut punch every time.

The other evening, at a party among friends, I was introduced to a woman visiting from Israel. As anyone in that circumstance might, she asked my story. I could feel the blood rush to my face. I knew I had turned red. Sweat popped on my brow. She wasn't asking about the fire festival. She was from out of town and likely knew nothing of it. She wanted to know what I did for a living, where I was from, how I defined myself. I knew that, but my body had its own

answer and it responded without intellectual intercession. So there I was, tears welling in my eyes, explaining that I had once been a maker of public events, a spectacle maker, but that... I was taking a break to reassess.

Not twenty minutes after the last fireworks exploded against the backdrop of one of the most well-regarded skylines in the world, I had to confront the press, the donors, and my friends and supporters. There was a post-show presser? organized for immediately following the show. The city had reserved a riverside meeting room. Champagne was chilled. No doubt there were tasty treats of some kind on trays.

Given all that had transpired, I didn't know who would show up.

Gone were the Mayor and the Governor. Gone, too, were the television stars and the local celebrities. Presumably, the Alderman had made themselves scarce as well.

I was met going down the stairs by a representative from the mayor's office. She had been an advocate for the project from Day One. She had helped navigate the thick city bureaucracy. She knew who in the park district I needed to avoid and who I should woo; she knew who in the Coast Guard was going to see the big picture and who would be have difficulty seeing past the problems. She had been a civil servant in a deeply inspiring and stabilizing way. I admired and liked her.

Seeing her brought tears to my eyes. I instinctively apologized. She grabbed me by the shoulders and practically shoved me into the concrete rail. She looked me dead in the eyes. "You hold it together," she told me. "You have nothing to apologize for. I don't want to hear it and neither does anyone else. And especially no one down there. You go down there and talk about

the accomplishment, about all that got done, about all the successes and about how it's only going to get better." She paused for effect: "You can do this."

I started to walk away. She grabbed my shoulder and pulled me back. I thought I was coming in for a hug. I was wrong. She waited until I looked her in the eyes: "No one feels sorry for you."

This surprised me. I remember wondering at the time why this needed to be said. And why not? Why didn't anyone feel sorry for me? They should. This was awful, worse than I ever could have imagined. She was still looking at me, making sure that I had heard and understood. I was confused. I could see in her eyes that she actually did feel sorry for me, so clearly she was telling me something else. I didn't know what and it wasn't really time to inquire.

When I got down to the event, the space was only half full. There were some press, some donors and city officials, but mostly it was full of friends and comrades, people who had believed in the project, who had given to it, given their time or their money or both. They had given me their faith and they were full of questions. What did this mean? Where were we going next?

I looked at their expectant faces and I understood what she had meant. No one felt sorry for me. They wanted a public statement; they wanted a reason to still be there. They needed to continue to believe.

This was a concession speech, I realized. She was a professional and this was old hat, an inevitable possibility. "Not this year, but maybe next..." "Our cause is just and it will survive...."

From somewhere, I was handed a microphone. Another was dangling from a boom in front of my face. People stood in groups, most stayed toward the back of the room near the bar. Everyone looked cold. I made a brief statement. I focused on the promise of the event. I cited the size of the audience and their demographic diversity as proof of concept. I begged forgiveness because there were too many to thank but I did need to acknowledge our sponsors and, of course, the courageous support of Mayor Emanuel and Commissioner Boone who took a risk to back something so new and ambitious.

I could feel my wife staring at me off to the right. For some reason, her knees were wet. I avoided eye contact.

There were a few questions, but I have no idea who asked them or even what they were and then the formal agenda was concluded. Someone handed me a drink. We exchanged niceties. Tria, my wife, approached and I held my hand up to her, telepathically pushing her away. Others were around me. Jokes were made, shoulders were patted, hugs. Things started to slow.

I turned to Tria and moved my vision from her knees up to her eyes and, just as I knew I would, I began to heave. Tears sprung to my eyes. My nose ran and I shook with cold. Within seconds, I was a big slobbering out of control mess. She dragged me to a corner, near the dish station where I tried to get control of myself.

It had been so much worse than I had ever imagined it could be. This was no incidental oversight. It was not an image that didn't work or a technical mishap. It wasn't that the ritual aspects had overwhelmed the spectacle or vice versa. It wasn't that no one had come or that it had been artistically thin. It was so much worse than all of that.

"Epic failure." Those were the words that came out of my mouth and the words that stick still in my head like a blinking sign, seemingly never to be extinguished, all caps and flashing in light: EPIC FAILURE.

When a political candidate asks for support, for time or money or both, there is an understanding that they very well might lose. Expectations are calibrated daily in the form of polls and news reports. Yet a political campaign is defined by its intentions. All kinds of commitments are made. Positions are taken, principles articulated, actions promised. Candidates are introduced as the 'next' Mayor or President or Senator or Councilperson. It is the promises that matter, not the realization. We all understand the realization to be entirely contingent and speculative.

We understand that the candidate's belief in his or her self is part and parcel. It is essential. Qualified belief will not work. It will not raise money; it will not raise spirits. A candidate who does not believe in herself will not inspire belief. But all the while we are aware that defeat is a possible conclusion. Polls are taken; odds are made; bets are laid. Supporters and dissenters alike understand that the conclusion might be quite different than the one they hope and even expect.

Likewise, the sports hero. When LeBron James goes to Cleveland to win a championship and the city dumps its belief into him, everyone understands that the odds are long. No matter his talent and his heart, he may lose. No matter how hard he works, how often he says just the right thing, how many teammates and coaches gather around him and give him their faith, LeBron James' campaign for the Larry O'Brien trophy<sup>65</sup> may fall short of the mark. Everyone knows it

and everyone understands that disappointed as they all might be, the quest will begin again, untainted, the next year.

What expectations surround the artist who asks for a city's faith? What are the rules that surround that campaign? What does that concession speech look like? Do I promise to return again? Or to crawl away? Who is going to guide me in that process?

Walking back to our staging area on the opposite side of the river, I chose to take the lower level of the DuSable bridge. Above the crews from Streets and Sanitation were gathering trash and spraying down, removing all evidence of the event. They had already re-opened two lanes of traffic. Below, everything had already been reset.

The city was built in this unique double decker way after the Great Chicago Fire. They say that before the final embers of the Great Fire of 1871 were even extinguished, lumber was already arriving to rebuild the city. As the materials for the rebuild started to arrive by rail and water, too much of the prime real estate was being taken up by the mechanics of their delivery. Building one floor up freed up precious real estate. Even further away from the lake, where material delivery was less intrusive, buildings that had been built at ground level, were raised to grade with jack screws or, for larger buildings, hydraulic lifts.

Underneath the city is a network of service roads and tunnels, parking garages, sewage access and refuse areas. One story up, street level is serviced by ground level; the ugly mechanics are requisitioned below. While cars and pedestrians walk the streets among the towers of glass and steel, below them is a hive of activity buzzing around concrete and steel foundations: the mechanical breathing of air systems; the pumping of water; the constant raising

and lowering of cargo doors to let in deliveries and spit out refuse. It's an entire network of generally unseen streets and walkways formed around the foundations and pillars that hold the structures above.

The best test of a true Chicagoan is how well they can navigate the lower level, away from all the visual landmarks. It was down there that I parked every day, alongside the river, in a spot I had discovered after careful observation over the years.

Less than ten years after having been leveled, Chicago was already twice its size. In 1893, 22 years after the Great Chicago Fire, Chicago hosted what is widely considered to be the greatest world fair in history. The World's Columbian Exposition, as it was officially marketed, was an announcement to the world that Chicago was back. Indeed, it came to be identified as the city of the future. They had converted the detritus of the fire into Chicago's crown jewel: a lakefront park that was soon to be declared "forever free and clear".<sup>66</sup> The world's first skyscraper, the Home Insurance Building, was built in Chicago on a newly devised construction system that cleverly distributed weight across a unified steel foundation. That system came to be known as the Chicago Foundation and it rapidly developed to facilitate taller and taller structures throughout a burgeoning downtown. To transport the massive audiences that were expected for the World Fair in 1893, Chicago completed the first above ground electric rail system. The first public showing of electric lighting was on the fairgrounds of the Columbian Exposition. People around the world were getting the news: Chicago is the City of the Future.<sup>67</sup>

This was all a part of the story we were trying to tell with *The Great Chicago Fire Festival*. We weren't celebrating the tragic fire that killed hundreds and raised it to the ground. We were celebrating the spirit of resilience that rebuilt it. It never missed a beat. The city rebuilt

itself. It literally rose from its own ashes and soared skyward. How Chicago handled near devastation is an inspirational story and worthy of commemoration.

There's a small area on Lower Wacker Drive created for the garbage trucks to turn around. If you know how to park, parallel to the brick base of the DuSable Bridge Tower, you can usually avoid getting ticketed or towed.

It was three in the morning and I had been up since five the previous morning. As I came around the corner from the Lower Michigan Avenue bridge, I saw that I had been parked in. A white city SUV was behind me, blocking me against the stone balustrades that prevent through traffic.

Not knowing what else to do, I continued toward my car. As I approached I could see that someone was in the driver's seat. It was Glenn. He looked like he was asleep, head down and leaning slightly forward. Shit. The last thing I wanted to do was wake this man whose night I had already no doubt ruined.

I looked back at my car. There was no way I was getting out. His bumper was touching mine. I took a breath and rapped lightly on the window. He turned toward me and I realized he hadn't been asleep but reading. He smiled and held up our book and then rolled down the window.

"I hope you don't mind," he said. "There was a box of them down by the river, so I took a few for my kids." He nodded toward a short stack on the passenger seat. How many kids did he have?

As a part of creating a city-wide festival, we had produced an original graphic novel about the Great Chicago Fire. It was a beautiful book, written by Tria Smith with images made of up illustration and historic photographs collaged by Shawn Stucky?<sup>68</sup> Every third-grade student in the Chicago Public School system got a copy. Third grade is the year that the social studies curriculum focuses on the Chicago history. We had brought extra copies to the event in hopes of selling them in order to recuperate some of the costs. Apparently, in the chaos that followed the failure to ignite, a bunch of them had been abandoned by the river.

"It's great," Glenn said, holding up the copy that had been sitting in his lap. "Really."

"Thank you, Glenn," I said. "Truly. Thank you for everything."

I collapsed into my car. I wished I hadn't woken Glenn. I could have just slept there in the car for a bit; or at least just closed my eyes for a moment or two. Now, though, Glenn had moved his truck and was waiting for me. I pulled out and drove off with a tired wave of the hand. I was underneath the city. At that hour, it is an obstacle course of garbage trucks and other service vehicles. I was dodging trucks and not paying much attention.

I didn't know Glenn. Not really. Yet his words had lifted my spirits considerably. Over the next few weeks, months if I'm honest with myself, I found myself tossed in the churning waters of the opinions of others. Aldermen screamed my name and demanded accountability and I felt like a piece of dirt, albeit a small one. The mayor came out in full throated defense, and I felt my stock rise.<sup>69</sup> The chief critic of the *Chicago Tribune* wrote a defense of the project (after having heavily criticized it two days earlier.)<sup>70</sup> Up and down I went. I couldn't get grounded.

When I made theater work, I didn't even read the reviews. Critics were a distraction. I was an artist. I was making something true to me. I was a renegade, revealing a hard-earned

truth. I was an explorer, sharing my discoveries. That was my understanding of the job of the artist -- to go into uncharted terrain and come back with stories and artifacts from their journeys that communicate what it was like there.

In recent history, the uncharted terrain that occupied artists was the depths of the human psyche. The discovery of the unconscious introduced an entirely new arena for exploration: the deep inner self, the mysterious dark unseen motivator of human action. In the artists leaped. That's where the theater spends most of its time and energy. That's where the critical apparatus puts its attention. Was it honest, moving, heartfelt, revelatory? Was it original?

It was safe there. When I made shows that were about me, the stakes felt comparatively low. At best, the show becomes a jewel in the city's finery. At worst, it is ridiculed as unworthy. Everyone involved knows the exchange and the risk involved. Buy a ticket or don't. Join the team or don't. Like it or don't. When I made shows people liked, I felt liked and that was nice. When they weren't, I felt misunderstood and self-important and that was kind of nice, too.

This is the trick. As it is most often framed, the artist is doing work that the public is at large unwilling to do. The artist is exploring the depths of their inner soul and braving ridicule by sharing their findings in a public forum. The self-protecting mythology holds that the artist should expect to be rejected because they are sharing truths about themselves that society is too constrained to yet accept.

In an era in which seemingly everyone is vying for some chunk of the public attention for their idiosyncratic expression, it was difficult for me to buy into the notion of the artist's courage of self-expression. The self-discovery and revelations that once demanded courage to open to public scrutiny are now posted and shared with casual imprecision. What was once trailblazing

internal investigation had spawned an industry of self-improvement manuals that dominate the *New York Times* bestseller list. Everyone is delving and exploring and sharing. It's a cultural compulsion.

Now, without the traditional art structure around me, I didn't have a compass. *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* was not about me. It was about the image of Chicago. It was about the city and its citizens, its history and character. How would I get my bearings? Where was I to look for guidance? Whose opinion mattered?

The intention was clear: Together, we would make the city a better place. We would stand as an example of what people could do if they came together, across neighborhood boundaries, surmounting any demographic difference to celebrate our commonality, our collective plight as Chicagoans, as citizens of a city with a proven history of grit and resilience, a character great enough to overcome even the most unimaginably horrible and sweeping events. Facing a city of ash, we would not give up.

I let so many people down. That's what weighs so heavily upon me. I suppose that some understood the possibility that it wasn't going to go as planned, that the very real prospect of difficulty and even critical repudiation was part of the deal. I fear, however, that many, many more believed that indeed we would change the city for the better that evening.

It's not even the individual people I am worried about, though there are many I'm still scared to see and to whom I have yet to make amends. I am worried about the collective. We had absolutely failed in our explicit effort to elevate the image of the city. We had not fulfilled our promise to create an undeniable spectacle to buttress the local performers. Not only had we failed

to buoy their accomplishments, we had undermined them. There was no way our failure would not overshadow their achievements.

This, I now realize, is the true definition of failure. When the distance between expectation and realization is so great that the link between the two is lost. The failed realization has betrayed the intention. It has corrupted its beauty and undermined the nobility of the effort. Real failure makes folly of the whole enterprises.

The worst possible conclusion of *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* may well have come to pass: that I have made it harder, rather than easier, for the next such enterprise. The public ridicule, the headlines and scathing social media ridicule seems likely to intimidate artists and their supporters and the political class, too.<sup>71</sup> No one wants to be exposed to that.

It's one thing to fail to tell a personal story in a compelling fashion or to fail to re-interpret a classic tale in such a way as to imbue its themes with a newfound vitality. It's quite another to elicit a vision of a better, more open and cooperative city, but instead to deliver its opposite. From that perspective, which was the only one I could see, the stakes couldn't have been higher. I had told people to expect a vision of a better city. *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* was going to demonstrate the power of crossing trenchant social boundaries and working together. It was going stand as testimony of the beauty of amplifying the voices of the rarely heard and the majesty of making visible the overlooked. And they had come to bare witness. In numbers that overwhelmed everyone's expectations, they came and lent their faith. They came to see the promise of a better city but instead were presented with yet another example of its limitations.

That disappointment, the communal exhale I had heard so clearly as the second plea for patience had come through the sound system, that was acquiescence, it was the spiritually exhausted communal acceptance of the status quo. Of course, this promise too would go unfulfilled.

I reviewed the list in my mind, all the things that I had told donors and media we were doing, all the programs meant to build a stronger citizenry. We had worked with 32 different community-based organizations creating free public programming in parks and on the streets of some of Chicago's most challenged neighborhoods. Downtown, for the 'closing ceremonies,' we curated stages in the public plazas along the river where representatives from those neighborhoods performed. There were musical groups and spoken word poetry, a break-dance competition, a dragon dance, step. On the river were volunteers from all over Chicago kayaking, singing in the choir, selling local wares from kiosks.

I was running the list in my mind when I realized that I was lost. Literally.

I have lived in Chicago my entire life and I was lost. In a city built on a grid, where the lake is always to the east, I didn't know where I was or in which direction I was travelling. Under the city, on Lower Wacker, Lower Randolph and the other seemingly unnamed and less identifiable 'Lowers,' it's all concrete and steel. Especially at night, it's nearly impossible to identify a distinguishing feature. I looked for a street sign or an address or a building name I recognized. I hadn't been paying attention and a few blocks back some wreckage and flashing orange lights had compelled me to turn off Lower Wacker and now I had no idea where I was. I couldn't see the river. There was no visual access to street level anywhere. Had I gone down another level? Where was I?

Even at the time, I knew it should have been funny, but I couldn't get there. I couldn't find the humor or charm in it anywhere. I felt nauseous.

What had I done? Why had I left the relatively safe, totally familiar terrain of making shows for comfortable people in theater houses? People paid a lot of money to sit in their seats and watch imagined worlds unfold before them. Far more often than not, they really enjoyed themselves, felt illuminated and transported, uplifted even. And it was safe. When it bombed, which it rarely did, I could make myself out to be a renegade artist, out beyond myself without a net, brave and bold, fulfilling my artistic destiny.

Now I was lost on the service streets, among the unseen systems that provide the light and clean water and the conditioned air to the glass and steel structures above. Above, at the before and after parties, at the press events, people were clinking glasses and eating food that had been delivered to them without detection by trucks into the cargo bays that lined the both sides of the street. It had all come in down here: the food and the tables, the trays of wine glasses and champagne flutes; the boxes of champagne and liquor; the sound equipment; the lights; the deejay booth.

The trucks moved quickly and noisily. The cargo doors clanging open and closed for their entry and departure. Steam seeped from vents on the sides of buildings that had no visible personality or distinguishing feature. And everything echoed off the concrete in every direction, the streets above and below, the generic grey walls of the foundations to structures that, above ground, gloriously scraped the sky.

I was supposed to be up there, among the glitterati, shaking hands with the governor and clinking glasses with Lady Gaga's boyfriend. What was I doing down here, lost among orange

blinking lights and the sounds of grinding steel? Only 5 hours earlier, Martin Sheen, the greatest fictional president of my lifetime, was telling me how important our work was, what a valuable contribution I was making to the life of my city and to democracy as a whole.

I stopped the car and watched the activity, trying to decipher its logic. I watched the parade of blue city vehicles, tow trucks and garbage trucks, blue vans and orange pick-ups, all nonchalantly bearing the city seal. A tow truck came at me at dangerous speeds, a car bouncing precariously behind it like an off-kilter toy. I needed to get above ground, out of these service drives. I needed to take the first ramp up and out. As soon as I could see the city, I would be able to locate myself according to known landmarks. Above ground, the streets would be a familiar grid with the lake to the east and the loop at the center. Things would be known and clear and self-evident.

Another tow truck passed, followed quickly by two more. They were clearing the streets for the morning rush hour and taking the cars to the tow yard. I spun around and followed the flashing lights. Once at the tow yard, I would be back on familiar ground. From there, it would be a quick spin along Lower Wacker to Randolph and then to highway and home.

At home later in the wee hours of the morning, I watched my children sleep.

My son was asleep with his laptop open and murmuring football statistics and casting a pale light across his placid face. He slept on his back, arms to the side, face straight up. The family dog was at his feet. I closed the computer and looked at him in the darkness. He was a picture of calm. My daughter was the opposite. Her head was off kilter and turned to one side,

one knee up and off the bed and the other splayed out to the side. Hair covered half her face, slightly wet with sweat. She looked like a boxer that sleep had just socked square in the jaw.

This is how they were, opposite sides of a coin, one constantly driving and the other endlessly receptive.

I worried that he was too soft and unambitious. I worried that she would be too fierce and controlling. I worried that the world I was preparing them for was nothing like the world that they would eventually inhabit. I worried that the things I knew to worry about were not at all likely to be the things that I really needed to worry about.

Even in the best of circumstances, I thought, they need to know that failure and disappointment are coming their way. If death and taxes are the only inevitables, I thought, then where is disappointment? It's the flipside of hope. For as long as there is hope and expectation, there will be failure and disappointment.

The pain of disappointment teaches us to shorten the gap between expectation and realization. We calibrate reality by batting ourselves back and forth between the two, ping-ponging off the beauty of hope and the hard-cold reality of futility. What teaches us to hope? What inspires us to keep reaching even when all evidence suggests its futility? How do you rise after being genuinely flattened?

My son rolled over and kicked lightly at the dog at his feet. Grudgingly the dog jumped down off the bed and came and rubbed his head against me. The dog's name is Beckett. "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better." That Beckett.

I don't know what they will be up against, oppressive environmental disaster, chronic unemployment and strife, displacement by artificial intelligence... it's impossible to project. But I

do know that if they are healthy and full of hope and aspiration, as I hope they will be, they're going to have to contend with heart rending disappointment.

So I'd better be ready in a couple of hours when they wake to serve as some kind of example.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Assessing Blame

I made lists of people to call. Everyone made lists of people for me to call. The lists were long. They broke down along pretty clear lines: financial support, civic support, activists and artists.

There were literally hundreds of people to call. There were the individuals who donated, the foundation officers, and our corporate sponsors. Civic supporters were less easily delineated. There were members of the mayor's team; there were alderman who had lent their names and maybe even some staff support; there were representatives from various city agencies like, say, the Department of Buildings or the Police Department; and then there were all the people to whom they had introduced us, people like the tour boat operators and the owners of the private plazas along the river, people who had been encouraged to help us by the city. Whether they were actually helpful or not, they needed a call. Finally, there were all the people who had lent us

their time. Whether they were paid or not, whether they were skilled or not, there were literally hundreds of people who had helped to make the event possible, by carrying something down to the river, by posting a flyer, by inviting us to a class or an interview or a workshop, by welding a barge or cutting foam for a pontoon, or by introducing us to a friend or attending a summer event. *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* had burrowed its way into the artistic community of Chicago like the roots of tree.

I could not possibly call all those people. We had a staff meeting and sixty or so names were highlighted for me to call, the rest were jobbed out to others. Of course, most of the highlighted names were from the first two categories: the donors and the city contacts. Under the premise of "labor of love," the artist would, as always, get the short shrift.

I tried making the calls alone in my office. I tried alone in my home. I tried calling with a staff member there taking notes, "West Wing" style.<sup>72</sup> I tried meditating beforehand, exercising, taking 10 minutes between each call. No matter how I steeled myself to the task, by the time I got through my call list each day I was chagrined, hot and slightly red in the face, my leg twitching. The feelings stuck with me most of the day. It didn't matter how the calls went, whether the supporter was generous or reticent or angry, I felt embarrassed and angry at the end.

I needed someone to blame. I needed to close the system.

After the calls, I would often go for a walk through our noisy neighborhood, by the horribly caged dogs down the street who would berate me as I approached and continue until I was well out of sight, past the metal recycling facility where the crush and tear of sheet metal screamed out futility, to arrive on the Canal Street bridge, overlooking the Chicago River. I could feel myself casting about for the person or thing onto whom I could transfer all these unwanted

feelings. I would catch myself running a list of resentments and spites and grievances, seeking a target.

Of course, I could blame the city. It was their fault. Truly they were terrible partners, absolutely impossible to deal with at almost every level. But blaming the city wasn't going to be gratifying in the least; it had no emotional hold. It was empty. The city can't hold it. The city is a cat. In my house, we say: "Don't blame a cat for being a cat."

When I first met her, Commissioner Weisberg was Mayor Daley's Commissioner of Cultural Affairs, but Commissioner Weisberg had served under three administrations. She was widely recognized as having almost single handedly redefined Chicago's public cultural landscape. Her team at the Department of Cultural Affairs and the Office of Tourism oversaw Chicago's BluesFest, Taste of Chicago and World Music Festival. They launched the Cow Parade, Puppetropolis, Summer Dance Chicago and countless other free public programs which successfully brought Chicagoans of all stripes together in our world class public spaces to celebrate, play and enjoy one another.<sup>73</sup>

Lois Weisberg was the subject of a widely read New Yorker profile entitled "The Six Degrees of Lois Weisberg." It spoke admiringly of Commissioner Weisberg's endless energy, innumerable ideas, and argued that the source of her strength, and a consistent source of power generally, was not her political cache or financial backing, but her preternatural ability to connect people to one another. She was a curator of human relationships. The author was a relatively unknown Malcolm Gladwell.<sup>74</sup>

In 2008, Chicago was assembling a bid for the Olympics of 2016. President Obama had just been inaugurated and his city was to be the official United States entry into the international competition. It was every day news. Plans were being drawn up, architects consulted, committees assembled. Hollywood directors were rumored to be soliciting audience with Mayor Daley.

I didn't know it at the time, but Commissioner Weisberg and her team had been largely left out of the Olympics conversation. The stories within political circles were that this was Mayor Daley's legacy project, and he wanted to be its impresario. There were rumors of famous men in baseball hats and sunglasses being shown through Mayor Daley's doors. High-priced agents were reportedly scouring their rolodexes for Chicago connections and soliciting introductions to the mayor. Carefully constructed pitch teams were reportedly arriving from New York and Los Angeles and dining in the back rooms of high priced steakhouses, but leaving their plates scandalously untouched. It made me mad -- not that people weren't eating their steaks, which is only slightly offends my sensibilities--but because I wanted the opening ceremonies of the Chicago Olympics to be a Chicago product, to speak to the specific character of our city. That it might become yet another demonstration of Chicago's coastal insecurity was deeply offensive. This needed to be a local project that stoked our civic pride.

Lois, as she was known to most everyone, had come to *Frankenstein* at Steppenwolf Theatre. She called me the next day to ask if we might meet. There was no agenda. She just wanted to know about Redmoon and what we wanted to do and be. That's the sort of person she was. We had provoked her famous curiosity and so she reached out. We had a wonderful meeting around an overly large and intimidating conference table that began a long conversation

about the role of art in a city's public life. So when I called the Commissioner's office to ask for a meeting about an idea I had, she found the time.

I pitched a very undeveloped version of *The Great Chicago Fire Festival*. Mostly, I focused on the idea of creating a signature event centered around our city's grit and resilience that would feature the distinct voices of our ethnic neighborhoods. The historic event of the Great Chicago Fire would be a thematic core and would center the conversation around Chicago's grit and resilience. We would create a coalition of creative community-based organizations and ask them to create parade objects. Seamed together, the resulting parade would be a celebration of Chicago: its character, its history, and its difference. She liked the idea enough to give me a desk, an impressive title, and a stipend to think about it further.

My stipend came from the Chicago Tourism Fund, which did not matter a jot to me at the time but turned out to be quite meaningful in the end. Nor did it matter to me that my desk was across the street from everyone else, in the abandoned back area of the third floor of a building the Office of Tourism had recently acquired. I didn't plan to be there much. I wanted to use the time and title to talk to people, to test and develop the idea through conversation and to build interest in it.

I started by taking meetings with anyone on the staff of the Department of Cultural Affairs who had time to meet with me. My first surprise was that they all had time. We had long meetings in which mostly they told me how things would not get done because people were very busy and overworked. My first scrape was very discouraging. I was also told that things would not get done because things just didn't get done. *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* would be an idea like many others; it would capture Lois' imagination and then lose it over time, as the

complexity revealed itself. I was told that even those things that managed to keep Lois' attention would oftentimes not get done; bureaucratic interference would arise (most often, I was told, out of pettiness.) Tired as she was, Lois would back down; she needed to choose her battles carefully and this was not likely a battle she would choose to fight, with the Olympics being run so publicly out of the Mayor's Office. Most discouraging, perhaps, was when I was told that things would not get done because community organizations were impossible and lacked creativity and vision and taste. They would never embrace the complexity of this project, would get stuck in the identity politics endemic in self representation, flounder, and quit even if I could find funding -- this "off the record" from the Office for Public Art.

There were angels. There were those who cared deeply and ignored cynicism. They understood the byzantine systems and who chose to see them as nothing more than the terrain through which they moved. They knew how to navigate through the risk aversion experts and around the nay sayers.

Mike Orlove was one such angel. I believe it was Mike who provided a most helpful framework for me. There are two categories of civic employees. There are Political Appointees and there are Municipal Workers. Political Appointees serve at the pleasure of the current administration. They are brought in to drive an agenda, a policy, or a program. Their jobs are to get things done. Municipal Workers are, in effect, the machinery of the government. Their job is to run the systems through which things get done. They don't take action themselves, but are the channel through which policies, agendas, and programs are enacted.

Political Appointees have almost no job security, can be fired at will, and rarely serve in any one position for more than a single term but they occupy the highest level of the chain of

command. Nonetheless, they are transitory. Municipal Workers are union employees and are the beneficiaries of old world job security, long term benefits, and ardent union protections. Their jobs are, effectively, for life.

In Chicago, this separation of duties was effectively secured by the efforts of a single man. Michael Shakman was a frustrated reform Democrat. He and his associates had tried and failed a number of times to dent the Democratic political machine. The machine, however, was immovable and the source of its strength, as Shakman assessed it, was its control over government employees. Public employees were hired and fired based on their affiliations. So challengers to the democratic machine were up against an army of political operatives whose steadfast commitment to the established regime was insured by their job dependency. In 1969, Shakman brought suit against the Democratic Organization of Cook County claiming the political patronage system violated the 1st and 14th amendments to the Constitution. According to the suit, standard machine politics compromised both free speech and equal protections.<sup>75</sup>

It took a while to come and out of the judicial system, but Shakman, as they came to be known, were a series of federal court orders that effectively dismantled traditional political patronage and established Chicago's current two channel system. (Similar systems are in place in most major cities and repeated at the state level.) As recently as 2005, a federal judge appointed attorney Noelle Brennan to monitor Chicago's hiring practices in order to assure compliance with Shakman.<sup>76</sup>

During the course of my short tenure at the Department of Cultural Affairs, the work environment degraded considerably. Commissioner Weisberg became less and less available;

meetings among the staff became less frequent; doors were more often closed; hushed side conversations began to displace open ones; people began to take other jobs.

It appeared that those who projected that Lois would lose interest in my idea and let it drop were right. It was the tail end of my one-year appointment, and I stood in front of the senior staff around the heavy oak table in Lois' office. The final iteration of the Olympic bid had been submitted some three months prior. I made a final presentation to Lois and her staff. I talked about the power of ephemera to engage everyday citizens in an act of civic pride. *The Great Chicago Fire Festival*, regardless of the success or failure of the Olympic bid, was a way to bring the city together, through art and craft and celebration.

As I spoke and watched the room, it became clear that the window had closed. Lois was, as she always was, generous and enthusiastic. She promised that we would get to it eventually. She pointed to a shelf in her office. It was full of binders. We would put it on that shelf and when the right moment arose, take it down, dust it off, and make it happen. She told me that the plans for building across the street had sat collecting dust on that very same shelf for many years before they had been able to pull it dust it off, raise the funds, and rehabilitate the building for people like me. She assured me that good ideas never die, and this was not the death of this idea. There were vague allusions to a particularly stringent environment, a few knowing glances between the upper staff, and, at least in retrospect, an especially tired look from Lois.

I never knew how to play these moments. The silent looks between the upper level staff were not so much communication as they were status checks. It was the first time I understood the office politics version of "knowledge as power." Those in the know were establishing their proximity to power by asserting their insider knowledge. To stand outside the circle of knowing

glances was to stand outside of the power circle. It left one without recourse. Not knowing what lay behind the knowing glances, there was no way to address the issues being referenced, no way to participate in the conversation at all.

I was not used to being left out of conversations. In my adult life, I have had two jobs. I waited tables until Redmoon could support me. As my compensation at Redmoon increased, I took fewer and fewer shifts at the restaurant. My last restaurant job ended when I was 31. In my mind, they weren't entirely dissimilar. In both situations, it's important to control the conversation and, simultaneously, to listen acutely. Know the menu intimately and then help people get as close as they can to what they want given those parameters.

I think of myself as a strong collaborator. I create open processes that allow for genuine participation by the team. But I am generally the one setting the menu. At the city, in the Department of Cultural Affairs, not only was I not creating the menu, I didn't have any idea what was on it, how it was made, or what the considerations were under which it was made.

That didn't stop me from having a strong opinion and giving it voice, however. I may have been left out of the conversation and without any real knowledge about the matters at hand, but I had my thoughts nonetheless and somehow thought them important enough to share. Lois did ask. She encouraged me.

"I'm not sure what's going on here, but from what I can see people are simply not on the same page. Most seem primarily concerned with driving their pet project into one of the downtown venues without a greater sense of mission or context. Programs don't accumulate, they don't reflect Chicago and its neighborhoods...." On and on I went. Some heads were nodding, others were nodding off. But that's how it was in all those meetings. It broke down

into thirds: one third had long ago absented themselves, one third would murmur consent to whatever was being said, and a final third were? thoughtful participants, whose real opinions were hard to ascertain. I was still talking: "One big project, encompassing and yet open access, if not the Olympics then something else, might provide a helpful framework, a centralizing force. It could bring cohesion to the staff, generate more open conversation, breathe life into this department, which, frankly, seems to be choking on itself right now. I don't care if it's the *Fire Festival* or what it is, but you need something to gel some enthusiasm and shake the roots a bit. No matter what it is, the *Fire Festival* or something else, I would love to be a part of it."

Lois thanked me. I stayed for the rest of the meeting and said a few goodbyes.

Within 6 months most everyone in that room, and their respective staffs, was let go. Among those remaining, frustration quickly became the ruling sentiment. As if that weren't bad enough, about a year later Mayor Daley announced that he intended to privatize Chicago's largest festivals and refused to promise that they would remain free to the public. Lois Weisberg, his long-time family friend and weekly dinner companion to his ailing wife, resigned in protest.<sup>77</sup>

I read of Lois' resignation in one of two small articles run in the city's major newspapers on the matter. I was red faced with shame. How little I had seen and understood! Unfortunately, this wasn't the first or last that I felt the special brand of humility that accompanies the revelation that my fiercely held opinions were based on a terribly small frame understanding.

Not many political appointees survived the rough transition from Mayor Harold Washington all the way to Mayor Richard J. Daley. To do so meant that you could work equally

well in a progressive administration and within a traditional democratic machine. It meant moving through the chaos left by Washington's untimely death by heart failure, through the temporary mayhem of the Sawyer administration and into the seemingly inevitable restoration of Daley Chicago. Lois Weisberg made that transition. Under Mayor Washington, she ran the Mayor's Office of Special Events. Under Mayor Daley, she shifted over to assume the mantle of the Department of Cultural affairs.

Lois took office in 1989, the same year that the NEA became national news. It all started with a work by Andre Serrano called "Piss Christ". What started as an outcry from a little known conservative Christian organization gained political steam to become a national story. First the American Family Association and then, fast on their heels, United States Senators Jesse Helms and Alfonse D'Amato attacked the piece and the system that had indirectly funded it. The contested piece was a photograph of a crucifix immersed in the artist's urine and, along with the black and white photography of Robert Mapplethorpe, it became a political symbol. "Filthy and blasphemous art" (Patrick Buchanan) and "morally reprehensible trash" (Senator Dick Armey, TX.)<sup>78</sup>

Weeks after Lois took her new office in the corner of the third floor of the Chicago Cultural Center, Chicago became the epicenter of the battle. At the School of the Art Institute, Dread Scott Tyler mounted "What is the Proper Way to Display an American Flag?" a piece that constituted laying an American Flag on the floor in such a way as to encourage people to walk on it. Aldermen threw up their arms; one showed up at the exhibit, with a press team in tow, demanding the piece be immediately removed. In short time, the United States Senate, in a 97 to 0 vote, made displaying an American flag on the floor or ground a federal crime. Veterans

marched on the museum. There were bomb threats. The Governor of Illinois, despite his vocal opposition to the position, signed a bill that defunded the School of the Art Institute and the Illinois Arts Alliance, an advocacy organization that had vigorously defended the artist's rights to display the work.<sup>79</sup>

The entire NEA budget constitutes less than .012% of the national budget, less than the cost of a single fighter jet,<sup>80</sup> but every year NEA funding is publicly scrutinized in both the House and the Senate with a fever. Redmoon benefited over the years from this spectacle. Since the public controversies of the late eighties and early nineties, individual artist grants have been largely eliminated, for fear of backlash, and the NEA has steered itself into the more readily defensible position of supporting art that has positive social impact.<sup>81</sup> Redmoon was perceived as wholesome in ways that made it readily defensible.

No matter what the expression, it was clear to anyone who watched arts funding used as political weaponry, funding the arts with public money was a risky venture. Public funding of the arts is simply too susceptible to political grandstanding. Putting aside controversial content, it's difficult to answer the critics who ask why these dollars are better used funding art than filling potholes or paying for police overtime.

In Chicago, the work-around was to create two parallel funding systems: a public agency and a private agency. The Department of Cultural Affairs would receive a budget allocation, approved by City Council. The money from the city budget could be expected to be heavily monitored and would have to be spent conservatively, with an eye toward the game of politics and utility. The Chicago Tourism Fund was requisitioned through the city's hotel and entertainment taxes, raised through private donations from individuals, corporations and

foundations, earned through sales of swag,<sup>82</sup> admission tickets to events and facility rentals. Commissioner Weisberg oversaw both entities. She was able to run one type of programming through her staff at the Department of Cultural Affairs, while channeling other kinds of programming into the Tourism office. There was a fluidity between the two entities that allowed Commissioner Weisberg to strategically circumvent the volatility of political posturing and public opinion when occasion demanded.

The knowing looks that passed around the table at my exit interview from the Department of Cultural Affairs referred to the impending collapse of that system.

Ms. Brennan, the court appointed monitor of city hiring, had turned her attention to the Department of Cultural Affairs. In 2009, she filed a report stating that, by the accounting of the city's own Office of Compliance, 174 jobs at the Department of Cultural Affairs were not in compliance with Shakman. Nearly 80 of those 174 jobs that were terminated shortly after my departure, including the job belonging to Mike Orlove, the prophet who had spelled the significance of a two-tiered government employee structure in a meeting nearly a year earlier.<sup>83</sup> The fuzzy line between the Department of Cultural Affairs and the Office of Tourism that allowed Lois to move so fluidly, was a violation of Shakman. The two functions would need to be decisively separated and overseen by different people and even different city departments. Under this new arrangement, my office and stipend would not have been Lois' to allocate.

We don't often give consideration to the balloons that never drop, to the confetti that is never released, to the corks that never fly. But for every big congratulatory spectacle, there are often two or three others that are fully prepared but never triggered. Does a clean-up team

unceremoniously drop the balloons and stoically fire the confetti cannons, and indifferently watch them drop? Or do they make the most of it? I'd be curious to know.

So it was for the Chicago 2016 Olympic bid. Though, in this case, even the excitement of anticipation was stolen from most of the potential celebrants.

The host city selection process is one of “fall away.” It is a strange system that awards survival. The four final cities, reflecting bids from each of four different countries, are voted on by the committee. The country with the least votes is eliminated in the next round of voting. So there are three rounds of voting, with the contest between the last two countries.

It was widely thought that Chicago had a very compelling case. Those really familiar with the politics of the Olympics knew the politics around this selection process to be wildly unpredictable. Both the national and local press wrote numerous stories diagnosing Chicago's prospects. Many were convinced that Chicago was a top candidate. The president hailed from Chicago and had just been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, and Chicago's bid had been received by the committee very positively in the first rounds of scrutiny.<sup>84</sup> There was an awareness that the committee might be persuaded to make history by selecting the first ever South American location, so at worst those in the know had Chicago lasting until the third round.

In Daley Plaza, there were large screens erected broadcasting the selection process. Situated across from City Hall, the Plaza was thus organized with increasingly dense programming as the day went on. Crowds were expected to be thin in the first round, build for the second and peak for the final announcement in the afternoon Central Time. Patrick Ryan, who was Mayor Daley's appointee to head the Chicago Olympic bid, took the principal players of the bid team to Copenhagen for the presentations and International Olympic Committee's final

decision. There was a stage erected with lighting and sound equipment and, no doubt, a balloon drop or something similar. There was a podium off to the side.

I never made it there. Like many others, I planned to get there later in the day, for the later rounds. There was no way Chicago would be eliminated in the first round. I had Madrid as the first to go, then Tokyo, leaving the final round Rio v. Chicago with Rio coming out the official selection. There were all kinds of betting pools going around. You could bet on the winner, with odds, or play a trifecta. I did not lay any money down, for fear of the jinx, but I thought Chicago would make the final round.

There is a YouTube video of Daley Plaza as Jacques Rogges announces Chicago's elimination in the first round of voting.<sup>85</sup> I chose it from many others because it had the words "epic fail" in it. Bold. All caps. "Chicago Reacts to Losing Olympic Bid (EPIC FAIL)". It is a fascinating view. The camera is fixed on the assembled crowd, Jacques Rogges can be heard in the background. He starts with, "The City of Chicago..." and you can hear a twitter of excitement run through the crowd. A moment of eagerness.

"The City of Chicago, having obtained the least number of votes, is eliminated...." Nothing can be heard from Mr. Rogges after that point. He is drowned out by the sounds of disappointment. There are moans and gasps, a few screams. Looking at the crowd, the surprise and shock is compelling. Most people stand open mouthed, aghast. Many are wearing the t-shirts given to them as volunteers for the cause, orange shirts with white writing. They stand there, hands at their sides, slack jawed, turning to check in with one another, a picture of mass disappointment. From off screen, someone shouts, "Chicago!", but there is no echoed rallying cry from the others, only open mouths.

The video cuts to a few isolated moving images of shock, people with their hands over their mouths and eyes wide open, and then a few individual interviews that last no more than 3 seconds, snippets of disappointment and incredulity. Most of the faces are white and over forty. Toward the end, there are two black men, incongruously dressed in more formal attire, long coats and ties. One of them addresses the camera directly: "Now the mayor can focus on our children killing themselves. He can focus on the economy."<sup>86</sup>

I am writing this in 2016, just after the Rio Olympics. Chicago's violent crime rate is at an all-time high, the economy at an all-time low.<sup>87</sup> I have difficulty imagining the magnitude of the scandal that would have followed from holding the 2016 Olympics in this environment. On the other hand, perhaps the spending and attention inspired by the incoming Olympics would have prevented such a fall.

I owe the rebirth of *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* to the dysfunction of the Chicago Theater community, or at least to a certain strange tension among its higher profile leaders.

My first meeting with newly appointed Commissioner Michelle Boone was while she was still situating her new office. It has to be the nicest government office in the city, with floor to ceiling windows on the east and south facing walls. Michelle had Lois Weisberg's big conference table taken out of the corner office space and put into what had been her private office. I had never been in Lois' private office. That door was mostly closed when I was in the office. I thought of it as her smoking room. (Lois was a notorious smoker and had the rasping voice to prove it. It seemed unlikely to me that she went out to the alley to indulge.)

Under its new occupant, the corner room, where the conference table had been, became a much more casual and open space, with Michelle's small desk sitting humbly in the corner and furniture clustered in groupings by the windows. At the time of our first meeting, those furnishings had not yet arrived, so we sat on the only furniture in the room, a couple of chairs by the windows overlooking Millennium Park.

Mostly we gossiped. We hadn't really spoken in a long while, Michelle and I, and I was anxious to hear how she was accommodating her new authority, responsibility and profile. We shared with me her excitement about the Chicago Cultural Plan, the first such plan in over 30 years. To create the plan, Commissioner Boone worked with a small internal team and a Canadian consulting firm (whose selection brought considerable public criticism) to lead numerous town meetings. The meetings were intended to create communal 'buy in' through participation. Big ideas were discussed, initiatives were quickly scribbled on post it notes and attached to walls. Community members 'voted' on different ideas with colored stickers. It was a self-conscious exercise in "participatory process", an effort to assure that the city could say that this was the city's cultural plan, created by and for its citizens. From the executive summary: "This plan, too, was created by visionary thinkers - you, the citizens of Chicago."<sup>88</sup>

One of the initiatives to come out of the town hall meetings and community research was the recommendation for "a new city-wide festival".<sup>89</sup> The first idea for that festival likely came from Mayor Emanuel himself, who was somewhat famously a serious student of ballet. How Commissioner Boone moved the proposed international dance festival to a festival of Chicago theater, I don't know, but I imagine she argued that theater was, without question, Chicago's most recognized cultural export at the time and far more likely to win the international attention that

the city coveted. At the time, Chicago theater was on a great run. Steppenwolf had just mounted Tracy Letts' play *August: Osage County* in Chicago and on Broadway. It was about to win the Pulitzer Prize for dramatic literature and sweep the Tony Awards. Both Bob Falls and Mary Zimmerman of the Goodman Theatre had recently been honored themselves with Tony Awards, Mary for her adaptation of Ovid's *Metamorphosis* and Bob for a hugely popular run of Eric Bogosian's *Talk Radio*, starring Liev Schreiber. Lookingglass Theatre had likewise recently picked up a Tony for best regional theater, and some of Chicago's smaller theaters and theater directors were getting notice for successful runs of shows in New York and Boston.

I doubt anyone has ever needed to ask Michelle Boone to keep it real. She is a truth teller, through and through. The next time I saw her was just after a meeting with the leaders of Chicago's largest theaters, both nonprofit and for profit. They had met to discuss the new festival and the meeting had ended in discord. "Like children!" According to Michelle, one had openly insulted another and discord reigned. Everyone wanted their entry into the festival in their home theater and no one was willing to consider having their product associated with someone else's venue. The conversation had ended with some foul language and ill feeling.

A week later, I heard this story from a vastly different perspective. It was recounted by the slur hurdler himself. I was at an "ensemble theater meeting" at Steppenwolf Theatre. The leadership from Steppenwolf, Lookingglass Theater, Redmoon, the House Theater, and About Face had been gathering quarterly for over a decade. It was the generous initiative of Martha Lavey, then Artistic Director of Steppenwolf, who wanted to provide a venue for open and honest sharing, a place where leaders could let their guard down for a moment or two and get some unvarnished counsel from their fellows. Conceptually, it should have worked, but my read

was that the attending leaders never really let their guard down, always feeling the need to maintain their professional profiles in front of one another and, particularly, in front of Martha. Nonetheless, it fostered a safe place and an important camaraderie. Mostly we gossiped.

At this particular meeting, David Hawkanson shared with the group that, along with a few other leaders in the theater community, they had been in a number of very encouraging meetings with new Cultural Commissioner Michelle Boone about a new international theater festival featuring Chicago companies. He wanted us to think about the opportunity and share ideas. "Hawk", as he is often called, is a no-nonsense guy who has served in a leadership capacity at various high-profile nonprofits for over thirty years. He is often incisive and sometimes crass. Hawk joked about the clash at the meeting. In his eyes, he had squelched a cynical initiative by an owner of one of the downtown venues who was self-servingly rallying for the Theater District to be the festival site, all under the guise of generous self-sacrifice. The owner had made a big deal of offering use of his venue to Steppenwolf "free of charge."

"That's very generous of you," Hawk said at the time to the producer, "Fuck you." It played much better in that room that afternoon than I imagine it did in front of Commissioner Boone. That afternoon, among the inner squad, there was robust laughter and supportive banter. We all understood the brand confusion that follows putting your production in someone else's theater. We knew that the value of hosting Steppenwolf and the festival far outweighed the foregone rental fee.

The next time I saw Commissioner Boone, the festival was off. She was miffed. The theater community could not find common ground and the conversations had fallen into

irrevocable dysfunction. Suddenly, she was confronting a significant hole in her own programming. The major city-wide festival was one of the pillars of the Chicago Cultural Plan, and now it was gone.

The last three times I had seen her, I had aggressively pitched *The Great Chicago Fire Festival*, so this time I decided not to go back at it. It seemed clear to me that for whatever reason the idea didn't work for her, and the last thing she needed in this moment was an unwanted pitch and the awkwardness that follows. I listened and sympathized.

Fortunately, Frank Maugeri was with me and he dove in. I think we had recently shifted titles again, making Frank Redmoon's Producing Artistic Director (and me Redmoon's Executive Artistic Director.) We were forever trying to find the right way to communicate our different roles in leading the theater. In the fifteen years that we worked together, we got as close as two working partners could and all the while our differences almost comically widened. The bigger he got, the more I retreated; he commanded a room and I fell back. Where Frank is a font of creativity, a font of ideas, never ending and always spouting new ones; I am more methodical and intentional, a thresher. The more spontaneous he became, the more self-conscious and considerate I became.

Here, as often was often the case, the differences served us well. I was cynical and insecure. Frank was optimistic and full of belief. So without any restraint, he pitched *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* as though it was a brand new thought. He sold the idea to the Commissioner.

It was as though she had never heard it before. I watched her listen to him and saw the light go on. She began nodding and leaned forward. He finished with the houses floating on the

river and the kiosks with neighborhood wares being sold on the riverbanks by their makers, and she sat back and looked over at me. "There's something there," she said, "something there. Let me have a couple of weeks."

Three weeks later, we had a verbal commitment of \$100,000 to create a concrete plan and proposal.

I knew that we could use the city's support to leverage funds from ArtPlace America. It was a perfect fit. Artplace was the result of an historic meeting convened by NEA Chair Rocco Landesman. The story goes that Rocco, as everyone calls him, called together the most visionary leaders he had met in his past as a Broadway producer and put them in a room and closed the door: "We can do better. I'm not going to watch us be mediocre. The arts can be a powerful force for economic development and social justice. Don't come out of this room until you have a real idea." The idea that came out two days later became ArtPlace America, a consortium of funders, bankers, and government agencies working together to fund and support cultural activities that build stronger communities.<sup>90</sup>

Carol Colletta was tapped to run ArtPlace America. She had previously been the Executive Director of CEO's for Cities, a nonprofit supporting cross sector activities that change cities.<sup>91</sup> Carol built CEO's for Cities into a widely regarded national organization of mayors and business leaders willing to try new things. I met with Carol a few weeks later. I knew this was the sort of project that Carol and her team would find exciting; it was ambitious, inclusive, and had city wide scale. Moreover, it sat at the intersection of culture and urban revitalization without being a massive infrastructure project. It moved and created human capital. We applied to and received \$250,000 of support from ArtPlace America.<sup>92</sup>

These were huge sums, more than Redmoon had ever received, but this was to be a city-wide festival and it would require more such gifts. My thought was that with the city's help we could access corporate sponsorships. A few large scale corporate gifts and we'd be there.

Corporate giving was the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. For as long as I can remember, corporate giving had been evoked as the promise land. It became a private joke for me. On our board meeting agendas, after "artistic update," "financial update," and "development update," I wrote in italics, to be deleted before sending, "vague evocation of the promise of corporate sponsorship." And so it was. If we were in a financial hole, or even projecting one, it was towards corporate sponsorship that everyone turned. If we were in the black and looking good, it was time to put some energy toward our corporate sponsorship program, maybe even to hire someone to the development team with experience in corporate sponsorships.

Surely this was the project that would open the doors. We had a good project and the city's backing. It was a large-scale event that would be a part of multiple marketing campaigns; it was civically minded, with neighborhood engagement for the more service-oriented companies and had a spectacular finale to satisfy those needing media exposure. What more could they want?

Commissioner Boone has a kind of tagline. Generally, it ends most meetings, but sometimes it pops into the middle of a meeting to set things back on track. "What are you worried about," she will ask. She sincerely wants to know, and she will wait for an answer. At a certain point in our collaboration, she almost stopped asking because the answer was always the same, and she knew it: Money. I was worried about money. Grand Plans are easy for me to

construct, they are a byproduct of my ambition and my idealism and they flow without regulation. Budgets demand that Grand Plans get concrete. The city officially announced *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* in May of 2013. As of September, we still had not talked about how the money was going to be raised, and it was what I was worried about. Every meeting. So it was with a palpable relief that Michelle told me that she had won the Mayor's approval to set a fundraising meeting with the One Chicago Fund.

The One Chicago Fund is practically a ghost agency. It won't be easily found on the internet or openly credited at groundbreakings or ribbon cuttings. Without anyone really noticing, the One Chicago Fund raised the money to develop Maggie Daley Park and to launch the Chicago Architectural Biennial. They raised money for an anti-crime initiative before City Council was willing to take the political risk. The One Chicago Fund is a quasi governmental agency designed to escape the inefficiencies that encumber public money. They raise money for public initiatives, but outside the purview of city government. It is, in effect, a reworking of the Chicago Tourism Fund. Only it doesn't retain staff, but backs projects that are fully staffed with non-governmental employees, thus skirting Shakman.<sup>93</sup>

The One Chicago Fund was led by David Boul. He is something to behold. He is decisive, aggressive, and fast moving. For almost a decade, David was an executive producer of *The Oprah Show*, so he knows how to move and handle people. He is also a committed civil servant who believes in the mayor, loves Chicago, and does not suffer fools or small steps. We met in One Chicago Fund's borrowed offices in a nondescript office building downtown. Some company David knew had recently moved out of a 10,000 square foot office space with windows overlooking State Street. David and Lynne Lockwood Murphy, his partner, squirreled

themselves into three offices away from the windows and surrounded by empty desks and blinking telephones that they didn't know how to operate.

I have always found the roots of the development effort to be horribly off-putting. The central discovery process at any development enterprise boils down to two essential questions: Who do you know who has lots of money, and how well do you know them? Lists are made, and schedules follow lists. Sequencing is important. A campaign needs a strong lead gift from a good name, and it builds from there through a careful progression because people follow people and some people are more willing to be out front than others. It is only distantly and all too briefly, about the actual programming and its mission. That is sometimes very jarring for the artist, or at least it has been for me, but it is the reality of fundraising and I have learned to accept it.

The first meeting about raising funds for *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* was awkward, but for a different reason. I was surprised that we were being asked about our connections. We were already taxing our donor base. Our people had been tapped. We had recently moved into a new facility and were pushing to raise funds for construction and the uptick in general operating costs related to being in that building. It did not seem likely to me that we would be able to raise the money needed for *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* on the back of our funders. Wasn't this the mayor's specialty?

I wish I had called out the confusion straight away. Likely I did, but development is a game of relationships, and David was plotting on a much larger matrix than the one I could see. In the cultural sphere alone, in addition to raising money for *The Great Chicago Fire Festival*

and Maggie Daley Park, he had been charged with raising funds for Royale DeLuxe, an internationally renowned public spectacle troupe.

That first meeting happened in late October, a little less than a year before the festival was slated to culminate on the river. As late as May, a mere five months to the culminating event on the river and two months before were slated to begin our neighborhood programming, we still had not achieved clarity. We were still a million dollars short and were six weeks behind our most compressed production schedule. The response from our advocates at the city was not to worry, things would work themselves out. This made sense, I told myself. They must have a Plan B. The city couldn't announce, promote, and advertise a festival and then simply not do it. They couldn't fail to fund this thing that they had been in the newspapers and on television talking about as core to their cultural plan.

Or could they? Among the headlines of school closings and almost daily shootings, it seemed to me that announcing that *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* had been cancelled would barely raise an eyebrow. In fact, news of a cancelled cultural event could easily be spun as an important re-prioritization of public resources to address more immediate needs.

And so it went, back and forth, up and down. It was an emotional roller coaster. We would have a meeting with David Boul and Commissioner Boone and sometimes members of one or both staffs and then, out on the sidewalk later, spend as much time trying to understand what had transpired as we had in the meeting itself. We were reading gestures, parsing language, judging the length of conversational pauses, anything that might yield some insight into the story behind the story.

It felt a bit like a game of "chicken," or at least that was one frequent interpretation at our sidewalk debriefs. The city wanted to be sure that we had pursued every possible dollar, that we had given them access to every valuable connection, that we were not "holding out" in any way. Surely, we thought, they could find the million dollars we needed. A million dollars was a rounding error for some departments. It was a fraction of the money that the mayor had sitting on a well-publicized capital projects fund. It was less than an eighth of the money they were raising for Maggie Daley Park.

Another interpretation was less consoling. They were seriously struggling to raise the funds and may not succeed. They really had struck out with Walgreen's and with Miller Beer. We had been party to those asks and witnessed the lack of interest in one case and the string of excuses in the other....

I had been stung once by my presumption. Every time I thought about raising a serious stink, I recalled standing in Lois' office, telling her how should could get her staff back on track, no idea that she would effectively leave that meeting to sign their blue slips in order to comply with Shakman and shortly thereafter resign in protest over r the privatization of her public initiatives. I chose to be patient.

On alternate days, I was confident and bereft, sure that we were on the right road and that I needed only to have the faith that was being asked of me and then absolutely desolate, working through the uncomfortable steps that would have to be taken to pull out of the event without completely undermining Redmoon's long term viability. Writing this, I went back and called up my email communication with Commissioner Boone. What starts in October of 2013, a year out,

as gentle prodding, takes a desperate turn by March of 2014.<sup>94</sup> By June, I am begging, plain and simple, explaining that we not only are we falling precariously behind on our, jeopardizing the project, we are effectively jeopardizing our institutional health because we have borrowed operational funds to keep *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* on track.

We had already fallen nearly six weeks behind on our production schedule. It was mid-June. By this time, we should have finished technical drawings, built prototypes and tested their viability, and hired the core production and technical staff. Instead we were having a scheduled weekly conversation about whether or not we could still do the project, what it would look like to pull out, and when we would have to make that decision. Each week we put all decisions off until the next.

We were stuck. Or, more to the point, I was stuck. The cardinal rule in negotiations is that one must know at what point to walk away. I did not know. Worse yet, I knew: I wasn't walking away. I had worked on this project for five years. I had somehow convinced the City of Chicago to let me light fires in the middle of the Chicago River, to... This was the project I was meant to make, the culmination of twenty-five years of practice and discovery. It had taken a long time for me to refine and fine tune my artistic vision and social mission, finally on the right track and this project brought it all together. I had carefully built my case. I had Harvard University behind it and the University of Chicago. I had won support from Artplace America and the NEA. We had letters of support from countless community organizations, aldermen, and members of a few key philanthropic families.<sup>95</sup>

To walk away at this point would almost definitely be to let the project go entirely. We would not be given a second chance. There were the financial matters. We would likely lose the

ArtPlace money; the city money that had been spent but not yet received would be reclaimed and subject to a new political cycle; other funds that had already been received and spent would come under scrutiny and compromise future giving. More than that, there was the question of social capital. I had spent it all; I had called every friend and associate, pulled every string, called up every social debt I could recall. There was no recovering from a mass expenditure like that, or so I told myself.

I wasn't walking away; I was going in deeper. I was asking favors in every direction. I called friends that I hadn't seen in twenty years, who I knew had been successful in their chosen careers and asked for their support. I reached out to artists and designers and performers from the deep and shallow past to see how they might participate. Redmoon had built enormous good will over the years and we called it all in. Even if the Big Money wasn't rolling in, momentum continued to build.

We had meetings on Thursday mornings; they were open to anyone who was interested in the project. In March, there were 25 or 30 of us sitting around in a circle in an under-heated warehouse, worrying through the details. By June, we were over 200. People from every walk. Teenagers who were learning to weld and make things as a part of employment programs, established theater professional and designers, teachers who were interested in helping write the curriculum that accompanied our book on the Great Chicago Fire, 'burners' who saw this as an opening gambit in a long thawing of fire department rigidity....

Rebecca Rugg led those meetings. We hired Becca to produce *The Great Chicago Fire Festival*. She is a leader and a communitarian and a teacher. She built teams and structures for collaboration.<sup>96</sup> Becca started laying more structure on the meetings. Artists presented past

work. Students talked about what they were learning. Board members and other funders started coming and then bringing friends. The meetings were inspiring. The diversity of backgrounds and experience in the room was by itself impressive. To feel it all being productively channeled toward a project of togetherness and celebration was truly inspiring. People left those meetings charged with the power of an ideal.

I stood on the periphery of those meetings. In general, I was at one extreme or another, either chewing the inside of my lip with worry or failing to hide the irrepressible grin of some proud papa. In either case, I didn't think that energy belonged in the circle. By June, my lip was raw and bleeding.

I initiated a more aggressive tact. I wrote a challenging letter to one of the Mayor's chief advisors explaining that, in addition to putting the success of *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* on the line, they were likely jeopardizing the future of our 25-year-old organization. I asked members of Redmoon's board to make similar appeals to their city contacts. I asked Michelle Boone to meet me after work for a drink and explained, over a cocktail, that at this point, falling short on funding the festival was akin to dropping us off a short cliff. We had made commitments every which way and not realizing this project would fundamentally undermine our standing in the community. It would be a blow to our brand from which we would not recover. She understood. She sympathized. She shared that she, too, was frustrated with the pace of things and the layers and layers of decision making and procedures that surrounded each and every project.

Michelle told me about a public event that she had organized to commemorate the mayor's first year in office. She had rallied thinkers and artists from around the globe to join the

mayor in a public conversation about the role of the arts in a healthy city. She dutifully passed through each of the bureaucratic gates: approval from the mayor's staff, budget allocation, approval of each guest, the mayor's scheduler, consulate approval for each international guest...

Then, the week before the press release was scheduled to go out, the mayor announced his intention to close 50 public schools for budgetary reasons. The controversial announcement consumed the news cycle, and the mayor's press office decided that the any celebration of the mayor at the time would be a bad idea. So the event was cancelled. Just like that. Michelle received a phone call at 4pm that day. She would spend the next day getting approval to send gifts of apology to each of the guests.

I walked back to the office a little drunk, very confused, and angry. If they could cancel that event, with international stars like those attached and committed, they could surely cancel *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* without a thought. Maybe I really did need to make other plans.

Back at the office I made lists, long columns of names. These were the artist and designers that needed to be released from 'hold'; these were the managers and fabricators that needed to be paid a minimum stipend for work to date and then released; these were the community based organizations that we needed to call to cancel the summer programming strand and to whom we should offer a workshop of some kind; these were the funders with whom we needed to start a conversation about the change in program, the money spent, and how to remain in integrity with them; these were the objects and tools that could be sold; these were the friends of the theater who had counseled us and given their professional expertise, to whom we needed to both apologize and ask for yet another round of counsel about how to get past public relations disaster.

And then the money came. We got a call. A check would be cut by week's end.

They had figured it out. A gift would be forthcoming from the Chicago Park District for a million dollars. There was barely time to celebrate. Late that afternoon three of us went to the local drinking hole and threw back a celebratory whiskey, laughed giddily, looked at one another incredulously, laughed again, and then went back to the office to make phone calls.

Everything that been on hold was released. It was a flood of activity, a torrent of paperwork and meetings and purchase orders and conference calls. Keeping track of it all was nearly impossible. In fact, it turned out to be just that: impossible to track. How does a focused, intelligent, well-meaning, experienced practitioner overlook creating redundancy in the system that triggers the marquee element of a new signature event for the City of Chicago, one that has been five years in the making, involves 7 city departments, 3 federal agencies, and countless technical advisors? That's how—too much moving too fast in too short a period of time.

If I had to name a single cause for the failures of *The Great Chicago Fire Festival*, it would be late money. It was late money that created an unrealistic production calendar and, more specifically, strained the management team charged with overseeing all the activity, keeping things to schedule, problem solving inevitable logistical difficulties, and generating a continual stream of communication.

Blaming late money would be easier, but it would be a lie, or at least such a radical oversimplification as to be close enough. But it's so much easier than the real answer: a toxic cocktail of ego, ambition, good will and fear that prevented me from properly responding to the pressure that the late money created.

There is an oft quoted dictum in fabrication: "Time, Money, Quality. Pick two." If you need it cheap and high quality, you better have a lot of time. If you need a quality product delivered quickly, it's going to have a heavy price tag. In our case, we had budgeted the project assuming a certain period of time, now we had less than half that time, but the total budget had not changed. Time and Money were a constant, so quality gave way. Inevitably.

That's not an excuse, that's just reality. But it was my job to figure out how to conform to that reality. Time is immutable. We weren't going to find more money. Quality couldn't be compromised. It was my job to find the hidden variables in this equation, and I didn't.

I needed to adjust the product. I needed to reduce our ambitions, change the deliverables. But I didn't. I didn't see the situation clearly enough to know that quality was going to be sacrificed and, tough as it is to admit, even if I had, I'm not sure I would have had the wherewithal to make the necessary adjustments. What could we cut? Performing for 50,000 people in the heart of Chicago's downtown needed to achieve a certain scale. Without compromising that scale, what could go? I couldn't see it, so I cut nothing and we paid the price.

I wanted to blame The City. They had announced the event before they knew how they were going to fund it. Though the funding ultimately arrived, it was so late in coming that we were irrevocably behind scheduled. They had created layers and layers of red tape, a regulatory gauntlet that exacted enormous energy and time and left us under-resourced and pinned into a technical corner. They straddled us with any number of unforeseen problems to resolve that, at first glance, were theirs to solve: site permissions, docking agreements, creating a deal with the tour boat operators, a river traffic plan. The city had put us in an impossible position. The city was to blame.

But it didn't work. From the beginning the project had been to work within the city, to accept it as it stood. Just as we accepted our neighborhood partners as they were, so I had pledged to accept the city as it was. It was our job to make the project work within the scope of their limitations. In fact, my hope was to compel them to move beyond their perceived limits, to push at their boundaries and expand them. I wanted to make this kind of work easier to get produced. I wanted to blaze the trail and cut a wide enough path that anyone interested could find it and travel along for as long as it served. I audaciously made that goal explicit in an early meeting with Commissioner Boone, and without batting an eye, she assured me that she hoped for the same. This kind of effort was important, we agreed, and we had the opportunity to make it more palatable, more known and therefore less likely to meet immediate rejection, as many efforts in the past had.

Blaming the city just wasn't satisfying. It was like blaming gravity for a fall. It was the given. It was no more gratifying than blaming the weather, which I also tried to blame. It had been the coldest first three days of October on record. And wet. And windy. Standing down at the river two days prior to the event looking toward the east, it felt like a mid-Winter morning. I was waiting for snow to blow in off the lake. But as WGN radio's Dean Richards had so righteously pointed out, we were creating an outdoor event. Accommodating inclimate weather was part of the job description.<sup>97</sup>

I needed a name and a face. I needed someone to blame and be angry with, but no one fit the bill.

Mayor Emanuel called me the next day. He told me of his intention to back the project again, "Big things like this take time. We'll do it again and do it better." Commissioner Boone

likewise reached out to me immediately, first on a personal level, and then the next day to call a meeting about how her office could support us. My own team at Redmoon had given it everything they had and then some; there was no one to be blamed there.

I could blame our professional pyrotechnicians. I tried that on for a while. They had insisted on the ignition system. In fact, they had sold it to the Chicago Fire Department. If it was safe enough for the United Center, with all star athletes and celebrities standing within a ten-foot radius, surely it was safe enough for the middle of the Chicago River. They had installed it and were hired to oversee its implementation. They were an excellent scapegoat for a while, until I tried it out in an off-camera interview with WTTW Chicago and the interviewer immediately followed by asking me who was responsible for hiring and overseeing them.<sup>98</sup> They were hired hands under our supervision. And I knew I should have caught it.

If, as I had decided, late money was the core failure, then David Boul was the best scapegoat. David had failed to raise the funds we needed on time. He had been assigned by the Mayor to the task and had not realized it. He looked to us for leads and connections, despite having been told a number of times that our funders were tapped and that we had little to nothing to offer. Add that he appeared to be withholding of information and was generally aggressive and a bit snarky, and the composite picture was an easy target for animosity of any kind. I saw others on Redmoon's team ready to situate blame on David. Surely, the One Chicago Fund had millions at their disposal. Why hadn't they just allocated the money from those funds? Why the complex workaround of siphoning money through the Park District, and why so late in the game? Boul was the one.

But I had been with David as he pitched Walgreen's and Miller Beer. He had gone with us, against his stated practice, to add heft and mayoral pressure and influence to asks as small as \$50,000. David had been in the trenches with us. I had seen him sweat the details and extend himself personally. He cared; he tried; he had been assigned a nearly impossible task and given it his all; he was hardly to blame.

Plus, I learned later, it was David who had figured out the solution of channeling money to us through the Park District. It was never revealed what deal he had brokered. There was conjecture that he had promised to pay the Park District back through the budget of another project, maybe under the umbrella of the Maggie Daley Park budget. No matter how he had arranged it, it was David who, in a pinch, figured out how to keep One Chicago Fund under the radar while getting us the money we needed to make happen.

When Alderman Burke<sup>99</sup> banged his fists on the oak door in the council room, he was demanding repayment of the city's \$300,000 investment into *The Great Chicago Fire Festival*. Imagine the mayhem had it come out at the time that the event on the river constituted a \$1.5M city investment. David had been right to keep the money trail obscure. He knew the perils of public perception. One Chicago Fund needed to keep its anonymity in order to be able to continue its good work.

It's so easy to leap on failure, to grandstand about spending priorities, to pick holes in a new initiative. One Chicago Fund's effectiveness was the direct outgrowth of its institutional distance from the political machinery. Could I blame Alderman Burke?

Over the years, as I moved projects in public spaces through all the appropriate channels, I marveled at what I could only understand to be fear. Both Mayor Daley and Mayor Emanuel were known for their hot-headed impatience, but they were also both noted for their fierce loyalty. I wondered if this was the source of the caution that I felt at every turn. Now I knew. It wasn't fear at all, it was reason. They were making a series of absolutely reasonable and obvious calculations that led to the very clear conclusion that there is precious little reward at the back end of risk.

The failure to ignite validated all of the "cover your ass" choices made along the way to mounting *The Great Chicago Fire Festival*. On the morning of October 5th, 2014, every city employee who had used the bureaucratic system to keep their distance from the project along the way was glad they had. The producer who had refused to get involved in our conversations with the tour boat operators, the army corp of engineers officer who had refused us access to the mooring points, the Department of Buildings employee who held us to the letter of the law regarding built structures, even though we were erecting temporary kiosks for a single night, the fire chief who had limited our propane to 6 pound tanks while 20 pound tanks sit on nearly every back porch in Chicago... each one had effectively buffered themselves from our failure. They slept easy on October 4th because no matter the conclusion, they were unassailable. They were not agents for the project, but the impartial machinery through which the project had to be enacted. They would still have their jobs long after the political operatives and their fire festival on the river had come and gone.

This was distinctly not true for their political counterparts. Their necks were out. The mayor was assailed with questions at a Park District park the next day. Coverage of the opening

of a new neighborhood playspace and fieldhouse was completely overwhelmed by failures of *The Great Chicago Fire Festival*. Commissioner Boone stuck to her talking points: *The Fire Festival* was a success. Seven minutes of mishap did not overwhelm seven months of amazing work in Chicago's under-resourced neighborhoods; big things did not happen without a certain amount of risk; we would do it again and do it better. A few days and scathing headlines later, both politicians had backed away slightly. The event would need to be scrutinized. An "after action report" had been ordered and would need to be carefully reviewed before any decisions were taken.

A few months after the 2014 *Great Chicago Fire Festival*, I was driving up to Northbrook to meet face to face with our representative from Allstate Insurance Company. Despite having assured us that Allstate was very happy with their support of the neighborhood celebrations, she was looking toward a meeting with her boss and thought it might be best if we had a face to face meeting to help her prepare her assessment of their sponsorship. I was dreading yet another stop on the "Grand Apology Tour" and turned on the radio to get it out of my head. Jon Ronson was being interviewed. His book "So You've Been Publicly Shamed" had just hit the market. I ordered the book from my phone before leaving the car; it was my first hard cover purchase in some time.

Ronson opens the book with the incredible story of Justine Sacco. Justine Sacco was a public relations professional on her way to South Africa. Just before taking off from JFK, she tweeted a self-aware but racially charged tweet: "On my way to South Africa. Hope I don't get AIDS. I won't. I'm white." By the time she landed in Cape Town 16 hours later, she had been retweeted over a million times, had been labeled a racist and much worse by hundreds of

thousands and lost her job and probably her career. Justine Sacco had been publicly shamed. It was a stain she would likely never outlive.<sup>100</sup>

In Commissioner Weisberg's era, it had taken profiles like Senator Jesse Helms and other Senators to create a national stink around the NEA. Now, in the era of twitter and what Ronson identifies as a new form of digital pillory, it took little more than a single slip and few well-crafted tweets to get the ball of shame rolling. Once rolling, the digital momentum is terrifyingly vast and fast. And, as Ronson astutely notes, unlike the pillory of yesteryear, the digital pillory recognizes no humanity. Identification is never established making sympathy impossible. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault famously noted the important shift of public sentiment during the spectacle of punishment around the historic pillory. At a certain point in the process of public torture and humiliation, the spectator is moved by the victim's suffering to identify with the victim and their sentiment shifts from the torturer to the tortured.<sup>101</sup> The digital pillory, however, has no such self-correcting mechanism. In the virtual world, there is no access to the tortured. The victim remains anonymous and unseen, a disembodied idea, a single tweet or image, nothing that can create identification. No amount of suffering is enough; the shame accumulates until heaping it on no longer holds interest. It fades from the public's mind, but the digital residue remains and the victim is straddled forever after with an indelible stain on their google search.<sup>102</sup>

We hear about politicians looking to earn and save "political capital" in order to take a risk. President Obama can't expend his political capital in defense of labor if he needs it for Health Care. Of course, this is totally absurd. Risk should be the expectation, not earned but compelled. We consistently elect our politicians on the platform of change and then straddle

them with an unforgiving expectation of success. Failure is often seen as moral dereliction rather than as testimony of deliberate and considered endeavor. At a time when change has become an imperative, not to mention a political calling card, we should embrace failure as evidence of effort, not condemn it as sloppy or worse. Yet the social stigma that surrounds failure is cause enough to run from even the most benign cultural initiative.

I write this only weeks after the election of Donald Trump. As the media searches for the systematic reasons for this surprising electoral result, it seems to me fairly simple and obvious. We elected a president as snarky and full of spite as the social media that has stymied even our most well-intentioned and scrupulous leaders. Change was the order of the day once again, but this time the electorate saw that change is only possible with someone immune to the spectacle of the digital pillory. They found and elected perhaps the only person in the country who can match the relentless nastiness of social media. Donald Trump has spent so much time in this world of digital vitriol and turbid moral opining, he is immune to its effects. He understands that the only way to curb the outrage is to create a newer, more exciting outrage and it makes him impervious to the constraints that encumbered the more polished and practiced politicians. Among an angry populace tired of ineffectiveness, he was the only candidate that could credibly promise change.

In the world of tech start-ups, failure is often seen as a sign of success. "Fail Fast and Fail Often" is the credo that has taken hold.<sup>103</sup> Only through failure can one expect to find success. The big, the bold and the new are built on a foundation of failure. No city should embrace this more instinctively than Chicago whose world renown architecture and public spaces are built upon the ashes of the Great Chicago Fire.

But this is also the city of historically epic corruption, and its citizens want to see their politicians held in check. As often as not, mayors have served for decades rather than terms. There is legitimate and historically engendered concern that the latitude to fail will be converted into self-dealing, cronyism, and unchecked power. So we have turned to reinforcing the checks and balances, investing our faith in systems to contain our politicians and their presumed greed.

I understand that power corrupts, and the politicians must be held accountable. I have watched the power brokers work. I get that the political systems must hold power in check. I see that the media must serve to scrutinize and bring mistakes and inefficiencies and malfeasance to light.

My experience, however, is that self-dealing and greed is far less a concern than the intransigence built into the political system and the public to whom they are accountable. I have stood in those halls, experienced the media scrutiny, traced the red tape of bureaucracy through countless forms and offices and meetings. I have seen teams of smart engaged thinkers spend hours plotting the route of least resistance for a relatively simple and benign initiative.

My personal experience is that the people who sit in these positions are primarily driven by the desire to get things done. They know that the public wants and needs them to get things done, that they need the streets to be clean and safe and smooth, and the schools need to work; they understand that the city is an ecosystem, with each part depending on the next, that without jobs, safety is impossible, that without culture, jobs are hard to build, that without high performing city services, jobs and culture will disappear. They see the big picture and are sincerely interested in making progress; they covet moments of effectiveness and action in the midst of the plotting and the fighting, the pitching and the spinning. I've personally engaged two

mayors and countless political appointees, and what they spend most of their time doing is figuring out how to fight and manipulate the political system and its media guardians in order to get anything done.

We've over-corrected. Even the great anti-corruption crusader Michael Shakman seems to think so. In 2015, Noelle Brennan was relieved of her responsibilities federal overseer of Chicago hiring practices. The Chicago Park District was found in full compliance. A federal judge considered the battle won. Shakman himself praised the Emanuel administration for complying with hiring bans. After nine years and a new administration, Brennan and Shakman are satisfied that enough policies and procedures are in place to prevent political patronage. They say it's time for the city to police itself.<sup>104</sup>

I certainly have my opinions. They are fiercely held but qualified by the gut-held memory that I may not be seeing the whole picture, that more than likely I'm missing a big piece of the puzzle.

But I can't help but think that this is yet another reflection of our misguided faith in the plan. We think we can create a political system that will protect us from the politicians, but instead we've built a political system that curbs their effectiveness. The spectre of scandal and sensational media scrutiny, of viral spin outs, leads them to build layers of indemnity, to move only through trusted allies and shadow organizations.

In the end, it's all about the people. No system will protect us from our fallibility or the fallibility of others.

The difference in the fizzling fires in 2014 and the spectacular flames in 2015 was the influence of one man. In 2015, we ignited the fires with a simple manual system. They were fueled by two 200 pound propane tanks. We could have burnt those buildings in a hurricane. The year before, both systems had been rejected out of hand by the fire chief. The end of our long and labored negotiations with the fire department in 2014 had left us trying to light the houses with an overly complicated and ultimately unsuitable electronic ignition system feeding four 6-pound tanks of propane.

Let me spell that out. In 2014, to ignite the houses floating in the middle of a river, separated from people and any flammable material by a 50-feet of water in every direction, we were allowed 24 pounds of propane. The next year, with an audience sitting 60 feet away and separated only by a gravel path, the fires were propelled by two 100 pound propane tanks.

The difference was Chik.

Steve Chikerotis retired from the Chicago Fire Department a Chief, but he started as a Grabowski. He grew on the Southwest Side and attended Saint Rita, an all boys Catholic school known as much for its football and wrestling as anything else. At one time, Chik thought he'd be an engineer, but in the end, he applied to be cop and a fireman, The fire department called first.

Specifically, Chik retired a Deputy District Chief, but by that time, he already had his second career well in motion. When Hollywood worked in Chicago and needed to capture its authentic character, especially with regards to cops and firefighters, it was to Chik that they turned.

This started when Chik was hired as a technical consultant on the Hollywood film *Backdraft* back in the late eighties. While he may have been hired to familiarize actors with the

function of their equipment, Chik distinguished himself with stories that illuminated the authentic firefighters' attitude toward that equipment. He was a Grabowski; he had genuine Chicago character, and it drew people to him.<sup>105</sup>

It was in that function he met John Roman. John Roman became one of the producers for *Chicago Fire* a Dick Wolf television drama that had been green-lighted for development at NBC. After coffee and a few introductions, Chik was hired as a story consultant for *Chicago Fire* and later for *Chicago PD*, too.

Becca Rugg, our producer, found Chik through an article published about him in the local paper upon his retirement shortly after the "Failure to Ignite." Chik didn't have much time but he was happy to introduce us to Roy Dean. Roy knew as much about lighting fires as he did about putting them out. More than that, he knew all the decision makers, and they knew and trusted him.

Roy made a new ignition plan. It was the same as our old ignition plan except except it replaces our original 6-pound tanks with 100-pound tanks. Where we had a "firefly ignition system," Roy had a person with a torch. Roy's plan also tagged all the valves and regulators with their names and operational specifications. At the bottom of Roy's plan was the shield of IATSE, the local chapter of the special effects union.<sup>106</sup>

We presented Roy's plan to the fire chief. The chief asked a question, "Do we really need these huge propane tanks to light one fire?" Roy made a joke that I couldn't hear. Everyone laughed. We were done; system approved.

What if we had met Roy the year before? With 200 pounds of propane on the river and a simplified ignition system, we have spectacular blazes consuming those houses. The climactic

moment of the *Great Chicago Fire Festival* is not a fizzle but a spectacular blaze. An alternative history opens itself tantalizingly before me, one that I have learned to resist indulging.

The system didn't change; the people did. In 2015, the Chicago Fire Department followed the same procedures that determined their safety demands a year earlier; interpreted and run through with the same personnel. But in 2015, we were allowed 200 pounds of propane and a guy with a torch.

The firefly ignition system and the propane restrictions weren't the product of technical analysis and rigor; they weren't the result of someone thinking through the entire production, the distance of the audience from the fire, and total fuel. No one ran scenarios with wind speeds and humidity; no one calibrated total available fuel and combustibility.

The regulations that governed *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* were the knee jerk reaction. It was regulatory fear abatement. No one wants to be the person who relaxed a statute that ultimately costs a life or a limb. Better to be inefficient but safe. Plus, inefficiency has the side benefit of enforcement and oversight positions to be filled by friends and relatives.

Despite myself, my mind keeps swinging back to a moment, two weeks before the downtown finale of the 2014 festival. Commissioner Boone had invited me to record a conversation for StoryCorps.<sup>107</sup> We sat in the small sound booth, a microphone obtrusively perched between the two of us. I don't remember if it was on yet. She told me that the day before she had seen her mentor Lois Weisberg. Lois had chided her about *The Great Chicago Fire Festival*: "Don't you know that you are supposed to protect the mayor from crazy ideas like that."

This stung me. *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* had started with Lois, under her watch! Now, retired and living in Florida, she called it crazy and wanted to distance the mayor! I kept trying to shove it from my mind only to have it surface again unwanted at the most inopportune times.

Of course, after the “Failure to Ignite” I was stuck with the reality that Lois had been right. My mind kept circling back to it. The mayor had needed to be protected. The event had taken yet another bite out of his public reputation. Instead of being able to point to the successful creation of a new signature event for the City of Chicago, one that promoted the cultural vitality of our neighborhoods and our particular character, he stood in front of reporters defending the funding allocation and beating off accusations of incompetence. Instead of establishing proof of the viability of a new model of production, we were a tale of caution.

Yet it was also true that, with real advocacy, the story may have been entirely different. If the city had been able to truly stand behind the project, if they had succeeded in cutting through the layers and layers of regulation, if they had delivered the funding more efficiently, if they had just smoothed the road the tiniest bit, we would all have been winners. I was sure of it.

With just a slight bit less resistance, we would never have been in position of relying on that crazy ignition system. The steamships would have approached the houses, torches lit, and manually set fire to a heavily fueled house. The fires would have been glorious, consuming, spectacular, and casting warmth on the audience lining the river. The hydraulic ladders would have raised from the water's surface, a surprising and welcome revelation after the simplicity of the fire... Water, steam, heroic music, fireworks, and the poetic denouement of the sailboats coming down the river, the faces of our neighborhood partners projected onto the sails.

I can still feel it all working, feel its rhythm, experience the rise and fall of the breathe of the audience. It's a parallel reality that sits but a small spark of competence away.

In this reality, though, things are very different. As it stands, all those who had acted out of fear and self-interest, all those who shrugged their shoulders behind the code book, those whose favorite email function is "forward," all those who had created distance and difficulty and dilemma were right to do so. Those who exhorted caution, those who avoided taking a stand at all, those who only hit "forward" or never bothered to respond... they are safe and happy and secure. The leaders, the ones who took a risk, who allowed themselves to believe and stand up for something new... they were excoriated.

I still have lists of people who deserve a call and an apology. There are formal lists in my computer. There are also names in the lower right corners of the pages of my journal, scribbled there in a flash of guilt provoked by an associative memory or even, in one especially embarrassing case, after ducking into the bathroom to avoid contact. Hardest is the mental list, the one that pops up just before sleep.

I don't have a script. It's fresh every time. I have no idea what I will say or, truthfully, where I stand with it all from moment to moment. I wait for those moments when I run into someone who I haven't seen or am forced to give a recounting at a party to find out how I am doing with it all.

I try to resist falling into some rote explanation or reductive narrative. I let it fall out and hope to find it making sense. The saddest part of all may be that I find it harder and harder to

hold onto the hope and belief that motivated the project and was its fuel. The promise seems to fade further and further back with each retelling.

I chose to answer a skype call from my friend Jessica a few weeks back. She had sent a note to my Redmoon email address and was surprised to get an automated response back. Jessica makes big work in Australia. Her most recent show was a bus tour through an isolated neighborhood outside Melbourne. The performances were constructed by the residents in the neighborhood, facilitated by Jessica and her partner Iain. Some were viewed from the bus, in passing, and some asked that the patrons get off the bus and interact. The performances were all over the place. There was a hi-hop dance on a dark street corner, dramatically lit by an augmented streetlight. Patrons got off the bus to taste one neighbor's freshly baked cookies with milk. There was a choreographed street fight that took an unexpected turn when the garage door nearby opened to reveal a band.

Jessica had seen the media surrounding the event. She had read it all. She had seen the reviews and watched the news reports. She had seen the statements of the local politicians; she heard me on the radio the day after. It had consumed her. She really only had one question: "What is everyone so scared of?"

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Endless Appeal of the Grand Plan

I became aware of the need for an After Action Report from a reporter who caught me on Tuesday afternoon, driving my kids home from school. The “Failure to Ignite,” as I had already come to call it, had been only three days earlier. The mayor had announced the need for "a full After Action Report" during his defense of the *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* on the floor of City Council,<sup>108</sup> and the reporter wanted a preview of our findings. I froze for a moment, processing what was being said, before offering to phone back when we were ready to make our conclusions public. I was getting better at all this.

City Council criticism was especially heated because the very next day, the mayor had doubled down on the festival so publicly bungled. He was at an opening of La Villitas Park but was drawn into a series of questions around the *Fire Festival*. He defended the event: "When 30-40,000 folks show up in that environment or atmosphere, it's a clear sign that what the event was about touched a spirit in the city of Chicago."<sup>109</sup>

At roughly the same time, I found myself facing similar questions.

I was on the phone waiting to speak with Dean Richards on WGN radio. I was on hold, which meant that I was listening to the radio program live, but through the telephone. My kids were in the kitchen eating breakfast; I was in the front room looking out the window at an incongruently clear and sunny day. The host and his sidekick were poking light fun of the fire festival. He called it a “Great Sizzle” and she plaintively and half-heartedly defended it: "Aww. It was a good idea, though."<sup>110</sup> They laughed and bantered. I stared out the window. A woman passed dragging her malamute. Somewhere in there was a distinct moment when I was pretty sure this was all a dream. Time was off. Things were moving too slowly.

I had slept less than three hours. At the Chicago River our stage crew were still tearing down the barges and dismantling the projection boats. They hadn't slept at all. Because the houses hadn't burned as planned, they were cluttering up the barges and the disembarking process was taking much longer than expected. The tear down was done, but the transfer was only mid-way. We had plenty of people hired and assigned to the task, but we were short on the boats needed to shuttle equipment from the middle of the river to the shore. The light and sound equipment, the switches and cable, the pumps and piping and sprinkler heads, the malfunctioning pyro ignition systems... everything needed to be off-loaded by boat before we moved the barges the next day. We were already 5 hours behind schedule.

I was not inclined to take the interview. Dean Richards is no one I know and I was having a hard time focusing, but I felt obliged. I had been audacious enough to try to create a public event that would provide voice to a city. Dealing with the fallout and press response to that seemed part of the deal.

Mr. Richards claimed to be a cultural reporter and an advocate for the arts, but that morning, at least, his interests were primarily political. It didn't take long for him to convey that he felt the whole thing to be a tremendously irresponsible waste of money, ill-conceived, poorly executed, and a symbol of civic incompetence. "Rain had been in the forecast for days," he asked. "What steps had been taken to be sure that these fires would light?"

This was all new to me. I didn't know how to answer these questions yet. The mayor has been doing it his entire professional life. He seems to glory in it (though I am certain he does not). I, on other hand, was suffering every moment and I'm sure it was apparent to anyone listening.

Now, having lived through it, I have learned that the most effective answer is the most specific one. Maybe that's how Mayor Emanuel landed on an After Action Report. Who's going to argue with the need for that? Who even knows what it is?

I should have answered that fresh, dry wood was added to the house immediately before the performance. I should have explained that the wood was laced with "rocket candy," a special mix of gunpowder and rubber cement, to accelerate the fire. I should have explained that the wood had been carefully positioned so as to create a "chimney" providing protection from the wind and a continual feed of oxygen so as to keep the fire moving. I should have enumerated the exhaustive list of regulatory provisions that made the relatively simple task of setting fire to cedar shingles a high tech and untestable series of interdependent steps.

Instead I stayed vague. I talked about the record colds and the difficulty of working on the river. I talked about the amazing crew who worked really hard to keep the houses covered

for as long as possible. I said that we were facing considerable regulatory constraints that made certain obvious solutions impossible.

"With the city in such dire financial straits, how much was spent on a festival?"

The better answer would have been that I had personally spent the better part of two years raising funds from foundations, individuals and corporate sponsors. That I mined every personal relationship I had to raise funds for the event; that I sought to leverage their affections, for me, for Chicago, for art and culture and its generative power. I should have shared with Dean Richards the strange form of shame that accompanies making an out-of-the-blue phone solicitation from an old high school acquaintance who converted the housing crisis into considerable personal wealth. Instead I stuck with basic facts. "The city committed nearly \$350,000 to the festival over a two-year period."

"With city services being cut, you can understand why people would be concerned about these things."

I tried to share my view that the arts are a part of a healthy urban ecosystem. That they are a part and parcel of creating a safe and vital city and that to me, those kinds of choices, choices between safety and cultural vitality, were overly simplistic, that the two were intertwined.

He cut me off: "It's not simplistic when people say there are no police on their street! ... We have money for festivals and for parties but we don't for basic services? I don't think that's a simplistic way of looking at things. I think it's a very logical way of looking at things for people who need those services, who are tired of people being shot in the street, and of ruining their cars

in potholes, and not having their garbage being picked up, and having to look at graffiti all over the city."

It was his microphone and he won the day, arguing that it was a huge waste of money, that I was negligent and ill-prepared, and that in the end *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* was a slap in the face to people in the city struggling with an underfunded school system, regular shootings, and pothole-cluttered streets. The festival was but another example of government waste and irresponsibility, another case of Mayor Emanuel mis-prioritizing, thinking about money and tourism and downtown and not the everyday citizens.

I couldn't really disagree. We had utterly failed and the phone interview was proof. The stated aspiration of *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* was to change the narrative. We had only added to it. *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* was intended to be a signature event for the City of Chicago, an occasion for citywide celebration; instead it became another occasion to rail on school closings and gun violence and governmental dysfunction.

Without much guidance as to what an "After Action Report" might look like, we generated a formal report that reviewed the technical causes leading to the failure to ignite and submitted it to the Mayor's office. In summary, it stated that record cold temperatures along with rain and high winds combined to undermine a regulation approved electric ignition system.

I was surprised to find this answer so satisfactory. Whether journalist, layperson or government official, the more detailed and technically oriented the response, the more gratified they were. They seemed to want to be immersed in the details of the mechanical apparatus and its failures.

Overall the system had three parts: fuel, ignition, and distribution. It was not very different from a stove top or a gas barbeque. The safety provisions built into that system were specifically designed to prevent the accumulation of gas and its sudden ignition—which is to say, explosion. Unlike a stove top, which throws a spark into steady flow of natural gas, the FireFly Propane Flame uses a heated coil. The coil is an alternative to the more volatile and unpredictable spark. A heating coil can be electronically controlled and it provides the first level of safety. The system ensures that propane will not be released until the heating coil has reached ignition temperature. If the propane does not ignite for any reason, the system shuts down. The valves close, stopping the flow of propane, and the electricity is cut, causing the coil to immediately cool. In this way, it is impossible for the propane to pool and suddenly ignite, which would cause a dangerous and uncontrolled explosion.

The first I ever heard of a FireFly was from the company we hired to consult with us on the pyrotechnics. We met in Chicago during the weekend they were in town to oversee the installation and use of the FireFly Propane Flame for Justin Timberlake's 20/20 Experience the World Tour, no doubt to shoot columns of flame as punctuation to a signature JT shuffle and spin.

It rained the three straight days prior to October 4th, 2014 and reached record cold temperatures, as low as 36 degrees. Though the weather had cleared by 8pm on the 4th, the start time for our spectacle, accumulated moisture had pervaded every part of the system. Moisture was in the pipes, in the wood, and in the FireFly unit itself. In addition, a brisk wind continued to blow across the river. Exposed as it was to the humidity and wind, the ignition area surrounding the heated coil of the firefly unit was drastically reduced. That same wind and

moisture also diffused the propane gas itself. The combination of the two events caused delays in the ignition of the propane. As per the design, that delay immediately triggered the safety provisions. The feeder valve closed, stopping the flow of gas, and the electricity cut, immediately causing the heating coil to cool.

There were 12 electric ignition systems shared equally among three houses. Of the 12 systems, four took flame for a period of time and successfully ignited portions of the houses. Most of them fell into a tragic cycle of futility: heating the coil, releasing the propane which dispersed too quickly for ignition, shutting the system down. Repeat.

I, too, took refuge in this answer. It has a lot going for it. It has the merit of being absolutely true. It covers the essential facts of the case and explains the crucial moment of the failure to ignite. It's tidy and irrefutable. Most exciting to me, its clinical clarity usually ends the line of questioning.

True as it may be, however, it is also entirely deceptive. It treats a plan like a recipe.

Technically I suppose a recipe is a kind of plan. It sits at one end of a wide spectrum of plans. At the other end of the spectrum would be a peace plan—like the Middle East peace plan, or the peace plan for the Northern Ireland dilemma. At the recipe end are determinate plans, plans that if followed step by step can reliably achieve a particular outcome. Recipes, Lego instructions, assembly directions for IKEA furniture or the like, planned routes, are all examples of such plans. They are simple step-by-step plans to achieve a predetermined result. At the other end of that wide spectrum are Grand Plans: peace plans, five-year plans, urban plans, prospecti. These are plans whose outcome is not known, but which are conceptually framed and whose

prescribed path to completion is therefore more a set of procedural principles than a set of known steps. Grand Plans serve to inspire and guide action rather than dictate and direct.

The latter are the kind of plans that captivate me.

In all my years of making theater, I think I only worked from a script twice. Working from a script felt too determined. I wanted to discover our path and outcome en route, not drive toward a given location. At Redmoon, our narratives were communicated in the interactions between performers and objects. We started with mechanical contraptions (puppets, masks, and moving set pieces) and gave them to physical performers (acrobats, dancers, puppeteers, circus performers); the story was what erupted out of those interactions. We discovered the show together. So, instead of scripts, we made what I called "action plans." An "action plan" was an outline of narrative moments, each with an accompanying title, and a series of possible action sequences that might convey that storytelling moment.

For the opening of *Frankenstein* at Steppenwolf Theatre, the action plan simply read: "The Monster Dismantles Himself. The monster takes himself apart, joint by joint."<sup>11</sup> It took us three solid days of rehearsal to discover how that might happen. Eventually it was performed by five performers cloaked all in black manipulating a life-sized marionette, and took seven minutes of stage time.

An excerpt from an early action plan for *Sink, Sank, Sunk* read: "Narrative: Establish BossMan's selfish short sightedness. Title: The BossMan Tries to Levy a Tax on his Employees." Next to it were a few ideas to explore with the cast and design team: "1.) Moving slowly around a large table, the BossMan reaches over the shoulders and heads of his employees to grab food from their plates and even mouths; 2.) Employees file past the

BossMan's desk to present him with homemade goodies. He accumulates and then eats a disgusting quantity of food. 3.) The BossMan deploys out a small band of singing ruffians door to door, to request payment by song and then coerce it by force. In the final production this narrative moment was announced by a narrator with a limerick and was followed by roasted chickens being loaded and catapulted up to the BossMan's oversight office.”<sup>112</sup>

On the spectrum of plans, ranging from determined to contingent, *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* was much further toward the contingent. The more a plan depends on variables out of the planner's control, the further toward peace plan it sits on the planning spectrum. So if a script sits just a bit inside of recipe, and an “action plan” is just over the midpoint, then *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* was well past two thirds of the way toward the peace plan endpoint. It was just this side of "city plan" in terms of the numbers of constituencies, stakeholders, and regulators on whom it was dependent.<sup>113</sup>

Another way to view this vast spectrum of plans, with a recipe on one side and a peace plan on the other, is to understand them in terms of degrees of abstraction. A recipe is concrete. It has a known set of variables and operations and a known outcome. Peace plans are aspirational. They seek to guide action, they serve as an abstract ideal against which specific policies and initiatives will be measured. They wrangle social forces toward an agreed upon, but fully unknown, destination. A peace plan is articulated as a goal to be worked toward whereas even the most ambitious recipes are intended to guide their user to completion.

Before one launches into any plan, there is a calibration of its location on the spectrum. How ambitious is it? How achievable? How known are the variables? How many controlled variables and how many uncontrolled? Instruction manuals and recipes will often provide

guidance in this effort to calibrate the scale of the ambition. They present a completion time or difficulty level. A peace plan doesn't need to announce the scale of its ambition; everyone knows it is an ongoing process that may yield landmark moments, but will never be complete.

Calibrating the scale of the ambition and achievability of those plans in the murky middle ground is difficult and important work.

I didn't properly scale the ambition of *The Great Chicago Fire Festival*. If an action plan sits a couple of notches to the right of a script, I positioned the *Great Chicago Fire Festival* a few notches further still. I understood it to be an aggressive step; I did not understand it to be a categorical leap. I left the realm of theater and moved into the realm of city maker. I wanted to stand with the people who shaped cities: the architects and landscape architects and urban planners and designers and engineers and policy-makers who shaped the contours of the city and the ways that people moved in and through them. It should have been clear to me as soon as I started reading essays and books by urban planners. It should have been clear to me when I called *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* a "signature ephemera."

"Signature ephemera" are events that so completely capture the unique character of a place and its people that they become an integral part of that place's identity. Mardi Gras is a signature event of New Orleans. Other famous signature ephemera include Running of the Bulls in Pamplona, Spain, the Pallio in Sienna, Italy, Las Fallas in Valencia, Carnival in Rio, the Diamonji Festival in Kyoto. Oftentimes, when you think of the city, you think of its signature ephemera—and vice-versa. Pamplona, Spain evokes the Running of the Bulls. Mardis Gras

brings to mind New Orleans, jazz bands, beads, ornately railed balconies, crawfish *etouffe*. *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* was to be a signature ephemera of Chicago.

The term “signature ephemera” was coined by Mark Schuster, an urban planner first at MIT and then at University of Chicago.<sup>114</sup> Urban planners generally concern themselves with land use and policy, with zoning and traffic patterns. They think about building heights and housing density, they map out highways and transportation systems. They consider the infrastructure of a city and help to create policies that shape it.

Mark Schuster went against the grain. Mark was interested in cultural events and the ways that they affect a city. He saw that public gatherings powerfully impact the identity of a place. He observed that recurring events influence perception and guide behavior. They build a real and reciprocal relationship to place. A signature event is quickly interwoven into the identity of a place because it is grounded in the people who create and interpret the meaning of a place. It's not a building or a highway or a park; it is not abstract; it's not an architectural scheme or green space initiative or transportation system. Signature events are made for and by the members of the community they are celebrating. Mark recognized that this special breed of cultural events are a vital part of the healthy image of a city.

Mark hailed from the Boston area. He raised his family there in a cooperatively owned apartment building. He and four other families shared a communal kitchen, a dining area, a backyard and almost everything else, including parenting responsibilities and little league coaching. The families were intensely involved in local culture. They went to public schools, served on local councils and boards, and participated in cultural events throughout the city. They were, to put it lightly, active community members.<sup>115</sup>

Mark noticed that more than anything else, the families were especially invigorated by a certain class of cultural event. These were recurring, seasonal events that seemed tied to the specific culture of Boston, events that came from its specific character and would simply not make sense anywhere else. He came to call them "signature ephemera." "Ephemera," it turns out, is a bit uncomfortable to use in everyday parlance, so conversationally, I came to call them "signature events."

Mark identifies six large scale signature events in Boston. He calls them the "big six:" the Boston Marathon, the swan boats in the Public Garden, the Head of the Charles regatta, First Night Boston, the Walk for Hunger, and the Fourth of July celebration on the Esplanade. Because "reasonable people are bound to quibble,"<sup>116</sup> he goes on to list another 13: the Evacuation Day (i.e., St. Patrick's Day) Parade in South Boston; the various Saints' festivals in the Italian North End; the Beanpot (the four college ice hockey tournament); the summer season of the Boston Pops; the summer concert season at the Harborlights Pavilion; the fall visit of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus; the ebb and flow of rental trucks in the Back Bay the first weekend in September; the Make Way for the Ducklings Parade commemorating Robert McCloskey's beloved children's book;<sup>117</sup> events honoring various moments in the Revolutionary War—the Boston Tea Party, Paul Revere's Ride, the Boston Massacre, and Bunker Hill Day; the spring round of college graduations; the Franklin Park Kite Festival; the Chinese New Year and the Festival of the August Moon; and Haymarket, Boston's outdoor fruit and vegetable market, on Fridays and Saturdays.

Looking at them, Mark realized that, taken as a whole, these ephemera are an excellent reflection of Boston's particular personality. In them we see the pivotal role that Boston played

in American history. We apprehend the unparalleled density of colleges and universities in the area. We get a glimpse its ethnic makeup in the neighborhood-based parades. The Make Way for Ducklings Parade and the swan boats in the Public Garden provide a glimpse at the strange breed of tightly wound whimsy that people associate with Boston. The city reveals itself through these events. It creates and reifies its own image.<sup>118</sup>

Before I even started conceiving of the *Fire Festival*, I made my own list of Chicago's signature ephemera. It was easy and fun to do. I was online in a cafe on Chicago's once-industrial West Side. I consulted the cultural news outlets for "Best Of" lists. I texted a few friends. I asked the table of coffee hipsters next to me. They had been comparing notes on their pour overs: "Hey, sorry to interrupt, are you from here? From Chicago?"

They looked at me skeptically. "Yes."

"I'm taking an informal survey. What is Chicago's Mardis Gras? Even if at another scale, what are the events that are unique to Chicago and capture its spirit?" Their list roughly corresponded to my own. For a while it became my party question, and I found that there was surprising consensus.

Looking at the list that developed, I was struck by two things. First, many of our largest and most widely recognized signature events were in a state of transition. More precisely, they were dying. Taste of Chicago, BluesFest, Venetian Night, Beachfront Fourth of July Fireworks, the Daley Plaza Christmas Tree Lighting—in the waning years of Mayor Daley's administration, under pressing economic circumstances, all of the aforementioned events were being canceled, moved, or fundamentally changed. The Christmas Tree lighting had been canceled for financial

reasons; Venetian Night had lost its audience and its public funding; the 4th of July fireworks were canceled citing safety concerns; both the Bluesfest and the Taste were a point of public dispute between Mayor Daley and his longtime Commissioner of Cultural Affairs Lois Weisberg. She had originated those events and ultimately resigned in protest over his insistence that they should no longer be free to the general public.<sup>119</sup>

More surprising to me was to see that two of the events on my list of "minor events" were under my purview. I had been making signature events without recognizing it. Admittedly, it was my own list and therefore likely skewed, but even upon closer inspection, it seemed to hold true. Redmoon's *Winter Pageant* was almost always included in the holiday "Things to Do" lists of various publications; USA Today noted that the Pageant "has become a tradition for many families and visitors."<sup>120</sup> And during the 6 years of its existence, our *All Hallow's Eve Ritual Celebration* became popular and iconic enough that Cultural Commissioner Weisberg asked Redmoon to replicate it downtown on State Street in 1995.

It turns out the coffee connoisseurs were social workers meeting to put the finishing touches on a grant they were submitting for a mural to be completed by homeless teens. Behind the bar were the members of a great funk band who were also principal members of a burgeoning local roastery. I was waiting to meet a man who started a bicycle coop that, in addition to selling and repairing bikes, mentored West Side teens. None of them were aware of one another, and I could not think of any cultural event that might bring them together.

My conclusion seemed as crazy as it was unavoidable: Chicago needed a new signature event, and I was the man for the job. Even at the time it seemed absolutely crazy. It also seemed entirely true.

It is hard to get lost in Chicago. The city is organized on a grid, with streets running North/South regularly crossed by streets running East/West. Addresses follow the grid, moving out from an imaginary center point located in the middle of the intersection of State and Madison. Each block is valued at 100, so one block south of State and Madison is 100 South State; one block east is 100 East Madison, and so on. Multiples of 800 mark a mile and are major streets, with secondary streets at every 400.

The first thing you learn when you live in Chicago is the grid. The diagonal streets follow soon thereafter. Cutting through the grid at varying angles, the series of diagonal streets all point toward downtown. They act like spokes on a wheel, with the city center as the hub. People have emotional connections to the diagonal streets, creating personal identifications with them. What diagonal street you grew up travelling says a lot about you. The highway system recapitulates the spokes, as does the commuter rail. Even the Chicago River moves out from the city's center along fairly uniform axes, as though trying to conform to the master plan.

The elevated train system functions on the hub and spoke system as well, each train coming downtown and circling around the center before heading out along another spoke. So the trains circle the central downtown business district. They loop it—and thus the Chicago's city center is called “The Loop.”

The crown jewel of Chicago's park system is Lake Michigan and the public lands that cradle it. To those not raised in this area, it is unfathomable that the lake is freshwater. More than once I have seen visitors from out of town taste the water out of incredulity. Lake Michigan and Lake Huron are actually a single, unseparated body of water, and that conjoined lake is the

largest single body of freshwater in the world. The lakefront itself has been preserved as a linear park made up of a combination of beaches, bird sanctuaries, playgrounds and recreation areas.

"Public ground—a common to remain forever open, clear, and free," as it was famously declared by Chicago patron and retailer Montgomery Ward from his seat on the Chicago Plan Commission, the governmental body charged with maintaining the integrity of the city plan.<sup>121</sup>

The remainder of Chicago's park system is built into the grid. A series of large open green spaces, designed by some of the lions of landscape architecture: Jenson and Olmstead and Burnham. These are massive parks in the vein of Central Park. They feature man-made topography and ponds, monumental field houses and recreation areas. These are neighborhood parks built into residential areas. They are connected to one another by a boulevard system, a series of extra-wide streets featuring tree lined parkways that describe a second loop around the city center.

Most every aspect of the city's structure was outlined in what is widely known as the Burnham Plan, one of the most famous and well-regarded city plans in history.

The Burnham Plan was not commissioned to assure progress, but to harness and organize it. Out of the ashes of the Great Chicago Fire, the future seemed to be exploding. In the 25 years following the fire, Chicago grew exponentially. The Columbian Exposition featured the first Ferris Wheel, a steel wheel nearly 300 feet in diameter that held 36 cars and more than 2000 people. Shortly thereafter, the world's first skyscraper was built on a newly devised construction system that spread the weight of the structure across a unified steel foundation that became known as the Chicago Foundation. That construction system became the standard in the industry

and was quickly developed and replicated to build taller and taller structures throughout a burgeoning downtown.

The city was re-orienting upward, with new layers of activity being introduced. Chicago introduced electric lighting to the world at the Columbian Exposition in 1893, and simultaneously completed an above ground electric rail system, the first of its kind. Before the close of the century, those train lines were extended to service the unprecedented density of its urban core. “The Loop” brought the existing “L” lines into and around the downtown center.

The Burnham Plan, as it has come to be known, is a brilliant document.<sup>122</sup> It declares the importance of the grand and monumental, the value of open space and beauty. A grand city will swell the heart and breed moral virtue. A beautiful city will inspire civic pride and engagement. Then it creates a series of design principles that reinforce the premise. It outlines the form of Chicago according to a few broad and well-conceived principles: keep the lakefront “open and clear;” streets should be organized on a grid system; a park system should interconnect and ring the city. It creates formal guidelines for the city's growth.

People like Daniel Burnham were celebrated as visionaries. He was among a handful of men who were called upon to design America's burgeoning cities at the beginning of the 20th century. As the impresario of the Chicago's World Fair in 1893, he had called upon most of the others in that small handful. Frederick Olmstead agreed, after much urging, to design the grounds. Olmstead created the Jackson Park Lagoons, the future site of the Obama Library. He also found, very late in the game, a young engineer named Daniel Ferris who proposed a giant steel wheel carrying gondolas full of people.

It was a time of unprecedented urban growth. The Beautiful City movement seemed to be channeling the future of America. Indeed, the Burnham Plan seems to foresee Chicago. As we celebrated the Plan's 100th anniversary a few years ago, it was still being called upon to settle planning disputes. Like the Constitution, it is used as the final authority in a court of law. Whether it regards proposed development along the lakefront or transportation infrastructure, the Burnham Plan remains the city's go-to guide. It is the Grand Plan at its best.

There is an unapologetic grandeur accompanying this enterprise of designing a city that feels absolutely Old World to me. I picture men with mustaches and top hats at clubs unrolling huge scrolls of paper. They put down their cut crystal glasses to huddle around a drawing set and nod and point. Their ambition for the city knows no bounds. They are watching the future unfold before their very eyes; they are simultaneously hopeful and realistic, idealistic and pragmatic.

Here's the surprising thing: the Burnham Plan is actually called *The Plan of Chicago* and it has not one author but two. Edward R. Bennett is the often-overlooked co-author of *The Plan of Chicago*. The commission to create a plan for the city was given to Daniel Burnham by the Merchant's Club of Chicago. It was Burnham who brought on Bennett. They had worked together on the San Francisco Plan and Burnham very much liked what Bennett brought to the table, so he asked Bennett to co-author *The Plan of Chicago*.

Burnham also made plans for Cleveland, Washington D.C., San Francisco, and even Manila. The plan that sticks out though, the plan that is regularly cited as testimony to his comprehensive brilliance, is *The Plan of Chicago*. *The San Francisco Plan* was never put into

place.<sup>123</sup> After the earthquake of 1906 it was largely abandoned. Burnham is considered the major force behind the design of the National Mall in Washington D.C., but *The 1901 Plan*, as it is called, is generally judged to be less a plan for a city than a plan for a monumental center.<sup>124</sup>

His plan for the city of Cleveland, called *The Group Plan*, had the same sweep and scale of *The Plan of Chicago*.<sup>125</sup> It predates *The Plan of Chicago* and is founded on the same ideals. It features the same design principles and its aesthetic accomplishments are, if anything, more monumental. It is similarly insightful and visionary and persuasive. In the end, however, it fell far short.

Typical of the City Beautiful movement,<sup>126</sup> of which he was a principal proponent and author, *The Group Plan* proposes a series of wide open green spaces and grand architectural gestures designed to 'inspire civic pride and moral virtue.' Central to the plan was Burnham's vision of Lake Erie as Cleveland's jewel. So, just as he did a few years later in Chicago, he sought to organize the city toward the lake.

As per tradition at in the late 1700's, Cleveland was founded and organized around a central public square. Per the practice at the time, a large town common was established as a shared grazing area and meeting place. The Common was bisected by two streets. A fence was built around the common, and eventually a town hall was added as well. In the late 1800s, as Cleveland began to grow dramatically, the public square was aggressively developed. Two memorial sculptures were added, as well as a series of large scale buildings, including Cleveland's first skyscrapers. Burnham himself contributed to Cleveland's Public Square with two monumental buildings.

When charged with thinking about the city as a whole, however, Burnham wanted to reorient it around the lake. In Burnham's eyes, Cleveland's public square drew people away from the city's greatest asset. To do that, he proposed a grand public mall that connected the Public Square to the lake. Reminiscent of the National Mall in Washington D.C., the Cleveland mall would feature great expanses of open park space braced by a series of large, monumental buildings of roughly equal proportions. The buildings were to be inspired by the Beaux-Arts school of architecture, all of stone, roughly equal in proportions, and featuring grand Roman columns and cornices.

The mall was built as Burnham had imagined it, and it is a magnificent piece of urban landscape: beautiful, grand, majestic. Like Grant Park in Chicago, it simultaneously frames the lake and the city; it puts the two in dialogue with one another. The city as symbol of human growth and achievement stands in direct conversation with nature's unimaginable force and generosity: a freshwater lake across which the eye cannot see.

But the mall is largely empty and, unlike Chicago, the city has turned its back on the lake again and again. Mostly famously, the city train station was to be the crown at the north end of the Mall, nestled against the lake and driving people to it. Instead, after considerable debate and some shady political dealing, Cleveland built the train station just off the original Public Square, bringing new focus and considerable pedestrian traffic back to the old city plan, away from the North Mall and away from the lake. Since that time, the city has continued this kind of schizophrenic planning, with new developments alternating between lakefront revitalization efforts built around the mall and city center development efforts inland which draw focus from the lake.

The difference between Cleveland and Chicago might just be Edward Bennett, the overlooked co-author of *The Plan of Chicago*—or maybe it was Catherine Jones.

While working on *The Plan of Chicago*, Edward Bennett fell in love with Catherine Jones.<sup>127</sup> Catherine was from a prominent Chicago family. Catherine's father wanted his daughter close, so he gave the young couple a large parcel of property in suburban Lake Forest. Bennett designed and built their home there; it would be their residence for 30 years. Having decided to make Chicago his home, Bennett set up an office that overlooked the construction of Grant Park, which he had designed for *The Plan of Chicago*. To boot, given his long-term commitment to the city, Bennett was named to the Chicago Plan Commission, the quasi-governmental entity charged with overseeing the development of the city and its adherence and philosophical alignment with *The Plan of Chicago*. Effectively, Edward Bennett became the living guardian of *The Plan of Chicago*. He was the Grand Plan's “executive producer.”

Bennett may not have had the grand vision of Burnham, or the brash charisma, but Bennett had a designer's attention to detail and a deep interest in the mechanics of a city. This is what attracted Burnham to him during their work together on *The San Francisco Plan*. So when the Grand Plan left the page and met with the material and political reality of a rapidly expanding Chicago and a complicated political climate, Bennett was there to adjust and wheedle. Bennett watched over mechanics of its implementation and helped to usher in new forms of regulation to assure its success. Bennett led the efforts to create Chicago's first zoning ordinances. He was involved in plans for transportation and the development of new parklands. For nearly thirty years after *The Plan of Chicago* was rendered, Bennett met the realities of its implementation

with diligence and the steadfast confidence and authority of a co-author. If not for Catherine Jones, Bennett would likely have been itinerant, like so many of his peers. He wouldn't have been there, in the city, to fight each and every time the city sought to compromise the vision of the plan.

In fact, Edward Bennett's final act with the Commission was to resign in protest over what he felt was a transportation decision in poor alignment with *The Plan of Chicago*.<sup>128</sup> There was a public dispute about the placement of the access roads for the new interstate highway system. Economics were driving the commission to back a plan that Bennett argued would disturb the Chicago Plan's integrity. When it looked like the decision would not go his way, Bennett withdrew from the commission. But for Catherine Jones, Chicago may well look like Cleveland.

Cleveland didn't have an Edward Bennett. Daniel Burnham was involved in numerous projects all over the world and close to retirement. His other collaborators on *The Group Plan* didn't have any presence in Cleveland either. John Carrere died in tragic street car accident and Arnold Brunner was a lifelong New Yorker who, ironically, designed street cars. So, when confronted with ground level political realities, *The Group Plan* gave way. Private interests had other plans and incentives and they won out time and again, dragging public attention and development dollars away from the lake.<sup>129</sup> The result is that even to those who love it, Cleveland is an unfocused city, lacking public coherence. Urban redevelopment initiatives continue to alternate between the Public Square and the Erie lakefront. Recently, they have begun to lose ground altogether to more pedestrian friendly developments, and toward the once

prosperous and then neglected Euclid Avenue, as the city seeks to redefine it as a prosperous medical tech corridor.

Mark Schuster would have loved Edward Bennett. To make a Grand Plan is one thing. It is quite another to have the patience, discipline and rigor to enact that Grand Plan in an ever-changing social system defined as much by the vicissitudes of the hearts of ordinary people as by the logic of systems. Ephemera is a means of adapting the plan, just as Edward Bennett did. It was Bennett who adjusted for the unforeseen, fought the fear and ambition, and found a new path when crises arose – as they inevitably would when the Chicago Plan met with the skyrocketing cost of concrete, the forces of political favor and opposing opinion, delays, topographies... in other words, reality.

There are two special moments that occur in the process of making a theater event. One can be predicted; the other comes unbidden, but must be wholly and absolutely welcomed.

The first of these two moments is the period of time just before rehearsal starts. This is the period of time when the principal collaborators (the authors, designers, directors) are all fully onboard with the idea. There have been innumerable conversations about the piece. These conversations have ranged from the excruciatingly practical to the purely conceptual. Designs have been drawn and critiqued and redrawn. The script has been written and rewritten, scrutinized, researched, cited and footnoted. The cast has been selected, contracts have been signed, a schedule is in place. Everything is ready. Costume drawings, character studies, lighting palettes, scale models... everything has been rendered and considered and communicated.

It is in this moment that the piece is most pure. It is a shared idea, pure potential. Everyone has assembled a picture of what the piece will be. It is a plan, a grand plan, and, assuming that the process has been a good one, everyone feels its grandeur. It is a brief and glorious period where all involved luxuriate in the untainted idea.

Like any moment, it is as easily overlooked as it is recognized. I have learned to mark it by sitting on the empty stage where the production will take place. That is not always easy to do. Stage time is a precious commodity. As soon as one show comes down, another loads in. So more often than not, this happens at 5am or so on a Monday morning, just before the stage crew arrive to load in the show.

Mostly I listen to the silence. More than the unoccupied seats, more than the uncluttered stage, the silence suggests the endless potential of the theater space. We can control our visual input by shutting our eyes and turning out the lights. We can feel empty space, at night in a vacant room. But sound is invasive. It's intimate. It touches you no matter the distance. More powerfully, its sources are widely varied and nearly impossible to curb. A growling truck, a celebratory scream or firecracker, air sirens, construction noise, HVAC, the bass from a passing car... It is very difficult to eliminate the possibility of these interruptions.

Like a music studio, a theater stage has been acoustically insulated to eliminate sonic intrusion. So sitting there, on an empty stage at 5 in the morning, creates the sensory experience of potential. Everything that enters the playing space—each sound, every movement, the set pieces and properties, the shapes and contours of the cast—everything that happens on stage will reflect an intentional act or its aftereffects.

The first special moment, then, is this moment. The moment before. It is the dark, empty silence. It is the phase when the plan gets to live in its purest form. When it is all promise.

The second magical moment is when it all falls apart. The set is built and occupies the stage. The cast feels the limitations of the script and the script is suffering the limitations of the cast. The director's concepts have met unexpected resistance and material interference. Everyone is suffering the limits of their plans and, simultaneously, the limits of their own imaginative problem solving. The ideal has met material reality. The plan has lost its traction.

As a director, I can feel the slide toward this inevitable collapse of the plan as soon as the first pieces of the set arrive. I remember the first time I felt this. I was sitting on the stage at the Steppenwolf Theater in 1996 and the cast was arriving for the first on stage rehearsal for our production of a *Frankenstein*, an adaptation of the Mary Shelley gothic novel. I could feel myself getting more and more discouraged with each arrival. The room was filling up, first with things and then with people, and as it filled, I could feel the potential diminish. The empty room was suddenly full. The purity of the grand plan was already being diminished by the particularities of its physical ingredients and social context, by the real people and things that were its material reality.

I loved these people. They were my friends and peers and I admired them, but I could feel my heart drop a bit every time the door opened. Likewise, I loved these objects. I loved the masks and the puppets and the set pieces. I had made many of them and watched them come to life under the careful brush of our painter Michael Culligan.<sup>130</sup> But no matter. The emptiness was disappearing. The purity was being contaminated. Each object was, inevitably, less than its imagined counterpart, a step down from its ideal. They either needed space on stage or a traffic

pattern to move on and off stage and a place to live once they were offstage. They were big and bulky and would be difficult to accommodate or they were small and delicate and would need careful attention. The performers were thrilled. This was our breakout. We were at Steppenwolf. This excitement, too, would have to be accommodated. It would provoke ego and with that ego would come fear and expectation that would have to be harnessed into service of the script or it would run roughshod and take us completely off track. Nor was it lost on me that the terrible set of thoughts surfacing in that moment could only be evidence of my own fear and ego and psychological clutter that likewise threatened the process and outcome.

The moment when the grand plan has been so completely obscured by the social, psychological and material clutter of the real as to be unrecognizable, that is the second magical moment. The show that everyone thought they were going to make, the show that drove the previous three, or five, or even 15 months, has just proved itself to be deficient in some substantial and irrevocable way. A new show needs to emerge. A new show needs to be wrought out of the very real physical ingredients and social circumstances that have destroyed the old plan. It is a crisis moment.

The group will rally and adjust and let go of their attachment to the old, or they won't. A new show will erupt or reveal itself, or it won't. If the directors have done their job, then the team will be prepared for this moment. Everyone will know this moment is coming and be prepared to adapt.

This is the moment when the plan is tested. This is the moment when it reveals its integrity. If the original plan was a good one, it will provide a structure for the new and better show that sits just around the corner. Having been guided by that plan, the script and the set and

the objects will have integrity enough that they can adjust to a new, unplanned, use, consistent but unforeseen. The cast and collaborative team will be attuned to the underlying principles laid out in the plan, as well as to one another, to be entirely ready to discover, manifest, and descend into a new show.

Traditionally, the script serves as the plan and the director is its executioner. Any given production is a reflection of a collaboration between the author and the executioner—between Burnham and Bennett. The problem was, I tried to do both. Throughout my career, I was both the Bennett and the Burnham, and that turned out to be a big problem for *The Great Chicago Fire Festival*.

I read Mark Schuster's article on “signature ephemera” with the relief of someone finding home after having been long away. I came to theater along such an atypical path, I shouldn't be at all surprised to discover that I really belonged somewhere else.

Nearly every professional theater maker I know fell in love with the theater at an early age. Most were in a play at some young age and knew right away that it was their path. Over time, some moved from the stage to roles behind the scenes, to writing or directing or designing. Others came to the theater by way of other artistic endeavors. Whether painters or sculptors or writers, they found that working with others in a collaborative process to be more fulfilling. Whatever the journey, they were in love with the arts, with expression and its path, from an early age.

I never cared much for the arts. I didn't understand painting and sculpture was only fun if I could climb on it or hide under it. I liked drawing but only as a means of getting back at

someone. Theater meant sitting still in a chair and I had plenty of that already. To this day I marvel at the child who can harness their physical energy enough to engage in any kind of a focused activity. I couldn't. I needed to be moving and touching things; the heavier, the better. If I couldn't touch it, it wasn't real. If I hadn't found this particular kind of theater, I may have started a moving company.

My mind woke in college. I remember the exact moment. I was in sitting in the back row of a Classical Philosophy class taught by John Riker.<sup>131</sup> In the 1980's John Riker was the picture of a college philosophy professor, small, bearded and wearing wire frame glasses. If he had smoked a pipe, no one would have even taken notice. In fact, he probably did.

It was mid-morning on a cloudy day and we had been moved from our regular classroom by a burst pipe the day before. We were in an untraditional configuration; all the seats were taken so I was standing at the back of the room, leaning against the wall. Some portion of my attention was out the window, as it always was. I was looking at the makeshift "shantytown" erected by student activists in protest of South Africa's Apartheid regime. I watched a freshly showered student carry a tray of food from the cafeteria into a shanty and I wondered if any of it mattered. What was I doing?

"If the soul's purpose is life, as Plato through Socrates insists it is, then what kind of life is most alive?" John took off his glasses and looked at the class.

At the time, with the sun breaking through the clouds and pouring in on my face from the campus quad, this struck me as simply the most important question a person could ask. John set his glasses down on the desk in front of him. He put his hands on the desk and leaned onto them, staring at us. This was uncharacteristically dramatic for John Riker. I leaned forward to meet

him. He repeated the question "What kind of life is most alive?"—and it seemed directed at my soul.

This was the question I'd been asking myself for years. Why did it all seem so terrifyingly unimportant to me? Why was I in this class and not out there on the lawn? Or in one of those stupid shanties? What mattered really? My SAT scores? The time it took for me to swim 200 yards of breaststroke? The chemical composition of salt? I just had no idea. If these old Greek guys did, well, that seemed worth a genuine listen.

Tracing it back, this question may well have planted the seed that blossomed into *The Great Chicago Fire Festival*.

The Greeks saw theater as core to citizenship. Theater was central to the function of democracy. The city and its citizens celebrated and discovered themselves in the theater. Ideas were disseminated and debated in the theater; civic pride was built and affirmed.

Once a year, Ancient Athens celebrated the City of Dionysia Festival. The city shut down for five days and its citizens feasted on goat and wine and a variety of cheeses, paraded about carrying penises on poles, and debated Big Ideas that were introduced into discussion by the theater. Theater was the centerpiece of the City of Dionysus Festival. For three days, the citizens of Ancient Athens, slaves and nobles alike (but no women), went to the Acropolis to attend the theater. They saw some bawdy comedies, most of which have been lost to us but are known to have featured yet more penises and the accompanying sexual humor that usually surrounds them. And they were treated to three very serious competing tragedies which remain to this day considered some of the finest pieces of dramatic literature ever composed.

The entire event was highly organized and structured in such a way as to assure maximum participation. Citizens were recruited into specific roles. Some were cast in the shows, in the role of the choir; others were judges or served on the committees which governed the competition; still others played roles behind the scenes. A year out, the planning began for the next festival, so that by the time it arrived it had immense social momentum.

The City of Dionysia Festival was the signature event of Ancient Athens.

It was only after reading Mark Schuster's writing that I put it all together. I had come to the arts with dreams not of making theater, but of making cities. I really had very little interest in telling stories and even less interest in sharing my own inner truth. I wanted to be a citizen. I wanted to be a Shaper of Cities. I wanted to be at the table with Daniel Burnham and Frederick Olmstead, making big plans and having big thoughts that would impact my city. To my great relief and excitement, Mark Schuster was arguing that this was not a misplaced ambition after all, despite all appearances.

In "Ephemera, Temporary Urbanism and Imaging," Mark argued that events were as much a part of the comprehensive image of a city as its architecture and parklands:

One does not normally think of ephemera as an important element in planning and urban design. Why? Is it because we feel that something that is ephemeral is fleeting and insubstantial, perhaps frivolous, only to be considered after the more serious matters of urban life are resolved? As planners we are trained to be instrumental, single-minded, and calculatingly rational in our actions, but not to be playful or experimental or to pay attention to emotions and feelings. We have surrendered to the discourse of economics; "value" has taken on a narrow meaning incorporating only costs and benefits that can be readily measured. Yet, our memories and images of places, our views of their importance and meaning,

our impressions of their quality and value, are shaped by ephemera. Surely we would be remiss not to notice.<sup>132</sup>

Urban planners have understood the importance of the image of the city. This is the argument behind the importance of the monumental in the City Beautiful movement that shaped *The Plan for Chicago*. Grand gestures, its founders insisted, instill civic pride and strengthen the moral fiber of its citizens. The function of a building, or a public space, extends beyond its use and into the realm of the symbolic. It speaks to the character of a city, its personality.

But there is a radical turn hiding in Mark Schuster's writing, one that flies in the face of most design school thinking. In bringing ephemera into the urban planner's tool kit, Mark is calling out the importance of the human experience. He is evoking the role of the individual consciousness, of memory and impression. Benign and innocuous as that may appear, it is a radical recognition. He is announcing the limitations of the structural. He is gently indicating how horribly vulnerable even the best plan is to the most unpredictable of all variables, one that even most hopeful planners would dare not claim to control: humanity.

In the end, every plan is contingent and ambitious and overly dependent on the predictability of human beings. This seems to me less controversial than it is jarring. This is the elephant in the room, the secret that we want to keep in the closet, hoping that without the light of recognition it will wither away. Mark's valorization of ephemera is a recognition of the limits of the formal plan; it looks away from structure and toward people.

Policy, architecture, monument, public sculpture, topography, these are all means of guiding human activity and promoting certain kinds of experiences. Those experiences accumulate into meaning. As Mark Schuster insists: "our memories and images of places, our

views of their importance and meaning, our impressions of their quality and value, are shaped by ephemera."<sup>133</sup>

Think of Tiananmen Square.<sup>134</sup> For most people of my generation and older, it is defined by the photographic image of a solitary protester standing in front of a line of tanks.<sup>135</sup> For many, that single event, and the photographic testimony of it, defines Tiananmen Square. Formally, the square is nothing remarkable. It is a generic, public square, as flat and cold and rectangular and grey as a multitude of others in Chinese cities across the country. Seen from above, it is indistinguishable in form or location. A momentary human intervention set it apart and defined it as a site of courage and revolution. Still, nearly thirty years later, it is a pilgrimage site for Chinese citizens. Flowers and makeshift shrines are erected under cover of night (and immediately dismantled by authorities).

At the other end of the spectrum of human interventions, think of Columbine High School.<sup>136</sup> Physically indistinguishable from any other high school in Colorado, to most of us it the site of sorrow, of tragic and unnecessary loss.

The image of a city is an interpretive act. It is as much the product of the human activity in and around that city as it is the structures and policies that have been carefully constructed to define it. The accumulated experiences and the memories that they create, the rumors and stories that they accrue and the feelings that they generate—in the end these are the defining features of a place.

In some ways, ephemera is the Edward Bennett of urban planning. Just as Edward Bennett was there to help *The Plan of Chicago* accommodate the changing economic, political and technological landscape, so ephemera can serve the urban planner. As the Grand Plan meets

a changing social circumstance, ephemera is the tool that adjusts and fills, wheedles and adapts. Ephemera revitalizes the dead spots and covers for the shortfalls. It allows the planner to continue to adjust and accommodate, to test and adapt.

Redmoon's mission was to "celebrate Chicago's under-recognized and overlooked assets through spectacular events."<sup>137</sup> So I regularly toured the city's public spaces looking for inspiration for our next project. Of the eight major parks that constitute *The Plan of Chicago's* first ring of public spaces, I had made work in five of them. Beautiful and well designed as they may be, they were by and large empty and underutilized. These were world class open spaces; beautifully designed landscapes facilitated by gorgeous, sturdy field houses featuring gymnasias, meeting rooms, recreation rooms, stages. Time and again, we found them empty. Acres of empty green lawns, empty playing fields, empty classrooms.

In the end, it is an undeniable case study. Structure does not create image. More powerful than even the greatest work of some of our greatest designers of public spaces are the experiences and stories that get attached to those structures. The image of a site is not about its form, it is about the social experiences associated with that form. As my friend Jeff Kosky says: "Humans live meaningfully; we dwell in a world of meanings."<sup>138</sup>

*Loves Me, Loves Me Not* performed in Frederick Olmstead's Jackson Park Lagoons, the one-time site of the Chicago World Fair of 1893. Considered one of the seminal works of landscape architecture, it was mostly vacant. It would be difficult to argue that this undeniably grand and sweeping urban greenspace uplifts the spirit of the populace. The Japanese gardens, once one of the most visited sites at the World's Fair of 1893, was where homosexual men would

meet for sexual encounters on the "down low." The constructed lagoons and their carefully understated topography and plantings were enjoyed by remarkably few, and even those were far more interested in the catfish that were tactically stocked by the Chicago Park District at random intervals so as to maximize impact on the frequency of visits. Many in the neighborhood had never actually visited Jackson Park.

When we performed *Twilight Orchard* in Columbus Park, designed by Jens Jensen,<sup>139</sup> people from the neighboring Austin community thanked us for making their park accessible. "I haven't had the heart to bring my kids here. It's too dangerous," one neighbor said indicating her 9- and 12-year-olds. I was slightly embarrassed to have her call them over, off the jungle gym where Shania, the 9-year-old, had been swinging from the legs of William, the 12-year-old, while he clung to a bar. They lived across the street from the park, not more than 500 feet from where we were standing.

A week later I was walking the performance site with the park supervisors. She was carrying her clipboard and assessing the damage to the lawn where we had driven our truck to pick up several large crates full of steel parts used to create a pedal powered merry go round.

A kid ran up to me. It was William. "Hi," he said. He was followed by a young woman who grabbed at him. "I'm sorry," she said, "He wanted to say hello. He said you were the man who made the park safe again." This kid didn't care about the show. That was meaningless, a momentary distraction. He cared that it signified that the park was safe to visit again.

A week later we were invoiced by the Chicago Park District for the damage done to the infrastructure.

In the Spring of 2014, shortly after we received our funds from the City of Chicago for *The Great Chicago Fire Festival*, I attended a convening at the Aspen Institute.<sup>140</sup> It was a select group. Also in attendance were the Mayors from Kansas City, Nashville, Memphis and Anchorage, Alaska. There were two real estate developers, the executive director of Governor's Island in New York, a marketing guru from New York City. There to observe, but not participate, were a handful of representatives from various national philanthropies. We were there to discuss ways that arts and culture create vital urban environments.

The underlying assumption at this convening is that genuine culture is an essential product of a competitive city. The guest speakers regularly cite Richard Florida and his theory that the bellwether of a competitive city is the visible vitality of its creative class.<sup>141</sup> Or they refer to Robert Putnam's research which shows that ready access to culture creates an engaged citizenry which, in turn, promotes a healthy democracy.<sup>142</sup>

These are also the theoretical underpinnings of placemaking, which we discussed earlier.

My role at these meetings is to talk about engagement strategies, to share stories of the arts moving into depleted urban areas and breathing life into them. I was there to provide firsthand testimonials.

At this particular convening, the mayors were there to hear and explore the stories of successful community engagements. All had major infrastructure projects around their neglected waterways. Once an active part of the manufacturing system, now they were abandoned and underutilized. What systems and policies needed to be in place to facilitate and entice cultural engagement at the redeveloped waterway? The real estate developers were there to reaffirm the

premise: cultural activity leads to vital urban spaces as evidenced by increased investment and rising property values.

I was okay at my job. I had stories to tell and compelling photographs and video to accompany those stories. But I was not great. I didn't have a formula and I didn't have easy answers or readily accessible kernels of wisdom. The people who are really good at those meetings are the ones with formulas and pithy subject headings. They have plans. They have three-part recipes. They present options—light fare for the hesitant or those with tight budgets and large scale initiatives for the well-resourced and courageous. They have plans.

Mike Lydon is great at these conferences.<sup>143</sup> Mike is an urbanist who has assembled a huge catalogue of urban interventions under the moniker "Tactical Urbanism." He presents a great case. He shows photographs of parking spaces being converted into "parklets." Regular citizens, inspired to take control of their cities, put coins in the meter or, better yet, use their smartphones to claim a spot. Then they move in. They lay down Astroturf and position lawn chairs. Or they set up a makeshift living room, couches and side tables and standing lamps. Mike shows photographs of people in plaid sitting on the chairs and laughing, holding colorful drinks in their hands.

Mike also has a set of photographs that demonstrate the power of painting pavement. Paint a pedestrian heavy intersection with large yellow flowers and traffic slows. Paint a generic concrete plaza in a black and white chessboard and populated with oversized pieces and people will linger, hop from square to square with a silly smile on their face, set up the giant pieces into non-sensical team formations. Painted pavement is but one proven strategy. Another favorite are the many unexpected uses of industrial shipping containers: shipping container as swimming

pool; shipping container as massive garden box, shipping container as temporary storefront or nail salon.

Mike has before and after shots of a busy intersection that demonstrate the effectiveness of these urban interventions. A bit of paint, a sea container, some strung low voltage blinking lights, a chair or two and public space is transformed. Pedestrian and vehicular traffic patterns reconfigure. Traffic slows. People walk instead of drive. They stop in stores and buy things. They are happy.

In truth, I wouldn't even be my own second choice. If not Mike Lydon then there is a small handful of urban observers who are also super interesting.<sup>144</sup> They are consultants, generally hired by Chambers of Commerce or Business Districts to propose urban revitalization programs that are then used to raise funds or to rally support among the membership. Slide presentations are their primary means of advertising, so they are great at these convenings on urban vibrancy. As a means of demonstrating their own expertise, they present a virtual menu of low investment/high activation options with photographs to demonstrate each of the menu items, like that particular breed of Chinese restaurant that has little faith in their customers.

These consultants are especially partial toward "pop-ups." A pop up is a temporary store or restaurant. If a city is willing to loosen their zoning restrictions slightly or bend occupancy requirements a bit, it can create all kinds of opportunities for aspiring merchants to test the market. This is especially appealing because it proves the viability of an area with minimal investment. So these consultants will show images of temporary stores, galleries, art installations, performance stages, all built into previously vacant and neglected store fronts. Artists, vendors, and aspiring entrepreneurs get free space to try a new venture. Landlords create

traffic, vitality, and safety around their building—and thus begins a virtuous cycle that leads to viable businesses paying long term leases, regular street traffic, and happy neighbors.

My story is too complicated and hard to track. It's missing the grab of the single narrative line. It's not a plan. My path changes based on the community, the site, the social conditions. The cause and effect chain is too long and circuitous and hard to follow. Most grievously, I don't have a tangible take away; my story is not easily replicated or scaled. What's a mayor or local business council to do, go back to their mid-sized city and find someone to start a spectacle company?

I'm best cited as a single case study in someone else's survey of options. Here's a local theater company that does crazy fun productions in public spaces. People come together and feel safe and connected to one another and their neighborhood. Then they go out to eat at a local restaurant or drink at a bar or window shop and buy trinkets from local merchants. Perfect. Next slide please.

The reason I get invited to these kinds of low profile, high stature meetings of Mayors and Shapers of Cities is because of the Loeb Fellowship. Harvard's Loeb Fellowship is awarded each year to nine design professionals in the middle of promising careers shaping the built and natural environment. I was awarded a Loeb in 2013.

The first time that the nine Loeb Fellows from my cohort were around a table, the curator explained the fellowship thus: "You are given open access to the collective resources of Harvard and MIT. You can do anything you like with those resources. Take classes or don't. Teach, work with students, lead projects... or don't. Spend time in some of the greatest research libraries

in the country, if not the world. Or don't. Build relationships with faculty; they are eager to meet and know you. Visit the Media Lab. Take courses at the business school or the Kennedy School of Government. Or don't do any of it. Here is what is expected: take this year to prepare yourself to change the world."

Change the world? This was exactly the kind of grand ambition I was hoping to experience when I chose to accept the fellowship and move my family out to Boston for the year. Not unlike the turn of the last century, cities were going through a period of unprecedented growth. For the first time in human history, more people will live in cities than not. And the people shaping those cities, the urban planners and designers, the architects, the landscape architects, the policy experts and big thinking urban ecologists—they were all suddenly accessible. I was among the Shapers of Cities!

We had two weekly meetings. One was as a cohort of nine. We sat in a small room and presented our thinking to one another for thoughts and critical analysis. The second meeting was a weekly curated dinner at one of the residents that housed the fellows. Those dinners featured eminent thinkers, old photographs on the walls, and rye whiskey in crystal cut glasses. If you pushed the two meetings into one, and added top hats, I could well have been with Daniel Burnham and Edward Bennett and Jens Jensen and all those other great Shapers of Cities. I had made it.

Of course, it took me a long while to get my footing. I was entering a conversation that had been going on for a long time. There was a lot of specialized vocabulary, a lot of presumed historical knowledge. I was admittedly intimidated. It was one of the only clubs I can remember ever wanting to join.

The Loeb Fellows come from a wide variety of professional backgrounds. In my year the fellows included: the man responsible for building Ecuador's first subway; an Israeli architect whose practice was designed to foster peace along the border between Israel and Palestine; the cultural commissioner of Lowell, Massachusetts; an architect working in prisons to understand how to create spaces for peaceful reconciliation; a real estate developer committed to urban revitalization; an environmental scientist developing more responsive disaster relief mechanisms; and a Londoner producing large scale public art events.<sup>145</sup>

To the person, we were overwhelmed by the opportunity. We were all over: at the MediaLab at MIT, at the business school, taking classes in leadership at the Kennedy School, teaching, organizing symposia, serving as advisors to student projects. We met once a week in a formal setting for review of one another's work and once a week for dinner with a thought leader from the extended Harvard community.

For a while, I felt somewhat out of place. These people made buildings and parks and transportation systems. I made theatrical events. Even as self-serious as I was, these seemed to me to be enterprises of very different levels of gravity. They developed the public spaces and the policies that govern them. They provided the schemas and contours of urban growth. I was in awe of these people, of their formal discipline and training, of the breadth of their thinking. These were the Shapers of Cities, past present and future. I wasn't sure yet that I belonged among them.

As a Loeb Fellow I was expected to participate in class conversation. I was asked to sit on review panels and in design charrettes. I tried to be productive, but I only seemed to be saying one thing, in a variety of forms and with widely varied degrees of eloquence. In one way or

another, I asked them to give some more thought to the people, the actual human beings whose movement and activity would be affected by their design.

It always felt like a stupid and obvious contribution, but I began to realize I was not alone. I began to see a distinct pattern. In other rooms and conversations, it was the most common contribution by the other Loeb Fellows. In one way or another, we were constantly asking, "What about the people? The actual people who will approach those buildings, walk those halls and touch the handrails? What about those who will live next to that park, who will be trying to decide whose park it is and whether or not it's safe, whose children will push open that door or play on that lawn?"

This is what it must have felt like for Mark Schuster. You can feel the combativeness in his writing: "Surely we would be remiss not to notice...."<sup>146</sup> This is not what the Shapers of Cities want to hear. Talking to a room of architects and urban planners about the importance of programming and ephemera is like talking to education policy makers about nutrition. It only reminds them of their impotence. Despite the rigor of their training and the discipline of their thinking, their hard work and well-made curricula (the classroom plan), they are mostly powerless in the face of human behavior.

They are not alone.

At the convening at the Aspen Institute in 2014, my assumption was that the real estate developers were there to testify to the power of visible culture to transform community. That turned out to be a gross underestimation.

The developers were from Forest City, the world's largest publicly traded real estate development corporation, holding the most property and returning huge dividends to its investors.<sup>147</sup> Alexa Arena runs a division for Forest City called SVP enterprises. She shared a case study that demonstrated their particular initiative. The case study Elaine shared was in San Francisco, where Forest City purchased a massive set of bulky abandoned warehouses in an undeveloped area of the city near the water. The buildings themselves had what are referred to in the industry as "good bones," meaning they are structurally sound and fine looking, but the area was widely considered to be unsafe, relatively inaccessible, and undesirable. On face value they appeared to be a good long-term bet.

Ms. Arena had other thoughts. She didn't think it necessary to wait for the values to change. She was going to accelerate the pace and change them herself. She convinced Forest City to make a relatively small investment into the largest of the buildings and open it out to artists, for studios, for events, for open air markets, for pop-ups. She showed us images of abandoned trash strewn streets, masses of blankets stuffed into doorways of large brick buildings, sad street-side benches stained with pigeon residue. And then the photographs became populated. Light emanated from windows, doors were painted, people sat on the benches. There was an open market with banners tagged with corporate insignia strung overhead, murals and skateboarders and a farmer's market selling cheeses and fresh produce. And then the *coup de gras*, a corporate headquarters with restaurants and cafes on the ground floor. There were pie charts and graphs with upward sloping lines and complex spreadsheets and bullet points describing leverage and cap rates and, most impressively to the mayors in the room, elevating property tax income.

After her talk there was a coffee break. The Mayors descended on her with Ms. Arena questions. I stayed where I was, immobile. What had just happened?

Of course the real estate market had figured out how to simulate the organic development curve we all knew existed: artists first, then gays and cafes, followed quickly by young professionals, and then everyone else. Upward it goes. Alex Arean had created an investment system to kickstart and catalyze the process. Of course she had. It was the fastest growing division of Forest City.

This is the kind of presentation the mayors and philanthropists want to hear. It's a Grand Plan. The sources of capital are clear (developers have endless piles of money and easy access to low cost loans), the motivations are market driven (real estate values rise along with increased activity and commerce), the impact is highly visible (a dilapidated area of the city has been revitalized). Every part is replaceable. If not Forest City, then someone else. If not these artists, those artists. If not this area, then that area. It is eminently repeatable. Buy a building, attract cultural makers with discounted rent, create vibrancy, real estate values rise (along with tax basis) and entice further investment. It's a capital driven, replicable, virtuous cycle, and it can transfer to most any location. It's the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

It occurs to me that this is why people find the technical explanation of the failure to ignite so satisfying. Finding the flaw in the system affirms systematic thinking. A short circuit caused by moisture in the line is an identifiable interruption of a mechanical system that operates according to a logical cause and effect sequence.

The answer is an exploded-view drawing of a mechanical process, with each component part serving a single function that nests neatly into a greater comprehensible system. As long as each component does its job, the result will be reliably predictable. There is a promise or order implicit in the story of the faulty FireFly. The listener is pacified by the details of the operational complexity. If they follow closely, the problem will reveal itself, tidy and neat and whole and, most importantly, eminently solvable.

With a better ignition switch, *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* fulfills its promise. The fires magnificently burn, a bright orange reflecting on the dark waters of the river; the 50,000 plus in attendance are captivated by the transformation of this familiar urban landmark; Beethoven plays over the speaker system; the fireworks illuminate the night sky; images of their fellow Chicagoans are projected onto the sails of parading boats. The audience is transported. They feel happy and enriched. Afterward, they file into bars and restaurants, spend money and support local businesses. This authentic, locally-generated event becomes a beacon for domestic and international tourism.

A better system is the consoling promise of a plan, and it's so much more palatable than trying to solve for the endless unpredictability of human behavior. I have always wondered at the endless parade of soap dispensers found in public bathrooms. Mechanical pumps protruding from stainless steel boxes, some attached to the wall and others built into the sink itself. There are plastic pumps that compress vacuum packed bags and sensor triggered pumps that extrude a dollop of pre-foamed soap. Last week I used a bar of soap that swiveled on a stainless-steel bar attached to a wall mounted bearing set.

As often as not, the experience is less than satisfying. The dispenser are empty or broken or leaking or too stingy or too slow. Unattractive blobs coagulate around the openings, or slippery stains puddle on the sink or floor below them. No matter what the system, it is found wanting—and in its deficiencies, some hopeful proprietor finds reason to put their money and hope behind a new solution, one that will require less maintenance, be more resilient, less vulnerable, tidier, reliable. It's an irresistible pitch to a restaurateur with a nearly interminable operational checklist or a facilities manager working on a tight budget.

A better system is an answer that breeds comfort. It consoles and reassures. It's endlessly appealing. The flaw of the last system has been identified and addressed in this new, more clever system. The worries of the past will be put to rest by a bit of smart analytic thinking. This is one problem you can let go; it's been solved. A clever group of analysts, engineers, and designers have looked at the problem and come up with the answer and for a small upfront investment....

What happened to *The Great Chicago Fire Festival*? The technical answer implies a predictable world. It is complicated but, with proper attention, it is absolutely discernible. It's a complex flowchart, a series of gates, opened and closed. We need only find the broken switch to fix the problem. That's a comforting conclusion. It suggests that if only we could stretch our mind and vision over the complexity of the determined systems, then the things that happen to us and to others would be understandable. And if it is understandable, it is but a small leap to believe it to be controllable.

The tidiness of the technical explanation of the failure to ignite evokes a relatable world full of promise. It is an answer that sets the mind at ease; it suggests that we can ease back into

the greatness of the plan. But the technical answer is not the truth of life as it is lived. It is blaming the soap dispenser.

The more likely answer is so much more unsettling. The real answer lies in the swirl of humanity that surrounds the trigger system. The trigger was ill conceived; it wasn't the right system for our circumstances. It's perfect for Justin Timberlake at the United Center, but we were a far cry from the United Center. So how did it get there and why didn't any of the professional, smart, and right-minded people catch it?

Even after months of forensic analysis, tracing each step and analyzing each decision, the best I can do is call out the multiple contributing factors. I can name a series of incidents, policies, interactions, and apparently minor decisions that accumulated to create the circumstance wherein the fires were vulnerable to a single, electronic ignition system. I can identify an interrelated set of decisions, budgetary conditions and timing problems, fears and knee-jerk reactions that led to choosing that particular system. Like any history, it is layered and complex, a dizzying combination of so many moving variables: personal limitations, meteorological misfortune, petty territorialism, imposing bureaucracy, poor planning... each small thing accumulating to create a single sensational event. Without 20-mile-an-hour winds and record cold temperatures, the system's shortcomings are of no consequence. With a bit more propane feeding the system, its vulnerabilities are rendered irrelevant.

We like to name things. Naming things makes them feel more known. I have found peace in the phrase "a perfect storm," and also in "an act of God." There's a whole campaign of the mind that follows this kind of thinking. From "Act of God" it's but a small leap to Everything

Happens for a Reason and onward to When God Closes a Door... For me that road ends on my favorite: Man Plans; God Laughs.

After I hung up with Dean Richards, he took calls. One caller self-identified as "a teacher in the Chicago Public Schools with a degree in the performing arts." She congratulated Dean on his aggressive stance with me. She thought the whole idea and enterprise faulty from the very beginning. "I'll make it very simple," she said. "If the children are not getting fed their breakfast, they're not going to learn. I hope Rahm is listening and that he feels it in the polls."

This is another well-practiced way to settle the mind: to firmly affix blame. Nothing is so gratifying as finding that the plan has been foiled by an idiot or a criminal. The only thing more soothing than finding that a faulty part has failed the system is to find that the fault lies in the operator. It is a best-case scenario. Not only does it maintain the integrity of the plan, it also affirms the implicit moral code. Idiots ruin everything. Idiots and criminals. "They."

In this case, it's easy to find an idiot to blame: me.

And there's some truth to that. The plan was faulty. It had a terrible oversight. Redundancy is the rule. There was redundancy built into the FireFly system; the coil cools and the propane is cut. Two parallel mechanisms serving the same function. If one mechanism failed, the second had it covered. If the propane valve didn't properly shut off, power was cut to the ignition coil, so it could not possibly ignite. Two systems assured that inadvertent ignition was impossible. Redundancy.

There was also redundancy in the fire safety program. If the blaze grew out of control, we had built an entire fire suppression system into the house. It was fully sprinkled, water was

pumped from the river into a pressured reservoir that could be released from sprinklers to extinguish the blaze at its peak. That system was backed up by the fire department, situated on the river with two fire boats and on the bridges with engines.

There was redundancy in the mooring system, to insure us from becoming a free-floating bonfire. We spiked the barges in the middle of the river with four steel I-beams, one on each corner of the barge, though only two were needed. They were driven into the riverbed by four separate motors, though a common motor would have done the job. The electricity was provided by a generator, but a back-up power source had been built into each barge. The fireworks were on a separate but adjoined barge. Each mortar was individually covered, hand-capped in foil, and then they were covered *en mass* by a fire blanket that would be manually removed once the fire had been extinguished. The electricity needed to trigger them had two separate switches, and both needed to be manually switched by an operator to power the system. The licensed pyrotechnician would only give the order to trigger the FireFly ignition system after two approvals, first by the fire department and then by our own spotting team. Protocol required a verbal confirmation of the order once given.

Redundancies. Everywhere. And yet, there was no secondary ignition system. How had we neglected to create a redundant ignition system? The marquee moment of a four-year project involving thousands of people, millions of dollars, and countless hours was entirely dependent on a single system with no backup. That's just stupid.

The second caller was much more sweet. She thought that Dean Richards had been mean. She reminded him that I was trying to do something good for our city. She reminded him that it

was big and new and that so much of it had been successful. She said he was a bully. I found myself holding the phone in the air triumphantly.

The next caller mediated the other two. Mistakes were made, he acknowledged, but there was no need to be snarky. It was with the best of intentions. He did, however, wish that I had apologized. He had been disappointed in the spectacle. He thought it a great effort, but it had come up short and he wished that I could have just owned that instead of acting like a politician.

This may have been the first call for an apology, but it was not the last. In a phone meeting with the Mayor's press team the Monday after the *Festival*, the Mayor's press office counseled against it: "There's no reason to apologize," they advised, "Don't get distracted. Focus on the great work that was done."

But I couldn't help it. I apologized. I apologized on record and off, to the public, to my collaborative team, to our funders, to each of the community based organizations, to the boat operators, to the city officials, to the Mayor and his wife, to the Commissioner of Cultural Affairs, to my wife and children and parents. For two weeks after the houses failed to burn, apologizing was my full-time engagement. It was easy to do, because I was truly sorry. I was in over my head. The project was much bigger than I understood and in the end my personal limitations led to its public failure.

I had always wondered why public figures refused to apologize, even when it seemed the clear and right thing to do. Now I think I understand. Apologizing closes the loop.

The idiot failed. The criminal cheated. It completes the story and ends the conversation. It's a simple truth that can disguise a more complex one. Rahm is a criminal for giving money to

the failed *Great Chicago Fire Festival* rather than to the public school system or to fill the potholes on my street. Jim Lasko is an idiot who can't even start a fire, even when that's all he's been talking about for months, if not years. Done. Move on. Next topic. Politicians don't apologize because it closes the conversation and allows for wholesale discounting.

I was still on the phone listening to Dean Richards defend his harsh treatment of me: "I'm not going to let him get away with putting lipstick on a pig...."

Why was I listening to this? I realized he was not coming back on the line, nor was anyone else. I hung up and went into the kitchen to watch my kids eat, an activity I find endlessly gratifying. I could watch my son eat meat for hours and somehow afterward feel like I had accomplished something.

As I sat down, Talia, my daughter, looked at me and said, "Are you alright?"

"I think so."

She didn't take her eyes off me: "How do you feel?" I don't know where she learned this method of interrogation, but she has really mastered it. It is quite disarming.

"Okay. A little sad, but okay." Owen, 14 years old at the time, was looking at me as well; green eyes fixed on mine.

They needed something more. They, too, had been through the disappointment. Their friends were there. Like so many others, they had believed it was going to happen, all of it, just as we had planned. We had been building up to this moment for more than a year and they had been fully onboard.

"Listen," I said to them. "We don't get to determine the results. We choose the path and the effort, we adjust and do the best we can, and then adjust again. How do I feel? I feel terrible.

I feel stupid and lost. You and your friends and your mom and all the performers and the people who worked on the show and the audience..."

I trailed off. They were both still looking at me. I was surprised to see them still listening. I don't usually get so much play time at breakfast. "Things don't always work out as planned," I continued. "Oftentimes they don't. So we adapt and make a new plan. All we get to do is decide how we're going to respond. I'm going to respond by trying harder. There were great things there. And there was a deep hunger for what we were offering. I couldn't believe how many people were there. So I'm not done. We'll do it again and do it better. The grit and resilience that we were asking everyone to celebrate? I have to live it now."

My son is a pragmatist. He kind of nodded his head like "Yep. Sounds about right," and then tore into a piece of bacon.

Talia was eight at the time. She searched me for more clues until she finally decided there were none to be found. It was what it was. She stirred her cereal for a bit then picked up her head: "I thought it was awesome."

I'll take that, I thought. Today. I'll take that today.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### How Power Moves

Here is how power in Chicago works:

In 1996 we had moved the *Winter Pageant* from the Logan Square Auditorium to the Pulaski Park Field House.<sup>148</sup> When we first performed in the Logan Square Auditorium, it had been free of charge. It was little used and lesser known. We let the Auditorium sell refreshments and keep the revenue. Five years later, it was a popular music venue and had grown too expensive for us.

Arriving at the Pulaski Park Field house for opening night, I noticed a difference immediately. I couldn't put my fingers on it. The place felt crisper, more tightly focused, brighter—as though I had put on glasses. Had they cleaned?

The park supervisor standing behind the desk leans over and says, begrudgingly: "Well, I guess I owe you."

That's how he is with everyone. "Why's that?" I asked.

"I had a stack of work orders in this drawer, some of them seven, eight years old. All done. In one morning. Door handles, light bulbs, cracked window."

The Park District had gotten word that Mayor Daley and his wife Maggie planned to attend our opening night. An advance team had descended on the Field House, fixing and cleaning everything. They salted the sidewalk, cleaned windows, swapped out a door with a hole where a foot had gone through it some time back. It was the middle of winter, but they even pruned the bushes out front.

"That's our city," I said, heading toward the bathroom.

"Toilet paper!" Leonard called after me. I had brought my own.

Here is how power in Chicago works:

A few years later, in 2004, we were slated to perform our Annual *Winter Pageant* in our rented facility on North Kinzie Avenue. We had converted the large concrete pillared warehouse room into a performance venue. To meet city regulations for venue licenses, we added bathrooms and drinking fountains, a wheelchair ramp, crash doors, lighted exit signs, and an emergency generator. Plans had been approved and an occupancy placard was issued.

Two days before we were to open, an inspection team showed up. As they always do, they found a couple of minor issues with our space. We had a tripping hazard by one of the exit doors. There was stuff under one of our stairs. We got to work right away; these were all issues that could be quickly addressed.

Less addressable was the building itself. We were renting a small part of a larger building that appeared to be a series of independently built structures that had been retroactively linked

through a series of doorways, long halls, and stairways. The building was not up to code. In fact, it did not have a business license, and had no plans or drawings on file with the city.

We were shut down.

One of our board members called a friend who could put a call in to Mayor Daley to see what could be done. We had hundreds of tickets sold. Children from four different regions of the city had been rehearsing for weeks. Buses were booked to transport them from their neighborhoods, permission slips signed, sets and puppets built and coated with fire retardant, lights hung....

The next morning the inspectors were back, this time with their supervisors. More issues were discovered. The costume storage was not properly sprinkled. The air circulation was inadequate. The roll doors separating the scene shops from the performance space were not compliant.

At midday, before a call could even move through the phone chain back to the Mayor, I got a call from the Chief of Staff of the Commissioner Department of Buildings. He was irate. The building had no plans on file and was not a registered business. How did I think I could hold a performance there? And with children? The city was liable. What if, God Forbid, there were to be a fire? It's our job to keep the citizens of Chicago safe, not to make sure that you can do theater shows.

We were slated to open in 24 hours. There was a building inspector in a white city vehicle in our parking lot when we left rehearsal at 10:00 p.m. that night.

Just after midnight, I got a call. Our friend was able to connect with Mayor Daley. Could we be at the building the next morning at 8:30 a.m.? Of course.

At 8:30 a.m. a parade of inspectors flowed into the building. All the inspectors from the first day, their supervisors, and another, larger group. The power dynamics were unclear. They walked around, clipboards in hands, making notes, standing in small groups talking in hushed tones. They pointed at the ventilation. They toed the wheelchair ramp. A little before 9:00 a.m. the Commissioner of Buildings arrived with a Fire Commander. The power dynamics became clear. A circle formed. The first inspectors stood on the periphery of the circle in small groups. The second group of inspectors, their supervisors, were the second ring. The new groups stood in conversation with the Commissioner of Buildings and the Fire Chief.

The Commissioner of Buildings concluded: "I want to know about life safety issues. Only."

They left two hours later. I walked into the shop where three interns were painting signs announcing the cancellation of the show. "We won't be needing those," I said. One of the interns, a young woman named Emily who had been at every rehearsal, leading a group of west side seventh graders in a snowflake dance, started crying.

Here is how power in Chicago works:

It took six months to convince the Chicago Park District to waive their fees for our *Last of Our Species* (2009) performance on the parklands just north of Belmont Harbor, on a beautiful and peculiar little man-made inlet protruding into Lake Michigan.

It is a wonderful site. The outcropping of landfill protrudes out from the direct line of the lakefront, with Belmont Harbor sitting it and Lake Shore Drive. There is no beach there, only a tiered concrete breakwater. Swimming is not permitted. The result is that this small section of the

lakefront is at a remove from the bustle of traffic and recreation. It has the feel of a private park or preserve, a long narrow patch of land spotted with huge old oak trees and blanketed by a plush lawn, watered all summer long by the spray of the waves against the concrete edge of the breakwater.

As a performance venue it was almost everything I look for in a site. It was a hidden treasure and people would be delighted just to know that it was there. We could make long entrances and exits, from three different directions. The lake served as a backdrop, so a performance at dusk provided ever-changing and undeniable scenery. Most importantly, it sat at remove from the constant sonic and visual strain of the city. Once night fell, we could experience something close to darkness.

At first the Park District wanted to charge us the same fees that they get from major music festivals, though our event would be free to the public and engage neighborhood organizations. We spoke with everyone, at every level of the hierarchy. Finally, we found someone who knew that there was a provision in the Park District agreement with the city that created a “non-profit” rate.

About a month before the event, I got a call from the Superintendent of Parks, who was looking for some help with their summer camp programming. When I mentioned the onerous fees associated with performing on park land, he suggested that perhaps an exchange could be worked out. We came to agree to provide programming at three local parks in exchange for waived fees.

Here is how power in Chicago works:

18 days before the *Last of My Species* was to open, two days after the press release went out, we got a call from a Park District representative. Performance was not permitted on that site. We would have to find another location. Calls were made. Fits were thrown. There was a new Superintendent of Parks as the last had resigned amid a quasi-scandal.<sup>149</sup>

Nothing. I couldn't get any traction. We had to change locations. Send out a new press release, redesign our flyers and postcards, change our website. Most of all, we had to change our whole production.

Later, someone familiar with city politics said to me, off the cuff, after hearing the story, "I wonder who with a yacht called the mayor." Of course! This stretch of park land didn't feel like private park by accident. That's how it had been designed and carefully maintained. Signage and street layout discourage a turn to the south from Lake Shore Drive. Reaching it from the north was even more difficult. The painted lines that define the lakefront walk and pedway are double yellow where they might turn toward the inlet. This park belonged to the boaters who rented spots at the Harbor year after year. There was readily available parking, underutilized green space, and most of all quiet. And it was purposefully structurally isolated to keep out the general public.

Here is how power in Chicago works:

We were touring Northerly Island as a potential site for *The Great Chicago Fire Festival*.<sup>150</sup> We were walking the site with someone from the Mayor's office and the superintendent of parks. On one end of Northerly Island is the Huntington Bank Pavilion, a concert venue operated by Live Nation.<sup>151</sup> At the other end of the island is a nature preserve.

We wanted to perform between the two. I could see the superintendent of parks calculating. He looked from one end to the other. He had been part of this design: profit on one end generating money to support nature on the other. "I can probably get Live Nation to agree. They want an extra weekend for Bruce Springsteen."

He turned his head to the other end, toward the area currently under redevelopment according to designs by Studio Gang.<sup>152</sup> Hills were being added, marshes dug between them. The superintendent was a twenty-year civil servant of the highest order, a noble man well practiced at the art of compromise and power balancing. He was still tabulating. He turned to his right-hand man: "Can we convince Mrs. Paulson that the birds won't mind?"

I had to double check, but his face told me he wasn't kidding.

Turns out that Mrs. Paulson is the wife of Hank Paulson, one-time CEO of Goldman Sacks and Secretary of the Treasury saddled with the burst of the housing bubble back in 2008. She is an amateur ornithologist and, based on the superintendent's response, a committed philanthropist. He turned to me: "Can you get Jeanne to call Mrs. Paulsen and soothe her concerns for the birds?"

Done and done. And done. We performed the second *Great Chicago Fire Festival* on Northerly Island between the union employees and the protected birds, having quelled the concerns of the multi-national entertainment company and the well-heeled bird enthusiasts.

Here's how power in Chicago does NOT work:

Redmoon moved into 2120 South Jefferson in early 2013. Our plans had been seen and approved by the Department of Planning and Development, by the Commissioner of Cultural

Affairs, by Danny Solis, the local alderman who happened to also be the chair of the zoning committee in city council. Within the city, there was nothing but support for Redmoon to move into this area of the city. With its large, mostly underutilized warehouse buildings embracing the river, the area had long been slated to be a cultural district. It had not come to pass. There were four key buildings with four different owners, each with very different visions for their development. It was thought that if Redmoon could swing the kind of cultural momentum it had in its previous residences, that momentum might sway the holdouts.

This may appear a controversial statement, but I assure you it is true: enforcing the building code is a subjective act. It's interpretive and leaves real latitude to the individual inspector. No building can meet all requirements. I recently met a club owner who ran into this dilemma. The plumbing inspector demanded a mechanical shut off valve. The fire chief demanded a straight line. Each was told about the other's demands and neither was ready to compromise. The club owner put in the shut off valve, passed the plumbing inspection and then removed it for the fire chief. Another example: bathroom count is a function of the building capacity and function; it is also a function of which code the city chooses to impose, state code or city code, or some compromise between the two. The first calculations of Redmoon's toilet count came out to 34. Ultimately, working with the Department of Buildings, we came to a count of 18, a compromise between city code and state code, between large assembly and meeting hall.

When the inspectors came for their first look at the permitted work on the building, they were not in a cooperative spirit. They drilled into walls to inspect construction techniques. They asked for a concrete trench to be uncovered to inspect pipes. Two-hour fire doors needed to be four hour doors. The breaker boxes needed to be enclosed in a dedicated ventilated room. There

was inadequate air circulation. We needed a certificate to verify that the intumescent paint used on the ceilings was manufactured after 2015, when the code requirements were modified.

I watched as our contractor looked at the list. His name was Mike. We called him Contractor Mike because, even before meeting him, he was the image evoked by the title Chicago Contractor. He came from a south-side Chicago family that seemed designed to create a power coalition. He had a brother who was a fireman and another who was a cop; his oldest brother was a zoning lawyer and his youngest brother was a teamster. As he read the inspectors' reports, I saw his face drop. He dropped the list on the table and walked away without saying anything.

From my office window I watched him on the phone in the parking lot. An hour later I found him cutting holes in drywall. He was angry. "What's up?" I asked. Mike knew how the city worked and had seen it all. He had something to teach me.

"Sometimes it's just best to let things play out," he said, yanking off a chunk of plaster.

"I don't know what that means."

"Some of your board members think they are big shots because they can call the mayor and make some stink. Do this and what about that... These guys, the guys who come in here and do the work... they don't like to be told what to do. You know what? These guys have already seen two mayors. They'll see more. You know what I'm saying?"

I didn't really. Not yet. Not completely. But I knew that our construction budget had just nearly doubled.

Here's how Power in Chicago does NOT work:

The mayor says he wants a local theater company to be able to burn a house on a barge in the river and everyone underneath him works their ass off to make it happen.

The day after the Failure to Ignite, as I've come to call it, the Twitterati were out in force. We were taken to task for any number of things, but the majority were offering pyrotechnic counsel, which mostly fell along the lines of, "How 'bout kerosene and a match?"

I couldn't help but think of all the times I confidently offered or withheld the same type of knowing counsel. How simple it all seems when all the complicating variables have been eliminated. I thought, in particular, of standing in front of the Commissioner of Cultural Affairs and her staff. I told them how easy it would be to break through the institutional malaise that I saw encumbering them. All they needed was a Big Vision. It didn't have to be *my* Big Vision, I told them, even though I was in the midst of pitching *The Great Chicago Fire Festival*; it just needed to be big enough to capture the hearts and minds of the staff; from there it would capture the public at large. A Big Vision— that's what they needed, I concluded. Nothing more than that.

I thought of Rick. Rick Kogan is a journalist in Chicago. When everyone else wanted to write an article about the masks and puppets that made Redmoon Theater's *Frankenstein* come to life on the Steppenwolf stage, Rick came and asked if he could sit underneath the stage for a few shows, just to observe. *Frankenstein* performed on an elevated platform spotted with trap doors. It was through those trap doors and the unseen movements underneath the stage that the stage show came to life. Rick could see what he didn't see and he knew that was the more fascinating story. He wrote an article that became the cover story of the Arts section for the *Chicago*

*Tribune*.<sup>153</sup> It was a great article and it sold out our run and, likely, did as much as anything to establish Redmoon on the cultural map. (This was back when newspapers had such power.)

I thought about getting lost underneath the city, in the maze of service drives and among the municipal vehicles and delivery trucks roaring about. I thought about the parties I was missing just above me, in the towers of glass and steel. How small and knowable the city looks from those penthouse apartments. I thought about how freely and confidently the Big Thoughts are bandied about by the cognoscenti.

How easy it is to declare what should happen above when you know nothing of the mechanics below that make it all possible. To be sure, a zippo and some diesel fuel would have done the trick, but the magic to a trick is always the work it hides. The terrifying secret to grace is the nearly unending toil that sits behind it.

At its best, the Chicago River is the province of many. More often, it is disputed terrain. When, for example, President Obama ordered the EPA to sue for a cleaner Chicago River, the suit was welcomed by his onetime Chief of Staff and then Mayor elect Rahm Emanuel.<sup>154</sup> The Metropolitan Water Reclamation District, however, countered that the Chicago River is not in actuality a river, but is a sewage canal and therefore not under the jurisdiction of the Environmental Protection Agency. It continues to dump raw sewage into the river to this day.

The difficulties don't stop there. The embankments of the Chicago River are under the control of the Army Corps of Engineers but are owned by the city who has, in turn, leased them to private operators ranging from Trump Tower to the operators of sightseeing cruises. The river

is patrolled by both the Chicago Police and the United States Coast Guard; the Chicago Fire Department has a stake as well.

There were fights among the different departments just to see where the fights would be held and who would be in them. Mostly the different bureaucracies fought not to be included. When at all ambiguous, they wanted out.

It took a while, but we were able to reach unofficial agreement. The Coast Guard would regulate the vessels on which the fires would burn. The Chicago Police Department (CPD) would regulate boat traffic within the confines of a perimeter set and maintained by the Coast Guard. CPD would also make all calls regarding street closures and emergency provisions for traffic control, but unless police intervention was required, the Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events (DCASE) would regulate the movement of the audience. The structures along the river, the stages in the plazas and the neighborhood kiosks that were to line Upper Wacker Drive would be managed by the Department of Buildings. Any moorings along that embankment would be subject to approval from the Army Corp of Engineers. The bridges would be controlled by the Department of Transportation (CDOT). And the fires and pyrotechnics would be regulated by Chicago Fire Department (CFD).

Of course, the Chicago Fire Department is hardly a monolithic entity. It has its own internal structure and there was some discrepancy as to who would have final say over which aspects of our fire plan. In the end, we came to agreement that the blaze itself would sit under Commissioner Richard Ford. The safety plan was the province of an unnamed lieutenant. And the pyrotechnics were to be overseen by Chief Cooper.

Our regular safety meetings for *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* took place in a conference room in City Hall. It was a large space, but we were a large group. Seated around the table were 19 uniformed officials from five different agencies, in addition to our team of four or five and any other guests. Each uniform represented an official set of concerns; each of those concerns would ultimately be expressed as regulatory conditions under which we would need to operate. I couldn't figure out where to look.

Each meeting seemed to reveal new layers of regulation. Most of the restrictions that defined the parameters of the fires on the river came from the Chicago Fire Department, but the Environmental Protection Agency had its area of concern, as did the police.

The EPA needed assurance that we would not further pollute the Chicago River. That seemingly small concern ultimately expressed itself in the form of some imposing constraints: we were not to use any liquid accelerants (no gasoline, kerosene, paraffin or derivation thereof); and we were not to leave any carbon residue, which meant we had to capture all the ash created from the fires and keep it contained on our constructed barges.

Life safety was the province of CFD and they had a series of concerns that can be put into two gross categories: the size of the fire and the combustibility of the ignition plan. There was a chief in charge of the size of the blaze, a chief in charge of the ignition system, a chief in charge of the land safety program and the trucks that would be deployed there, and a chief in charge of the water safety program and the fireboats that would be deployed there. The water chief would work closely with the Coast Guard and the Chicago Police Department.

Concerns regarding the size of the blaze were mostly focused on “radiant heat,” the heat that emanate from the fires in the river. The fire could not get so hot that it caused the audience to

panic. Chicago is built above grade, meaning that the downtown area, its streets and entryways, are all one story above ground, so the river flows through the downtown 20 feet below street level. To get down to the river, one descends one of many sets of concrete steps. From each quadrant of riverside, then, access is contained by two sets of stairs, one on either end of the city block that contains it. A panicked crowd would absolutely bottleneck at the stairs to tragic effect. We needed to be sure not to induce panic in the crowd with the size of our blaze.

It turns out that predicting radiant heat is not a straightforward business. Gusting wind is the worst-case scenario. A strafing wind running at river level had as much chance of accelerating the fire as it did preventing it from igniting. If the wind moved from side to side, or swirled as it sometimes does within the river walls, it could sweep the fire in gusts toward the audience.

I didn't need to be told about the power of wind on fire. A featured section in the book we wrote and distributed to third graders in the Chicago Public School system retold how the fire jumped the Chicago River in 1871.<sup>155</sup> Residents had taken refuge on the on the north side of the river, thinking that the fire could not cross nearly 100 feet of water. But the blaze defied all expectation. It consumed the wooden walkways and docks that braced the river and rode a northerly gust of wind to leap the river and resume full strength on the other side.

The variables affecting radiant heat are: total available fuel, the time it takes to burn that fuel, and the distribution of heat thrown off by its burn. Of the three, the only controllable variable is total fuel. Total heat cannot exceed the energy released by converting the available fuel to carbon, no matter the shape, contour, and speed of the wind.

Sitting around that table, trying to figure out where the power lay, I began to understand what Mike the Contractor had been telling me. It became crushingly clear when, looking to lighten the room a bit, I admitted to my confusion about titles. There were four officers from the Chicago Fire Department there and I had called one of them "Commander" and another had corrected me. "Commissioner," they said.

"I'm sorry. I just can't keep it straight. Can someone help me out," I said.

"Sure. It's easy. Just stick with 'Chief.' Chief means you're the boss. No one will object to being called 'Chief.'"

And there it was. Around that table everyone was a Chief. No wonder I couldn't figure out where to look.

The Chief in charge of the blaze chose to focus on total fuel. The most foolproof way to control the size of a fire is to control the total available fuel. No matter the rate of the burn, whether fed by wind or stifled by rain, whether it catches slowly but then takes off after reaching a certain temperature or starts quickly and never lets up, the maximum size of the blaze is determined by limiting the amount of flammable material.

This is the most conservative possible approach to controlling a fire. It is not the control tactic that I was hoping the Fire Department would take, but it was difficult to argue against. As was pointed out any number of times, by any number of city employees, we were starting a fire in the middle of a downtown that had been destroyed by fire before. People would be lining the river. Even the smallest ripple of fear could set off a horrible panic. If panic struck and the front rows began to push back away from the fire, people may instinctively understand that they were

contained down there by the river. There was limited access to the stairs leading up and out. Fear could build and explode. Crowds, we were reminded, are dangerous and unpredictable.

So the cap on total available fuel was not limited according the actual danger, but according to a perception of danger. It wasn't a function of how large a fire needed to be to cross the 60-foot gap between the fire and the audience, but how large a fire needed to be to frighten an audience and compel them to want to get away from it. That was a judgment call, a subjective determination made by the chief of the blaze in our absence and without our consultation.

We would burn a test panel. They would stand and watch from some indeterminate distance and then, after some discussion, the sentence would be declared. "Looks okay," he would say after a brief conversation with his fellow Chiefs.

It was by process of elimination that we ended up with propane.

We couldn't use any liquid fuel. The EPA had determined that the risk of them ending up in the notoriously contaminated river was too great, despite the fact that nearly every boat on the river has a gasoline powered engine somewhere on it. The pressurized propane found in a tank is technically a liquid, but it converts to gas as it leaves the tank. It would never mix with the water of the river and so was permitted.

We thought it would be best to submerge the propane tanks underwater. The water would serve to isolate the tanks from one another or anything flammable. Liquid propane depressurizes it converts to gas. That conversion from liquid to gas requires energy which it takes from the latent heat in the liquid. When propane is quickly released, it draws all the latent heat out of a system, and the steel tank and copper lines and regulators will sometimes freeze. Therefore,

submerging the tanks had the added benefit of insulating the whole system and preventing it from freezing up. Submerging the tanks was safer and more efficient; two birds, one stone.

The propane was channeled from steel-walled tanks through perforated copper piping. The copper lines ran along the interior of the walls that created the house; on either side of the line was the structure of the house. The wood shingles were set off the propane line by an inch on either side to provide a balance of air flow and wind protection. Framing the houses with steel, we limited the total fuel and isolated the fires to the thin shingles. Our tests showed that these thin shingles would burn like paper, quickly and brightly, but never reach a very high temperature.

The problem was always the propane. As the Fire Department calculated it, the propane was basically considered a bomb. It was part of the total fuel calculation. If it all took flame at one time, it would produce a big, intimidating, hot blast. According to this logic, the propane would be severely limited. It was determined, according a calculus to which I was not privy, that we would be allotted four five-pound propane canisters per barge.

I tried to argue with the restrictions on the propane. A five-pound propane canister is the size of a tennis ball container. It is the propane container that gets attached to a camping stove. Sitting on the back porch of most every condo in Chicago is a twenty-pound tank of propane powering a gas grill. I have two on the back deck right now, one attached to the grill and the other on standby. Outside the Home Depot where I shop are 42 full twenty-pound tanks, one seated immediately adjacent to the next.

These are heavily regulated consumer products, I argued. They don't explode, and if by some nearly impossible chance they do explode, they are designed to sit immediately adjacent to

one another and not lead to a series of explosion. Not only that, but we have submerged our tanks. They were three feet under water. I'm not sure how to calculate the suppressive effect three feet of water of that, but I'm confident it is considerable.

They listened. Heads nodded. And then the summary judgment: "Five-pound tanks should be enough." Conversation over.

I was learning on the fly. Much of this was new to me, but working with Chicago Fire Department was old hat. We started using fire as a spectacle device in the mid 1990's with street spectacles in Logan Square. My official interactions with the Chicago Fire Department date back to then.

Redmoon's earliest Halloween events were all about fire and drumming. We paraded through the residential community surrounding the eponymous square, gathering people as we went. We carried torches, spit fire, and twirled poi (small balls of fire at the end of flexible chain). People came out of their houses and apartment buildings to join us. We walked together to the square where we performed a fire dance and as a closing gesture ignited cloth rope strung through a small section of elevated garden fencing. The rope had been soaked in paraffin and was "drawn" in the shape of a wolf, because that was someone's favorite animal, I think.

The first year we started as a group of 40 or so and ended performing to maybe 400 people. Five years later, we were closing down the streets for audiences well in excess of 12,000. I do not speak euphemistically when I say, "We were closing down the streets." We rented the barricades and we put them up. Some courageous performer or aspiring director walked into

traffic with palms raised in the air while behind her two others dragged out orange and white striped traffic fences.

We will never know how we were able to make those first years of Redmoon's *All Hallow's Eve Ritual Celebration* precisely because no arrangement was ever made. That is not to say there weren't conversations. Before we did the event the second year, we went to the police station down the street from our storefront studio to tell someone there our plans, but we never got past the front desk. The desk sergeant kept asking what it was that we wanted. "What do you want? Do you want a street closure? Do you want a permit? We don't give permits here."

I looked at him and I understood very clearly that we did not want to ask for anything.

No, I told him, we did not want a permit. We didn't think closing streets would be desirable or necessary. We just wanted to keep them informed. We wanted them to know our plans. He suggested that we might want to write them down and bring them back in.

I hadn't asked for anything and neither had he. We didn't need anything from them and they didn't have to do anything. Sometimes mutual disengagement is the best place to begin a collaboration.

It was not so different at the Fire Department. We hadn't thought to notify them at all, so when they showed up at the second annual Halloween event with an engine, I was sure we were being shut down. Instead, they walked the performance site, which was the area around the historic monument in the middle of the square. I showed them the buckets of sand and hand extinguishers and fire blankets. I talked them through our plan to set a safety perimeter with performers.

They didn't make any demands and took no responsibility. They may have asked us to move a few of our hand extinguishers toward the fuel or to move the perimeter out a bit. A fire engine stayed parked at the spectacle site for the duration of the spectacle.

Given my history with the Chicago Fire Department, the overbearing authority that we faced around *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* made no sense. I couldn't figure out how to make headway.

Looking back, those early days with the Chicago Fire Department seem absolutely impossible to me.

As we prepared for the *Fire Festival*, every fire gesture was monitored and regulated. We had to pull permits to ignite a small test panel in our own parking lot. The permit had to be submitted by a licensed pyrotechnician who agreed to be present for the test. Anyone who was to touch fire had to pass a fire safety certification program making them an official fire guard. In order to burn a two-by-eight-foot wood panel suspended from a steel frame in a concrete parking lot, with 20 feet clearance in any direction, we had four fire extinguishers, two buckets of water, a fire engine, and twelve certified fire guards: three from Redmoon, three chiefs, five fire officers, and a licensed pyrotechnician.

15 years earlier we had ignited a ten-foot-high bonfire in the abandoned lot next to our West Chicago Avenue workshop without any oversight whatsoever. When the police came down the alley to see what was happening, they didn't even get out of their car. The fire department never showed.

It was in the early morning hours. We had pulled everything off the streets of Logan Square and had a pile of detritus high enough that it had to be scaled to place the last items at its peak. Most of that pile had been created in community workshops that we had led the months prior in different community centers throughout Logan Square. They were makeshift shrines, lovingly built into wine crates by local residents. They were made to honor the passing of someone from the year prior. On the evening of our *All Hallow's Eve Ritual Celebration*, they lined the historic boulevard. Precious little memory boxes, filled with photographs and trinkets and decorated with plastic buttons and pipe cleaners and paint placed in clusters, stacked one atop the next, with small devotional candles burning in each.

For one month prior to Halloween, Angie Tilges and Sundry Wislow, two local arts educators, took the Shrine Workshop Vehicle to anyone who wanted it. The Shrine Workshop Vehicle was the name we gave the rented van that we had custom fitted with shelves and hooks to hold all our shrine making materials. It was a guerilla arts residency. They showed up at public schools, at the Boy's and Girl's Club, at social service centers. They were at Field Houses, at churches, senior citizen homes and birthday parties. Workshop participants were told about various Halloween traditions, but particularly about Latin and Celtic traditions, both of which focused on Halloween as the time of the year when the membrane between the living and dead was at its thinnest. In the Celtic tradition fires were lit to guide the souls of those who had passed to their next place. *Dia de los Muertos* features graveside celebrations. Families decorate the graves of their loved ones with photographs and flowers and remembrances. They drink and sing and tell stories. They invoke the spirit of their dead relative and it is not at all unusual for the spirit to join in the festivities.

Logan Square residents were asked to bring photographs of their lost loved ones and use those photographs to make a memento. In addition to stacks of donated wine crates, The Shrine Workshop Vehicle was filled with various bric-a-brac that could be used to personalize the boxes: shirt and jacket buttons of various colors, pipe cleaners, beads, small plastic toys, color paper, and hot glue—lots and lots of hot glue. People reveled in the creative opportunity. Some took their projects home, not wanting to be rushed in their process. It was not unusual to see people posing for photographs next to their shrines once they had been installed on the parkways that lined the boulevard.

Many people took their shrines home after the event. Many more did not. We were left with nearly a hundred. Equal parts practicality and amusement led us to the conclusion that they should be burned. So they were put into a huge pile along with the set pieces and props that we could not reuse and set ablaze.

The fire was absolutely enormous, much larger than any of us had anticipated. We were scared. A bunch of us ran into the shop and brought out buckets to douse the wood framed house downwind of the fire. Someone began to run a hose from our slop sink on the other end of the shop. We had just finished a second round of tossing ten or so buckets of water onto the siding when the police pulled up. The hose was on and trickling water. We set the newly emptied buckets upright as though they were full and staged for operation.

They came from either end of the alley with their lights on but no sirens. Whatever the implicit limits were to our informal agreement, I was sure that we had exceeded them. This time we were in trouble. I walked slowly, casually, I hoped, up to the first of the two police cars. The window was already down. "A little celebration?" the officer suggested.

"We just closed down our Halloween Festival in Logan Square," I said by way of explanation.

"Yep."

And that was that. Nothing more was said. I stood by the car for while watching the fire. It began to slow. The crew dropped the hose. I walked away from the police. They stayed for a while and then drove off.

After shoveling the ash into a heap and dumping sand onto it, we settled into a nervous laughter. That had been frightening. We assessed. The loose way that the shrines were stacked facilitated maximum air flow. A few timely gusts accelerated the fire. Add to that an abundance of glue and petroleum based plastics, which have a high flash point but burn hot once lit, and we had a frightening blaze.

The next day, looking at the neighbor's house in the light of day, the vinyl siding was noticeably blistered. We agreed that we needed to be more careful.

Testing the panel for the *Fire Festival* seemed the other extreme. It had taken less than ten minutes for our test panel to burn off all of its fuel. The blaze had not been hot enough to even discolor the steel. Our pyrotechnician never got up from the folding chair that seemed to accompany him wherever he went. The three chiefs put their hats back on, shook hands with each other, got into their three separate city vehicles and drove away.

Sometimes a big idea comes along that makes sense of a whole mess of apparently disjointed and contradictory thoughts, ideas and information. *The Penguin and the Leviathan* did that for me.<sup>156</sup> My divergent experience with the Chicago Fire Department, and with the city at

large, suddenly all made sense. The *All Hallow's Eve Ritual Celebration* was a penguin. Despite my efforts to the contrary, *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* was the leviathan.

It was just plain luck that presented me with the Yochai Benkler's book *The Penguin and the Leviathan*. I went to a panel discussion at the MIT MediaLab<sup>157</sup> that had been organized by my friend Aaron Naparstek, the founder of StreetsBlog.<sup>158</sup> Aaron was very interested in community organizing for better cities and had brought together a group of super smarties to talk about how the internet was changing the ways that people organized. Yochai Benkler was one of the panelists speaking on the subject. He spoke. I listened. I ate some cheese and drank a bit of wine and then I went home and didn't give it another thought.

A few weeks later my son came home with his new friend Ari, a self-possessed boy with a deep intellectual curiosity that captured my son's interest. Ari turned out to be Yochai's son. I had picked Yochai's new book at the MIT panel conversation, so I started to read it and things started to make sense.

Yochai Benkler is a Big Thinker. He is a Harvard Law professor and a resident thinker at the Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society. The Berkman Center, as it is more commonly known, seeks to understand and help shape the ways that digital networking is transforming our world.<sup>159</sup> Benkler's thinking and writing is focused on the emerging future. Part advocacy, part observation, his books are inspiring for the breadth of their vision.

The subtitle of *The Penguin and the Leviathan* is "The Triumph of Cooperation Over Self Interest." It is grand, sweeping, and optimistic. The Leviathan from the title is the biblical whale evoked in Thomas Hobbes' seminal work by the same name.<sup>160</sup> In it, Hobbes articulates his highly influential theory of human nature. Benkler characterizes Hobbes' position thus: "Humans

are fundamentally and universally selfish, and the only way to deal with people is for governments to step in and control us so that we do not, in our shortsighted pursuit of self-interest, destroy one another (or make one another's lives too miserable to bear)."<sup>161</sup>

The Leviathan, then, represents any system tied to the belief that the animal nature of human beings must be controlled through big coercive systems. Benkler argues that we have alternated between two such systems: Big Government and Laissez Faire economics.

Big Government seeks to quell our animal nature with the "rule of law." Government is like a parent, civilizing its children through discipline and education. Bad behavior enforced and prosecuted by a state run penal system. Good behavior will be taught and rewarded through considered government policies and the institutions that they yield. Our education system and social programs are governmental means of rewarding civil behavior and curbing our innate selfishness.

On the other end of the spectrum sits Adam Smith's "invisible hand."<sup>162</sup> The invisible hand aligns self-interest and civility. Good behavior is rewarded by the market place with gainful employment and economic independence. Bad behavior will lead to removal from the benefits of the marketplace and all the economic freedom and stability it provides. Morality is interpreted and enacted by the "invisible" forces that drive our market system. Government is charged, then, with maintaining the sanctity of the market place so that it can enforce civil behavior.

The root of both systems is the unquestioned belief that people are, at root, rational economic actors. We behave according to an instinctive and sophisticated calculation of self-benefit. In large part, the argument between Democrats and Republicans concerns striking the

right balance between these two civilizing systems. Republicans generally want to leave things to the free market. Historically, Democrats have advocated more for government intervention.

The first part of *The Penguin and the Leviathan* is dedicated to dismantling this premise. Benkler dissects the Leviathan and leaves it splayed for our inspection. People are not reliably self-serving, Benkler says. This is an overly simple, if particularly tenacious, theory of human behavior, with very little hard evidence to support it. He shares countless carefully designed tests that reveal a complex system of motivations that compel human action, one that includes empathy, care, kindness and cooperation. It turns out that our actions are motivated not just by self-advancement, but by any number of sometimes conflicting values.

In the end, he makes a direct commonsensical appeal:

But let me tell you a secret. We've all known, intuitively, that we aren't really selfish and rational all the time. We teach our children to tell the difference between right and wrong, to be nice to others, to follow the Golden Rule. We have all loved another person, and made crazy, irrational sacrifices in the name of love. (Even economists. Really.) We've all given up our seat to an old lady or handicapped stranger on the train, held the elevator or door for the person behind us, put a dollar in the UNICEF jar. We've all done things because we knew intuitively that they were simply the right thing to do, not because they would bring us personal gain or profit. In other words, we've all acted in ways that prove we know, on some level, that we are more selfless than the reigning view of humanity would suggest.<sup>163</sup>

The remainder of the book is dedicated to a deep consideration of the Penguin. As an alternative to Hobbes' Leviathan, Benkler introduces us to Tux. Tux is an adorable cartoon penguin, a sea-faring opposite to the monstrous Leviathan evoked by Hobbes and the Bible. Tux is the symbol of the Linux operating system.

For those who don't know, and I admit that I didn't, Linux is a widely used open source operating system.<sup>164</sup> Among programmers, software and hardware engineers, Linux is as widely

used as Windows or OS. As opposed to those other two operating systems, it is not the product of a multi-national corporation seeking dominance and profit share. Instead, Linux is a non-profit and is developed cooperatively through free and volunteer labor. It is "open source"; anyone can work on it. People see problems with the system and contribute by solving them. If the solution has merit, it will be adopted and used by the Linux community and over time become part of the Linux operating system. If it is clumsy or unreliable, it will fall away, or be adapted and integrated into an alternative and better solution. Linux is a self-governing, self-generating, cooperative system that has become a viable rival to the intentionally engineered operating systems generated by the best minds of the world's most powerful and well-resourced corporations. Microsoft is represented by four equal sized square of different colors; Apple by the silhouette of a perfectly bitten apple; Linux by a cartoon penguin named Tux.

Tux represents an ethic of cooperation, Benkler writes. It stands in defiance of the principle of competition that dominates market capitalism. Products like Linux and Wikipedia, and even Facebook's content, reveal the generative power of cooperation. These cooperative systems are facilitated by digital networking, but their power is visible outside of the digital sphere as well. Benkler points to a shift toward community policing. He talks about the transformation of the assembly line, changing the fundamental building block from a dehumanized individual to a team-based system that facilitates pride of ownership and mutual accountability. He shares a series of carefully constructed social experiments, each one building a more nuanced understanding of the social motivations that compel cooperation.

He contrasts Tux with the Leviathan, the Biblical whale representing the imposing governmental system instituted to curb natural impulse and impose order. The Leviathan is top

down. Whether based on “the invisible hand” which entrusts the superstructure of the market to productively align self-interest, or big government to create order through laws and regulations, the Leviathan assumes that big, powerful systems are needed to keep people in check. On the other hand, there's Tux, sanguine and cute, representing the cooperative spirit that powers "bottom up" organizing.

Redmoon's storefront studio was at one end of a three-block diagonal street in Logan Square. On the other end was "Shakespeare," what the locals called the local Chicago Police Department station on the corner of Shakespeare and California Avenues. Between Redmoon and Shakespeare were two known crack houses and a public elementary school.

Kids in the neighborhood would walk past our workshop, see us making puppets, and walk in like they owned the place, asking what we needed. In response, we offered them free arts classes. At that time, we were making large scale puppets, an urbanized adaptation of the spectacle technologies of Bread and Puppet Theatre.<sup>165</sup> We would be out on the sidewalk working on large *papier-mache* heads that would be attached to long poles and stuck into borrowed shopping carts (before the days of anti-theft braking systems). Or we might be test driving a bicycle tricked out with a record player and a gramophone horn. Kids from the street were always “helping.” They might paper the puppet forms or run alongside the bike or just sit on the stoop and watch us work, asking questions, offering their ideas and critiquing ours.

These same kids, and more often their older siblings, would sometimes clear us off the sidewalk. They'd ride by and tell us when something was going to “go down.” The first time it happened I barely noticed. Veronica, an 11-year-old girl who lived next door to our studio, held

her hand in the air, moving her fingers like the shooting of a gun. I didn't really pay attention until I noticed that her brothers were nowhere to be found. She came back around a minute or so later. I looked at her. "Trouble. There's going to be trouble," she said. We went inside and sure enough, within fifteen minutes we heard shots fired nearby and the squealing of tires, followed by sirens and more shots and then the sound of feet pounding back and forth in front of our corner studio.

When we first moved in, the police would pull their cars up next to our impromptu sidewalk work station and stare at us, saying nothing. They'd stay for a minute or two and then they'd shake their heads and drive off. It took months before a particularly outgoing female officer broke the ice by rolling down her window and asking what it was we thought we were doing. "That worth risking your life over?" she asked.

Years later, from 1998 to 2003, we were on the far west side, in Police Precinct 1, which at that time held the dubious distinction of being the highest arrest rate precinct in the city, or so we were told again and again by the police officers who told us we were crazy to be there. There, too, it was a female officer who broke the ice. In that case, however, she had an agenda. She wanted to use our roof top to spy on the open drug activity on our corner. "It's not like you're going to fit in and go unnoticed," she told me.

Within a year we were working at the public school and had built a sculpture garden in an abandoned lot adjacent to our building. We finally formalized our engagement with the neighborhood kids when Tria Smith finally got a meeting with the Chase School Principal and convinced her to let us create an after-school program for girls. With those children we requisitioned an abandoned lot and used the car tires abandoned in the alley and the concrete

slabs from whatever had once occupied the lot to build a kind of proto-urban garden. We planted sunflowers and tomatoes into brightly painted tire planters. Shortly after that, we began an after-school program at Chase School, an elementary school that had been put on formal probation the year prior.

So when I walked into the police station back in 1996 to tell the local police about our Halloween plans, it was not as a stranger. It was as one of the kooky artists down the street who do stuff with the neighborhood kids. It was as a friend of the Cooks, who lived next door to the station house and whose daughters were part of our program. It was as the artists who ran an after-school program, rehearsed our events in the schoolyard, and built a garden in an empty lot where people had previously been shooting up. We were neighbors and we wanted to do something in our neighborhood.

Again, this was a very different situation than what we faced with the *Fire Festival*. It's not hard to see the two as perfectly characterizing the difference between top down and bottom up organizing:

In one scenario, the police commanders are called to a meeting at the Mayor's Office. They are seated around the table with representatives from numerous other departments who were similarly beckoned. Everyone is in full dress uniform. The Mayor's indelicate deputy tells them that the Mayor wants to create a new event for the city and that this guy here, the bald guy in the casual dress, is leading the effort. Cooperation by fiat.

In the other scenario, I stand waiting on the other side of a desk. The Sergeant on duty takes his time getting to me. He talks to a few others, maybe getting a read from them on this guy from the theater down the street. Finally, he calls me forward. I reach up to shake his hand. The

desk is broad and elevated to emphasize power and authority. I tell him that we're hoping to create something great for the neighborhood and that I wanted them to be aware of our plans.

Of course, it's not as simple as asking the right way. It's a function of power, where it sits, how it gets expressed, and the costs of wielding it.

The *All Hallow's Eve Ritual Celebration* grew organically. The first year or two the Halloween event itself featured those same kids and their families and it marched down residential streets calling people from their homes and apartment buildings to join. It was powered by the residents around the square. As it grew, so did the depth of its reach into the neighborhood communities. We partnered with the Senior Citizen center down Milwaukee Avenue and the gang intervention program at the local YMCA. We engaged the families from the Association House and worked with Thresholds who ran a home for the mentally ill in the area.<sup>166</sup>

As we kicked off the parade in the third year, I spied Alderman Wilma Colon and her staff take a position at its front and unfurl a sign bearing her name and city seal. What? She had done nothing to make this event a reality. In fact, each thing we had asked of her office had been met with shoulder shrugging. I considered running up there and asking her what she thought she was doing. I reminded myself that this was anybody's parade. Anyone could join and they could costume as they wanted and could march and carry banners, too. It was the neighborhood's parade and that the alderman was out front with a banner was a testimony to its success.

That year, 1997, we had built all kinds of steel contraptions built bike frames and parts. At the front and back of the parade were two bike powered towers that reached up some 14 feet

in the air. Each one was powered by three pedalers. Two moved the bike and one propelled the mechanics at the top of the tower. At the top of the front tower was a spinning truss. From either end of the truss dangled a lawn chair; seated in the chair was a costumed performer dressed as a *Dia de Los Muertos* skeleton, in beachwear but with a skeleton face, sipping kerosene from an overly large cocktail glass and blowing fire. At the back of the parade, a similarly structured tower had a see-saw at the top.

These towers represented a tremendous leap forward. They were spectacle devices. Prior to this moment we had been working with paper and wood and paint. In 1997 we bought a welder and it was a game changer. Suddenly we could work with steel, with hubs and wheels and bearings. It was a whole different game. We went from looking at images of Welfare State International and Bread and Puppet, to images of Dogtroep and Royale de Luxe.<sup>167</sup>

Within the first block, the drive chain on the lead tower had skipped and split and fallen to the ground. I couldn't tell if over eager pedaling had applied too much pressure and twisted it off its weld or if it had simply popped out of its pillow block because the entire frame had been somehow torqued. Either way, suddenly one of two primary spectacle devices was immobilized and pulling to the side of the road.

While I was trying to decipher if there was anything to be done, Lupo came up next to me and leaned over. Lupo was the oldest brother of a family that lived down the street from our studio. His younger siblings were always around; the oldest of them was Vero, who, long ago at that point, had warned us that it was about to "go down." Lupo had kept his distance. He was older and in a complicated social circle. When we passed one another on the street we might nod to one another, but little more than that.

I was surprised to see him. I looked over my shoulder and saw he was with a few other friends, none of them in costume, one holding at his side a suspicious looking paper bag. Together the two of us looked at the mechanics of the tower. It didn't take long to come to the mutual and unspoken conclusion that there was nothing to be done. "We could push it," he said.

"Would you?"

He waved over to his friends and they got their shoulders behind it and off it went. Up top the lawn chairs began to swirl again. The next time I saw them they were sweat soaked and smiling ear to ear. I don't know how it started but every few moments one of the skeletons riding the spinning lawn chairs would yell "Somebody stop me!" and the young men would stop pushing, look up into the air, and respond with a blood curdling holler while the skeletons spit fountains of fire into the air.

As we rounded the first corner into the more residential areas, we were met by two patrol cars, lights flashing. I thought we were done for. It had gotten too big for an unofficial event flying under the regulatory radar. They were going to shut us down. As I ran up front to talk to the officers I realized that I was dressed in full skeleton costume and make up, smelling from the kerosene that had dropped on me from above. It was not the best outfit to communicate our professionalism.

By the time I fought my way up front through the suddenly dense parade, thick with impromptu paraders, the squad cars were already moving. They had taken up a position in front of the alderman, silently running their lights. They had come to be our official escorts, not to stop us. I looked back and another car had taken up the rear. In between the squad cars were masses of people of all shapes and sizes, some in costume, most not, illuminated periodically by the

orange glow from bursts of fire, set into slow rocking motion by a team of nine drummers smiling ear to ear.

There was no stopping this. Even if that had been their intention, and I don't think it was, they would have been forced to reconsider. There may well have been a riot, so great was the ground level enthusiasm in that moment.

No doubt one of the reasons that Linux chose the penguin as their emblem is that penguins are communal creatures. They organize themselves into colonies. The colony facilitates their survival. Together they have a better chance of finding food, finding a mate and reproducing, and surviving attack. In fact, the penguin's primary defense is a numbers game. A group of penguins on land is called a waddle. They are a terribly easy target. A predator that comes upon a waddle unaware will inevitably go away with a kill. But rarely more than one. Penguins defend themselves by staying together and warning one another upon attack. One will die, but the others will escape to the nearby water. A group of penguins in the water is called a raft. As a raft they are safe. They split and accelerate, can turn and maneuver with great dexterity. As a raft they are nearly impossible to catch. They are social creatures whose multiplicity is their greatest source of strength.

Part of the appeal of organizing bottom up is that responsibility has been diffused. There is no single signatory. There isn't a clear decision point where someone accepts responsibility by putting their name at the bottom of a legal document. It's a big mess of people, a complex and nearly untraceable network of leaders and followers and collaborators. The leviathan is weighted

down by its own bureaucracy. It is huge and laden with layers and layers of self-protection. It's encumbered and lumbering, easy to target, but hard to dent.

Thinking about it in retrospect, I wonder what the response would have been if something terrible had happened around the *All Hallow's Eve Ritual Celebration*. There was no paper trail. We never got a permit, not from the police, not from fire, not from the Alderman. Outrage would have flared, but responsibility would have been nearly impossible to pinpoint. Fingers would have pointed in all directions.

Permission is tough to come by. Within a bureaucratic system, to give permission is to take responsibility. If, after it's been permitted, the fire at *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* burns out of control and sends people stampeding for the stairs, the first place everyone will turn is to whomever put their name on the bottom of the permit. The investigation will start there and work its way upward. Who gave that person the authority to grant a permit? Permission transfers responsibility. No one wants to be the one who signs the permit. Why single yourself out? There's safety in numbers.

On the other hand, stopping something in motion can have similar effect. Who wants to make that call? Who wants to single themselves out as the person who took some treasured thing away from its community? In the earliest years the safest route was inaction. We didn't ask for anything and they didn't have to do anything. We paraded down the street with a small band of costumed performers. People came out of their apartments and houses and clapped and waved or maybe even joined the festivities.

Then, rather suddenly, there was an event too big to be ignored. Precedent and social momentum shifted the risk assessment. To take something away from an eager public is

politically problematic. There were thousands of local residents for whom it was now an annual family tradition and nearly a dozen community based organizations for whom it was a treasured source of programming and public exposure. The alderman had a picture of herself marching at the front of the parade hanging in her office window.

The risk calculation had tipped. Precedent had altered the calculus. To stop the *All Hallow's Eve Ritual Celebration* would have meant disappointing its organically grown stakeholders. It was just as problematic, or more, than granting permission.

This is an entirely different calculation from the one computed by the upper level officials of the Chicago Fire Department confronted with *The Great Chicago Fire Festival*. "No" was the best answer. Anyone could see that. Even the most rudimentary risk calculator would effortlessly compute that the scale and public nature of *The Great Chicago Fire Festival*, to say nothing of its multiple bonfires and pyrotechnics in a congested and unintentional downtown arena, brought high risk and very little reward.

It occurs to me that Tux is the rosy flipside of the public pillory described in Jon Ronson's *So You've Been Publicly Shamed*.<sup>168</sup> They are two sides of the same coin.

Ronson describes an idle populace, bored and disengaged and powered by an abundance of moral outrage, unleashing a tidal wave of scrutiny on a hapless victim. As a force, they are tireless and unending, flushing the internet with their righteous anger, humiliating people and tarring them irreparably with their libel. Benkler looks at that same idle populace and sees the potential for a completely different engagement. Properly engaged, that same righteous energy can be tapped to do great things. Enticed by an appealing cause and coordinated by the right

system, that populace can solve problems big and small, create world changing intellectual resources, and serve as a proving ground for the power of cooperation.

Both men see that a new world has been created by the digital revolution, one changed by the power of social media to organize and channel a massive, alienated and grossly underutilized populace. Ronson is observing one set of consequences, Benkler projecting another. What pushes the populace one way or another? What makes them powerful agents of good in Tux's world but heartless prosecutors in the other?

The answer is very simple and both authors point to it: empathy. Benkler has a chapter dedicated to the power of empathy. He cites many studies showing the way that empathy changes the economic calculus. Empathy, Benkler declares, “we care about human being simply as human beings,” regardless of who they are or what they can do for us.<sup>169</sup> Ronson points to empathy as the critical missing piece. It is the absence of empathy that leaves the mob unchecked. It may start down a righteous path, but without the governing intelligence of empathy, it doesn't know where to stop. Without empathy, they become cruel and unrelenting.

The magical ingredient that converts the angry mob into a well-meaning collective? Events like *The Great Chicago Fire Festival*.

And I'm only just barely joking here. Combine the two thinkers and that's nearly the answer you get. Benkler may well have stolen the following from a Redmoon grant application: "The more we practice cooperation, the more we believe in the virtue of being cooperative."<sup>170</sup> For Ronson, the lack of human contact in public space, is what allows the pillory to get out of control. It is in public space, where the accused encounter their executioner, that the public regains their empathy and returns to their essential humanity.

Put it together and what you get is practicing and demonstrating cooperation in public space as an essential social good. This is where we encounter one another. It's where we see one another as dimensional beings, worthy of and capable of empathy. It's a place where bridges are built and walked over, where unlikely and often overlooked connections can occur.

We are barraged with reasons to be scared, and the range of those reasons is staggering. As often as we are told to fear for our individual lives, we are told to fear for the future of humanity. As often as we are warned about the physical dangers that accompany even the most mundane activities, we are also warned about the future of democracy, the impending collapse of civil society, the slow and inexorable decline of our empire, of the economy, of our standard of living. The foods we eat are contaminated. Global warming is going to destroy the planet, and if not, then the nuclear apocalypse might. Around any corner may lurk a thief or a murderer or kidnapper or maybe a collision with a vagrant bullet or car or fist. There's an Asian flu, Zika mosquito and his many friends; there is Ebola and AIDS and the measles are still hanging around. Vaccines are effective but may be causing allergies or autism or worse, we're told. Bullies and pedophiles and internet perverts are after our kids, as are recreational drugs and the parade and harder drugs that follow them. The list is endless.

We are on high alert. We are constantly computing. Is that walk safe? That food? That neighborhood? The doorbell rings. I'm home alone. What time is it? The risk calculator is constantly running. All too often, though, we don't have enough real data to make a well-reasoned calculation. More often than not, the calculation is based on social cues and gut checks.

We don't have a choice. These are every day, every minute decisions and they have to be made with the information that's available at the moment.

We practice togetherness to provide a more reliable set of data. That's what these signature events are about. They are practicing cooperation. They are providing experience.

In 1999 we transformed our *All Hallow's Eve Ritual Celebration* to include deep collaborations with other community based organizations. We curated unexpected partnerships. We paired the gang intervention program at the YMCA with a group of South American quilters from the Association House; a team of seniors from the Copernicus Center down the street worked with a group home for the mentally disabled.<sup>171</sup> Each pair worked side by side with a team of Redmoon artists to create an installation along the historic Boulevard. The installations needed light and power. We didn't have the budget for generators, so we came equipped with numerous extension cords and with the expectation that we would solicit power from the neighborhood businesses and residents who lined the boulevard.

(The alderman's office was conveniently located immediately adjacent one of the installations. They refused our volunteer coordinator's request without giving a reason. I was so angry that I walked into her office, unplugged an air freshener near the door and plugged in our cord and walked out without saying a thing.)

The rate of rejection was extremely discouraging. Our volunteer coordinator called me on the walkie-talkie (this was before the wide distribution of cellphones) to report the lack of progress. A lot people weren't home, but of the people who were, we weren't getting many yeses. I was sure she was handling it wrong, being too hesitant in the ask perhaps, or somehow

provoking people. I found her speaking into an intercom system at the base of a three-story apartment building. There was nothing wanting in her ask. It was great.

People were worried. They were worried about creating a tripping hazard, power outages, electric shocks. What if it rains? They were worried about leaving their windows unlocked (to allow for the cord), about starting a fire from the heat of the line, about neighbor complaints. What if it tripped the circuit breaker or blew a fuse? Would our cord really reach that far? Wasn't it bad for... something? Someone asked: "Is that even legal?"

In the absence of real data, fear takes hold. One door closing leads to other closed doors. Fear breeds fear. It's an absolutely reasonable response. But the inverse is also true. An open door leads to other open doors. This, too, is a reasonable response.

There is power in numbers, but it must be cultivated. Cooperation has to be practiced, and it all starts with the human connection.

Off the street some, at the second door of a larger apartment building, someone said yes. Without even a thought. "No problem," she said and we tossed the cord through her window and ran the other end out to the street.

It was getting later, school was out, kids were returning home, some of them already in Halloween costumes. Our installations along the Boulevard were beginning to take form and gather attention. People were coming off the sidewalks to venture out onto the parkways to look around and ask questions. And the "yesses" began to roll in.

The next year our installations were larger. We needed cords for lighting, for fans to blow feathers in the air, for a series of record players with gramophone horns, for the amplifiers of a

string trio. Only one person said "no". He thought the whole project a nuisance, too noisy, too many people. Halloween was bad enough without all this extra ruckus.

The second year of our Halloween celebration, instead of the 500 people that collected for the first event, about 2000 people showed up. I think we were all surprised and pleased at how easily it all went down, including the sergeant who arrived midway through the evening and the Chicago Fire Department lieutenant with whom I spoke after most of the audience had dispersed. We stood around the carcass of the fire drawing we had burnt to close the spectacle. It was easily four times the size of the wolf drawing of the previous year, and in addition to a triple thick paraffin soaked cloth rope, we had interwoven fire canisters that would catch and hold a blaze. As we talked, we idly kicked at its remains with our boots.

As he walked away he said, "You guys made that show about the mural, right?"

It hadn't occurred to me. Two years earlier Claire Dolan and Jessica Thebus had chosen to make the *3rd Annual Winter Pageant* (1993) about the story behind a mural at the Kimball stop on the Blue Line. The mural depicted three firefighters with white angel wings battling a blaze. It was in honor of three officers who lost their lives when a roof collapsed on them during a fire fight at a local electronics store. The store was three blocks from where we were standing; the mural was between us and the store; the show about the fire had played in a ballroom not more than 100 yards away.

"Those guys were friends of mine."

We had made a human connection.

In 2015, against all odds, we remounted *The Great Chicago Fire Festival*. We moved the event off the river to the first site I had proposed, the onetime site of Chicago's small private airfield. When it was an airport for small private planes, mostly downstate politicians coming up to the city for meetings, it was called Meigs Field. After Mayor Daley closed the airport down in spectacular fashion, having bulldozers criss-cross trenches through the air strips, he renamed the Park District-owned property "Northerly Island." On Northerly Island, the house came alive with fire. It was consumed in a gratifying spectacle of the highest order. Photographs of the blaze show it to be twice the size of the house itself.

The fire was fed by two 200-pound propane tanks. We ignited the fires with a simple manual ignition system, a torch dropped into a pool of flowing propane. We could have lit those fires in a hurricane, honest to God.

The year before, both systems had been rejected out of hand by the Fire Chief. The end of our long and labored negotiations with the Fire Department in 2014 had left us trying to light the houses with an overly complicated and ultimately unsuitable electronic ignition system feeding four five-pound tanks.

How had we come to such a different conclusion in 2015?

We had made personal connections. It was clear we were on different terrain from our very first meeting in early 2015. A year earlier we had been on one side of the table and they had been another. In between us sat representatives from the Mayor's Office and the Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events. There was no "we."

In 2015, we didn't meet at the Mayor's office. The chiefs came to Redmoon. I walked into the room and they laughed, at me, with me, at the absurdity of the whole thing. They laughed and

I smiled and my face turned red and someone said, "Well we'd better do a better job this time around." We had become a "we."

They may have taken the most conservative path in 2014, but not with ill-intention. It was the well-worn path, the easiest and least risky choice available, and there was little incentive to choose differently. Now there was. Now there was a connection, a camaraderie. Just as we had, they had suffered the disappointment of the previous year. Just like us, they sought a different conclusion.

More than that, now we knew each other. We were together now, aligned in our goals, and with one year's practice under our belts.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Not Story—Experience

Let me step back. A long step back.

The American Theater has unproductive and self-defeating preoccupation with story.

At Northwestern University, where I did graduate work, the text sat at the center of theater studies. The core curriculum started with AO-3, a class devoted to the history of dramatic literature. We began with the ancient Greeks, Aeschylus and Socrates, coursed through Shakespeare and Moliere, before sprinting through Chekov to Brecht followed by a quick taste of Beckett. The big playwrights got a full lecture, others had to share time with a contemporary.

Acting classes were likewise text centered. The actor was told to fix themselves to the text, to learn to read as a performer, to find character within the punctuation as much as the words, to track the arcs of tension suggested by the rhythm of dialogue. Directors, too, were taught to read text and to treat that reading as their primary work. The dramatic text was the center around which directors, actors and designers were all to revolve.

I was more surprised to find that this emphasis on story held such sway in the world of professional theater. Of course the more traditional theaters stayed tightly focused on the text. That was their rubric. They were bringing to life classic texts; it was in their mission. However, those theaters seemed to set the culture. Even more alternative theaters who saw themselves as renegade clung to the primacy of the dramatic text. My friend Sean Graney runs *The Hypocrites*.<sup>172</sup> At the time, *The Hypocrites* were a grungy store front theater known for their aggressive re-interpretations of classic scripts. In my first conversation with Sean, he impressed me as decidedly punk and anti-authoritarian. He wore a mohawk and had a neck tattoo. Yet here he was talking about himself as an interpreter of text. His productions, he claimed, though known for their wild irreverence, were the result of the great works of the lions of dramatic literature.

The critical apparatus is equally fixated on the idea that theater is a storytelling form. My own work was consistently criticized as lacking narrative drive. Time and again that was the rap against *Redmoon: Story*. We didn't seem to hold story in high enough regard. In one brazen review Chris Jones, head critic of the *Chicago Tribune*, openly enjoined us to work with a writer. If only we could tell a story, he said, we would really have something.<sup>173</sup>

It may come as something of a surprise to my critics, but I love a good story. In fact, I consider myself something of a story hound. I'm just not convinced that theater is a particularly good storytelling form or that it benefits from the effort.

Story is everywhere; we're inundated by story. With the smart phone I can download stories in any form and have them available to me most anywhere. I can download essays, short stories, histories, and novels. I can download audio recordings of great actors reading classic stories, of new stories being read by their authors, of sketches in all varieties. Visual stories are

available in six second videos on Vine, in 30 second commercials, in 22 minute "half hour" television comedies and 44-minute dramas, and full length "feature films." In my pocket, at any time, are more written stories than in my local library growing up. Right now, on my phone, I have Saul Bellow's *Humboldt's Gift*, *The Best American Essays of 2015* (two behind there), and Arundati Roy's new novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*.<sup>174</sup> I've made no real progress on any of the three because I keep getting pulled away by something else.

It's just silly to write off digital media as somehow more shallow or ill-considered or crassly commercial. Not only do I have an entire library at my fingertips, filled with the classics and the newest releases, but I can access the old film classics as easily as I can get to newer digital products which are, like everything else, all over the map. Sometimes they are fully realized, thoughtful stories, and sometimes they are total disasters, through which a valuable idea can almost be discerned. Last week I listened to a musical podcast, a form that's attracted artists as diverse as Lin-Manuel Miranda and the makers of *Serial*.<sup>175</sup> It was terrible, but it was almost great.

The point is, when it comes to story, I'm inundated by easily accessed options, old and new, of real depth and richness. I can call them up by theme, by duration, by actor, director, or even producer. Theater is just about the last place I look. It's inconvenient and it's a trap. Once I'm in that room, I can't get out without disturbing, at minimum, the people between me and the aisle. I can't hit fast forward I can't eat popcorn. I can't turn the volume up or down or hit pause. I'm stuck.

And that's to say nothing of the fact that theater is an encumbered storytelling form. What makes theater special is that it is live. That's great for a lot of things, but not particularly great for

its capacity to tell stories. As a theater maker, I am constantly longing for the control of the camera lens and the microphone, for the precision of the editing room. I wish I could choose the very best moments and weave them into some tight narrative whole. How powerful it would be to then layer in digitally engineered sound effects to accentuate specific moments all the while establishing a bed of music and sound to maintain the emotional arch of the story. As a storytelling form competing with the control and precision of film or television or even recorded audio forms, theater seems to me to be irrevocably handicapped.

If theater is going to survive on its capacity to tell a compelling story, it seems doomed to fail.

To use market language, theater's "unique value proposition" is that it is a live event. As a storytelling form, theater's "unique value proposition" is a deficit. It makes telling a story more difficult in nearly every way. It is harder to produce, harder to repeat. It's less precise and, for the customer, far less convenient. That's all very bad news for the future of theater... as a storytelling form.

As a social medium it has a very different future. As a social medium, theater has a distinct advantage. It can construct unique, saturated social experiences. It can be immersive; it can promote social encounter; it can catalyze relationship; it can break down barriers; it can engender community. As a social medium, theater is poised to answer one of the largest holes in the marketplace: how to create togetherness. Suddenly theater's "unique value proposition" becomes a tremendously valuable asset, socially and economically.

It proves out. Theater that engineers social experience is a booming market with powerful social relevance. As a social medium, theater would appear to have a very different future. As a

social medium, theater's "unique value proposition" puts it at a distinct advantage. As a living experience, it can construct saturating social experiences. It can be immersive, creating experiences for all 5 senses; it can engage the full body. It can move people through a space, as the immensely popular *Sleep No More* does.<sup>176</sup> Or it can surround people from all sides and the ceiling, too, as De La Guarda did so successfully.<sup>177</sup> Theater can promote social encounter and catalyze relationship. That's part of the appeal of these "immersive theater" productions. It's a new way to hang out and be with one another. As a social medium, theater is poised to answer one of the largest holes in the marketplace: how to create togetherness.

Every once in a while, the theater tells a story so good that it must be seen. If it's a great story, it will likely be made into a film, often just as powerfully told and sometimes better. I saw the original production of *August: Osage County* at Steppenwolf in 2007.<sup>178</sup> I saw *Angels in America*, too.<sup>179</sup> I went to Julie Taymor's *The Lion King*.<sup>180</sup> All were excellent stage stories, winners of piles of awards and the subject of stellar reviews and critical acclaim and long essays declaring them proof of the vitality of the stage, announcing that any declaration of its demise was premature.

Yet to my eyes, of the three, only *The Lion King* needed to be seen in the theater. *Angels in America* had a moment or two that were stage dependent, but nothing that wouldn't ultimately be counterbalanced by film's reach and sweep and precision.

From the beginning, *The Lion King* capitalized on the living nature of theater. The puppets were paraded through and past the audience, from the rear of the house to the stage. "This is live!" the show seemed to be saying. "We are here. Now! Right here in front of you,

making these animals move and dance and sing." And the audience understood. Smiles spread from ear to ear and people turned around to look at their friends and neighbors, to point and share their joy. Through the puppets parading down the aisles I saw my fellow audience members, smiling at them and smiling at their friends. We were made aware of one another. We were participating in one another's experience of the play. We were together.

The remainder of the show was informed by that first moment. That the puppets had walked through audience reinforced the living nature of the event that followed so that even when the images on stage became so fantastic as to defy immediate understanding, we were always aware of them as mechanical and physical feats being performed for us live, at that very moment. When the herd of gazelles ran toward the audience, leaping in groups over rolling hills, our mind had already been trained to both enjoy the sweep of the image and to take it apart and understand it as a mechanical feat being enacted in the moment. The performer was visible, side by side with the puppet, announcing herself, constantly present but constantly receding, giving over to the puppet at the same time she was bringing it to life.

I've seen hundreds of theater shows. Intermission at *The Lion King* was like few others. Usually, there is a race to the bathrooms or the concession lines. People stand around in isolated pods of twos and fours, talking to their companions. At *The Lion King*, strangers spoke to one another. Conversations broke down the pods; they moved through the audience, just as the puppets had. For the moment, in the safety of that space, boundaries broke down and a larger community was formed. People had seen one another laughing and smiling and pointing and marveling, and that experienced opened up channels of communication that would otherwise have been impossibly closed.

This can happen in the theater space. It is rare, but it happens. The more an audience is brought into an awareness of the living nature of the event, the more likely they are to engage one another. *Hamilton* broke the audience down a bit.<sup>181</sup> People engaged one another, inspired by what they saw and heard, to feel themselves a part of something bigger than their small band of friends with whom they'd purchased the tickets. I understand it was especially true when a post-show announcement was made. The night I saw the *Hamilton* in Chicago they took a moment after the traditional curtain call to wish the new casts in San Francisco and Los Angeles a good opening. They cast assembled on stage for a selfie, with us, the audience, as the background. We loved it. It broke us down. We turned to our neighbors with hands raised waving at the Los Angeles cast, laughing. I am told it was similar when they made an announcement about politics or about a cast member; the audience seemed to connect in a different way.<sup>182</sup> The post-show address, with the house lights up so that the audience could see and take one another in, seemed to inspire a sense of togetherness. They were thrown into an awareness of their shared space and their shared experience, and that opened unexpected channels of communication.

That feeling of togetherness is what brought me to the theater. I went with friends. I went to be with friends. I went to see friends perform, or to see their work on stage. I went because afterward there were good parties full of smart and interesting and funny people. Theater is created socially and shared socially. That's why I went and why I started to make it. If I got a story, that was fine. But what I really wanted was an experience of inspired togetherness.

The first time I stood in front of a live audience I was nearly undone.

I was in college. There was a packed auditorium and their attention was alarmingly palpable; it made the air thick, viscous almost. It was as though the gravitational field on the stage was rendered tangible by their attention. A movement this way or that would change the previously invisible contours of the room, making them visible. I had entered through an upstage door and we stood in a small group of three. Moving downstage and away from the group seemed to stretch the stage space around them, drawing it taut. Returning to them, released the tension.

I remember thinking that the director had put way too much faith in me. I was not prepared for this heightened awareness. The fake gun at my hip was heavier than I liked, too real. I was swept away by a series of unwanted thoughts: I could take it out. I could take it out and completely change the entire auditorium. Time would shorten, space would tighten. We would be held there, I thought. What would happen then? I could do that. I could do anything. What would happen if I took out the gun and waived it in the air screaming? What would happen if I stood perfectly still and let drool seep from the corner of my mouth?

It should not be surprising to me that my first experience in front of an audience on stage is defined by a horribly destructive impulse. I was a lifelong troublemaker, and I was suddenly the focus of way too much attention. Of course I regressed. I heard the tavern door close behind me and, like a seven-year-old looking at a finely balanced tower of blocks, my first thought was how easily I could destroy it all.

There were six people on stage at that moment: the three of us who had just entered; one behind the bar; two sat at a cafe table. A series of invisible threads connected each of us. If I pulled at mine the others would respond; they would have to. We were drawn together. We were

sketched as a whole and any movement by one would necessarily move the others. It was a beautiful thing, a form of togetherness I had only felt playing sports at the highest level. After years with the same team, there were ecstatic moments when everyone knew where everyone else was and where they were going, when the ball moved effortlessly between players and the goal opened wide.

Years later I watched my friends Ljana and Tony Hernandez of the Wallenda family perform their famous 7-Person Human Pyramid.<sup>183</sup> Four performers formed the base of the pyramid, two pairs, each straddled with a shoulder harness. Connecting the harnesses and the pairs was a pole. Standing at the center of those two poles were two more performers. They were similarly connected by a pole. At the center of that pole was balanced a chair. On top of that chair stood Ljana. Three levels of family, siblings and cousins and in-laws, connected and stacked, each balanced on the next, moving slowly, step by step, across a tight rope stretched across two scaffolds thirty feet in the air with no net underneath them.

I reached up and wiped tears from my cheeks. My son looked over at me, surprised. But when I looked at my wife Tria, she too was crying. She was a theater maker; she got it.

There it was in front of us, the oh-so-precariously balanced, finely-hewn trust that sits at the heart of every great theater event. Be it circus or kitchen sink drama, be it spectacular musical or comedy of manners, Shakespeare or Mummenschanz,<sup>184</sup> if it has the audience on the edge of their seats, it's because the people on stage have found that balance. They have found a way to each stand firm in themselves while holding up everyone else. They have created a finely tuned whole out of a group of individuals and figured out how to walk it across the thin wire of time from the curtain's rise to the curtain's fall.

That's the magic of theater: it's a living mass of individuals working together in harmony, alive to one another and the moment, but operating according to strict principles that allow them to do something extraordinary. They may tell a story, or they might create a series of beautiful and evocative images. They might refer to a particular series of paintings or a folk song or a team of firefighters. It might be created with objects or bodies or both. The extraordinary might be as simple and moving as creating laughter from physical impulse or contemporary politics.

Theater can take many forms, but its heart is always the same: the living demonstration of the beauty of human coordination. It is built upon the very tenuous and fleeting foundation of human agreement. It's a family on a high-wire.

At a certain point I stopped saying I made theater. I started saying that I made "spectacle." Spectacle operated according to a different set of principles. If conflict is the heart of drama, then transformation is the heart of spectacle.

Spectacle does not create an argument. It does not follow an immediately discernible logic. It is not tied to psychology or realism. There is no proof in spectacle, and while there may be conflict, it is not the heart but a distant appendage. Narrative may be a part, conflict may enter, but at root it is a poetic form more than a narrative one. Spectacle is more like music or dance or painting, not plot driven, but lyrical.

At the heart of spectacle is transformation. It depicts, conveys, communicates the surprising act of something, anything at all, and sometimes many things, changing their apparent essence from one thing to another. The blanket becomes a sail. The block of wood is a mask is a face. The inanimate is given life.

Transformation is the caterpillar to the butterfly; it's the acorn to the seed. The caterpillar appears, by any account, a glorified worm, a complete creature, but it reveals itself to be quite different from what we would otherwise have thought, seen or surmised.

Transformation reveals an unexpected truth. It asks us to look again, to think more deeply, to continue the search for beauty even in the face of the ugliness. Transformation is the antidote to cynicism because it demonstrates the endless potential of things to be different than they are, to reveal themselves as having been all the time different than what we thought they were. When a caterpillar chews its way out of a chrysalis, to reveal itself a butterfly, it challenges us to look past our limited vision, to consider a secret wonder and potential, beyond our immediate senses. A butterfly's wings beat a rhythm of hope and beauty and endless potential. Transformation leads to illumination.

Transformation encourages us to look at the world with child-like eyes—that is to say, to look at the world with hope and a sense of possibility, and with humility. Can you remember when you last admitted that you didn't know? Can you remember the feeling, the awe and openness, that came from not knowing? How it made the world more approachable, more dynamic and malleable? That is the destination of spectacle.

George Bernard Shaw famously said, "No conflict, no drama."<sup>185</sup> Shaw was referring to the conflict between characters, or, more specifically, the conflict between what a character wants and their immediate ability to get it. Without this conflict, he was saying, the drama will fall flat and die. Shaw himself was renowned for his polemics and his plays crackle with conflict. He was a master of his craft and he was tremendously influential.

Shaw was an incredible storyteller. I've seen many of his stories, some on the screen and some on the stage. The screen was always better.

Conflict was never what excited me about the theater. I was excited by agreement.

"Yes! And..." is a fundamental rule of improvisation. A proposal must be accepted. It is true. That's the rule. That's the "Yes!" The next performer takes the proposal and builds upon it. That's the "And...." So if one performer looks up and pretends as though she has felt a drop of rain, the next does not deny the rain, but must instead find an umbrella or get wet.

Viola Spolin is the mother of contemporary improv—literally.<sup>186</sup> Not only did her inspired games create a training system and the vocabulary for modern improvisation, she also gave birth to and raised Paul Sills, the eventual founder of Compass Players and later Second City.<sup>187</sup> It is said that she was possessed when she invented the catalog of improvisation games that became the foundation, recognized or not, of most improv training.

In the early days of Redmoon, many of our core performers trained at the Piven Theatre Workshop which was devoted to the teachings of Viola Spolin.<sup>188</sup> So, at Redmoon, "Yes! And..." was rendered in Spolin's original vocabulary of "Explore and Heighten,"<sup>189</sup> and it was not so much used to generate comedy as it was to structure our process.

Traditionally, actors would explore and heighten their character's emotional life using language and gesture. They might explore and heighten a single sentence or phrase, repeating it and building it. They might sing the phrase or stutter or it or whisper each individual word over and over again. They may say the phrase moving like Charlie Chaplin or squatting as though stuck in mud. They are looking to see where the phrase takes them, to find what it might trigger in them that is truthful and interesting and surprising.

It's a wonderfully playful way to discover the unexpectedly honest. John and Joan Cusack and Jeremy Piven and Lauren Katz and Aiden Quinn were all trained in Viola Spolin's games at the Piven Theater Workshop. They all started in theater, but moved to film and television to tell their stories. Tria Smith and Jessica Thebus studied with Joyce and Byrne Piven as well. They grew up in there and when they came to Redmoon, they carried Viola Spolin's games with them.

At Redmoon we took the focus off of the self and put it on the material of the performance. Whether it was a puppet or an inanimate object, or even the performance site itself, we explored and heightened. We searched for what brought it to life.

One of my favorite moments from our adaptation of Chekhov's *The Seagull*, called *Nina* (2002), was the long entrance of Konstantin.<sup>190</sup> We performed the show in Humboldt Park, the park where my son first saw a baseball game, pointed and said "That." It's a beautiful park originally designed by Jens Jenson, with lagoons ringed by indigenous flowers of all varieties. As we explored and heightened around the park, Jimmy Slonina went all the way on the other side of the lagoon and waved his arms to get our attention.<sup>191</sup> And then he started to run. He ran toward us but around the edge of the lagoon. We could see his body chugging along determinedly for bits and pieces and then he would disappear behind a cluster of low bushes. A moment later, he reappeared, still chugging, on the other side of the cluster. From the distance it was comical and unexpected. The time he was lost to us never seemed to correspond to expectations. He was hidden from view for too long behind a tree and too short behind some bushes. More interesting was that as he got closer, the running was no longer funny. It became desperate and needy and tragic. It was the perfect entrance for that character.

We were not exploring ourselves, as traditional theater training would have prescribed, but exploring the material, the site, and the social dynamic that it provoked.

A powerful idiom developed, one that sat at the other end of the spectrum from the vocabulary of psychological realism.<sup>192</sup> In our rehearsal room, the focus was outward. It was on the physical world, on the material. It was on the mask or the swath of cloth. We would often talk about what the object "wanted." This mask seems to "want" slow movement; it needs to stay forward; the lower it sits the better. These two masks don't want to be together. The cloth came alive when you lifted it from the corner and dragged it through the light. The puppet loves lateral movement; "It wants to be higher and to move more slowly."

One performer might propose a bundled swath of cloth as a nursing infant. She hands it to another performer who takes the cloth gingerly, accepting the premise that it is indeed a child, and explores that proposal. Moving the blanket this way and that, the exploration might lead to the performer holding the blanket softly against their own face and sucking their thumb. Eventually, as the cloth moves between performers it might become a sail, a surface onto which shadows are projected, or a blanket onto which a picnic is laid. It may end on a homeless man seeking warmth. A bundled blanket has become the medium for a poetic stages of life story: birth, growth, love, adventures and trials, and, eventually, inevitably, birth again.

We thought of ourselves as in service. We were in service to the puppets, to the masks, to the objects. A traditional drama relies on the charisma and particularity of its performers; it is brought to life by the emotional truths those performers can find within themselves and bring convincingly to life on the stage. It is the actor on the marquee, their photographs are featured in the advertisements and in the programs dutifully handed to each patron before the show. In the

critical reviews that will follow, the actors' performances will be lauded or critiqued for the honesty and depth of their feeling, the originality and nuance of their portrayal.

In our theater, the performer sat behind the stuff. They were often masked or rendered indistinct by costume. Their performances were mediated through an object.

We played against the tradition of featuring photographs of performers. In our programs we represented the creative team using silhouettes, photographs of hands, or caricatures. Our promotional images were wood cuts or photographs of the objects themselves or a list of the objects we would deploy in the piece: "200 yards of rope," a list might say, "a car chassis and 14 wood cut masks."

It wasn't about us. It was about the journey.

Sometimes we'd go into the rehearsal room with nothing but a group of puppets and masks and sheets of cardboard. Together we'd find a story or a compelling set of images around which a piece could develop. Or we might start with a narrative kernel, a simple storyline, and only raw materials. Together we would discover the form and the flow. No matter what the particular strategy is, at its core it was a collaborative process, and the foundational principle was agreement.

I think of rehearsal as an expedition. There is plenty of advance work, research and preparation, but the outcome is not yet set. It is like mining or an archaeological dig; we may know where best to look, but we don't know what we will find. More than anything else, what we found was one another.

In conversation, seated at a table, seeking agreement is likely to neuter an idea. The hard edges of an idea tend to get smoothed over and the more the it gets discussed, and the more

familiar and less interesting it becomes. But in rehearsal, with each participant building on the last (guided by the rules of explore and heighten), proposals transform and blossom. They reach unexpected culmination. Even the most visionary of artists could never have conceived some of the moments that we found together as a team. The conversation between actors, directors, and designers, as mediated through material, went in wholly unforeseeable directions and realized unimaginable moments of beauty.

Those who believe in the arts are inclined to believe that change starts and ends in the heart. We are also inclined to believe that art is the language of the heart. Byrne Piven liked to say: "The heart is raised on a mess of stories." He claimed it was a Jewish saying. I can't find a source but it strikes me as true, both to the faith and to Judaic culture generally. Faith is constructed on a foundation of stories: the Torah, the Bible, Greek mythology.... These are the stories that create the framework that organizes information. Reading and interpreting the richness of those stories and the ways that they moved the heart was how we learned to determine the just and the right and the beautiful.

Or so I thought, for some time.

Lately, I've begun to think very differently. These days, I have far less faith in the power of stories. I think their influence has been progressively degraded to the point of being more suspect than trusted. Perhaps when they were less ubiquitous stories imprinted more deeply. Now they are everywhere and most often they are encumbered by crass utilitarian ends. We are being told stories to sell us things, to compel certain actions, or, sometimes more subtly, to lay the foundation for some later action ask.

I think we have learned to mistrust stories and, in turn, have likewise learned to distrust their manipulation of our hearts. If at one point the mess of stories was a deep well of accumulated cultural wisdom, now it is seen as little more than a series of arrows telling us how to behave in such a way as to serve someone else's ends: where to spend our money; how to vote; what to endorse. If the heartstrings can be so effectively manipulated that you find yourself in tears after a thirty second Toyota commercial, is the heart really a reliable compass?

If I had to locate the most reliable source of truth, I'd put it in the gut.

I'm all about the head, but in a world of never ending data flow, it's nearly impossible to find and hold a position based on head alone.

I relish the opportunity to strain the heart. I'm happy to cry at a commercial or to fall in love with an Augie March or the "It Girl" of the moment.<sup>193</sup> I love being carried through the tension of release of a tragedy of any duration. (The only thing I won't do is horror stories. They embed themselves in me in an unhealthy way.) In the end, though, I think of it as exercise. I'm keeping my heart in shape, flexible and attuned.

It's in gut, the pit of the belly, where experience makes sense of the accumulated data of the head and reconciles it to the vicissitudes of the heart. We find balance in the core, in the belly. You can't put anyone on your shoulders without a strong core. You can't balance on the high-wire without being rooted, head through heart to core and on down.

If you've ever been on a movie set, it is as you might expect. Every minute on a film set costs tens of thousands of dollars, so it is structured for maximum efficiency. Things are hyper organized. Each piece of major equipment seems to have an attendant and the other equipment is

carefully maintained. It sits in stacks or on racks under clearly typed labels. Even the tape has its own hook and label. "Gaff" it will say (short for Gaffer's Tape), and there will be four or five rolls of black tape underneath. There are buckets full of chilled water bottles everywhere and tables full of healthy good eats. The people are cordial and professional. Everyone seems to know their role. Every interaction suggests accommodation. I have been on a few sets and I have never seen a request go unattended. People seem to ask for only what they know they can get and then they get it. It is a high functioning system organized around clear objectives and an overt hierarchy. Like the "real world," it is broken into clear classes and functions; unlike the real world, people seem generally content with where they are.

The rehearsal room for a theater show is an entirely different beast. First, it is relatively unencumbered by things and people. There won't be much equipment. Most often it is an empty room with a floor marked by colored tape delineating the parameters of the stage floor and the location of the known set pieces. Nor will there be many people. On the average day of rehearsal, the director will be there with a stage manager and the performers. A designer may be there, but not likely. Nonetheless, the room is generally filled with a lot of talking and laughing; people will often be stretching over their scripts, highlighting sections of text, taking notes, and committing their lines to memory.

The two rooms reflect two very different enterprises. Film is trying to capture lightning in a bottle. The camera, the microphones, the lighting and all their attendants are there to be sure that when the magic moment happens, they haven't missed it. It may be a well performed interaction between actors or it might be the wind through the trees with the sun sitting at just the right position in the sky. Hours can be spent readying a shot that will last less than 3 seconds.

The important thing is to capture the moment when it happens. One time is all they need. Later, that single moment, the best of all the takes, with the lighting just so and the tear slowly rolling down the perfectly lit cheek and the wind blowing through the trees in the background—that take will be woven into the whole for maximum effect.

The theater does not depend on capturing a series of singular moments. The theater depends on fostering a group of performers and technicians able to create a dynamic event on stage night after night. So the work is entirely different. When a magic moment happens in the theater rehearsal room, the work is not done; it has just begun. Is it repeatable? What would need to be in place for it to be repeatable? Inevitably the answer will depend upon creating a powerful social dynamic among the cast and crew.

In the end, the director has no control. On opening night, the director will watch or pace the hallways or sit in a nearby bar with a whiskey in hand while the actors take the stage and do what they do. No one, not the director, not the stage manager or producers or investors or anyone else, can do anything about it. What happens that night and during all subsequent performances will be the momentary expression of the dynamic created in the rehearsal room, a social dynamic created between performers and crew, built around a common understanding of a story or a theme or a series of theatrical moments.

More importantly, but less perceptibly, what happens on opening night will be a reflection of a particular ethos created over the weeks prior to opening.

How different these two media and the processes that make them! They may be based on the same building blocks: acting, directing, light, sound... but the final output is entirely different.

Film is a product. It can be bought and sold and shared and distributed. It is a traditional commodity, a fixed material good. Even if the digital distribution network has challenged the simplicity of this exchange, it still conforms to our traditional understanding of a product. It can be rented or purchased. It is a recognizable material product that endures in a fixed state. A film set is designed to efficiently produce that product. Each person has a role, each role is defined and duly compensated. There are clear hierarchies and reporting systems. It is a factory.

Theater is ephemeral. It is here and it is gone. It may produce artifact, but the product itself is momentary. The product is a period of time; it is a shared experience with a beginning a middle and an end. It starts when the curtain rises and ends when it falls. The commodity, to which the ticket provides access, is the shared experience of a moment in time, a social dynamic between a group of performers and technicians on a stage and an audience. When it is over, it is gone. It cannot be retrieved. It cannot be shared again. A theater director can't "put it in the can." They unleash it onto the stage. The theater director creates a living entity. Night after night it will take the stage and, inevitably, it will continue to grow and morph, to react and stall and become. The film director moves on to their next project or sits at home knowing what their film looks like. The theater director has to go to the show to see, because it's always different.

Theater rehearsal does not produce a fixed good, but rather fosters a community of people who can reliably create a fleeting product. Therefore, the rehearsal room is as much occupied by the task of creating a powerful, healthy, and creative dynamic among the cast and crew as it is about finding the powerful theatrical moments. Some directors will drill each moment. They will tightly choreograph every movement, every tick, every mannerism along with the light and sound that will accompany them. A stage manager is then left with the

responsibility of keeping the cast and crew tightly bound to that choreography. Other directors will work to set a structure in place to contain and orient actor improvisation; the structure might be a set of rules to follow or a series of moments to achieve, between which actors are liberated to play and discover. Most directors sit somewhere between these extremes, creating a repeatable structure in which actors can find their individual truths and fleeting expression. Even in the most traditional productions of the most canonical plays, the best actors will perform their role differently each time on stage. They will find new truths and compel new responses. That's what keeps the stage event vibrant and alive.

Theater depends on bringing people together around a common goal, building trust and understanding and clear expectations. It's about providing the performers and crew with the tools they need to succeed in front of the audience. They need individual liberty within a framework that provides their fellow actors and crew with enough stability as to promote their own liberty, and all that within the thematic or narrative arc of the piece.

Creating a theater show, then, is as much about creating a dynamic community as it is about stringing together a series of powerful theatrical moments. The two depend on one another.

I don't think I've been a part of a show whose conclusion wasn't marked by tearful goodbyes. A cast ends up feeling like a family. There's a tremendous intimacy that develops. They are rehearsing listening and cooperation. It's like practicing good citizenship.

For some, the Wallendas' *7 Person Human Pyramid* lacks all subtlety. It is low brow, lacking the intellectual sophistication that underpins and substantiates real art. For me it is minimalist poetry.

It takes a long time to set up a seven-person pyramid on a tight rope. It is built like construction blocks, one piece at a time. The foundation is firmly set before the next level is added. The higher it goes, the more time it takes to establish the balance. Like blocks, the hand lingers on the higher blocks, finely tuning the balance, making small adjustments this way and that until it is pulled tentatively away, full of fear and hope. Only here, the blocks are human beings, and when the hand is drawn away they are standing on a wooden pole or a steel wire less than one inch in diameter, with the ground thirty feet below.

I've actually seen this pyramid performed twice, in two very different situations. The first time I saw it was as it was staged by Lookingglass Theater in their production of *Hephaestus*.<sup>194</sup> The pyramid was woven into their circus-centered staging of the Greek myth of Hephaestus, the most vexed of the Greek gods.<sup>195</sup> The production was seamless. Lookingglass has built their reputation on just such endeavors: taking big and bold physical gestures and weaving them into epic tales with the very highest production values. No matter how complex, Lookingglass makes it all look seamless.

The second time I saw the pyramid performed I was in Sarasota, Florida, in an old-school circus tent. There were peanut shells beneath my feet and pink puffs of cotton candy bobbing about in the background. It wasn't compelled by a narrative. It wasn't particularly well lit or accompanied by dramatic music. I think it was sandwiched between a contortionist and a very funny clown act with an audience participant dressed as a bull.

It was the second pyramid that knocked me out. Without all that other stuff, I saw what it was: A family, holding one another up, trusting one another with their lives. It was the literalization of the virtues of the theater.

For me, the hardest part about making theater is getting over myself. Time and again, I get in my own way. Intolerance lies just under the surface. I can feel it rise and threaten to breach at the slightest provocation. It may be an ideological clash, but it may just as easily be boredom. Most of the time, I can't locate the irritation until well after it's overcome me. It takes so little to provoke me to a set of bitter and ungenerous thoughts that I will then have to live with as I replay them over and over again, each time burying myself further and further in weighty regret. It's a problem. It gets in the way of my own learning, my own sense of community, my ability to reach out. I avoid going to parties or being in large groups. I can't stand TED talks. One piece of bad theater will keep me from attending another for a couple of months.

One has to be open in the rehearsal room, listening and searching for the next fertile vein. Frustration, irritation, over eagerness, expectation... they all stand in the way of discovery. Until there's a "Yes!" there can't be an "And".

I have learned to ask questions. It's a deliberate and sometimes a difficult effort, at least at the start. I seek out the most confusing thing that my interlocutor has said and ask a follow up question. I think of it as "heat seeking." What is a bit off or laden or too quickly brushed past? Where's the heat? Oftentimes, it means going back in the conversation a few beats, picking up something that was said parenthetically, and asking about it. It might be a few months left out of a timeline. It might be a quick off the cuff remark about themselves. Three or four questions later, I'm in a real conversation. I'm exploring. We are exploring, together. We are mining.

It is amazing how revealing these conversations can be. More than that, it breeds a surprising intimacy. No matter the person, almost without fail, and certainly in opposition to my

own first impressions, everybody is interesting and compelling. Everyone has something fascinating and bizarre and amazing in their stories and oftentimes not a part of their self-narrative.

When it's good, this is what rehearsal is like. Ask the next question. Find the most interesting thing and pursue it until it dissipates or yields, until it proves itself barren or until it reveals a rich vein.

Over the years, I've observed directors in rehearsal and been amazed by where they put their attention. To my eyes, they often miss the magic moments. They are looking so hard for what they want to see that they are missing what's already there. It's the same thing with documentarians. I will watch, amazed, by where they point their microphone or camera. Their attention was being guided by the story they were determined to tell, and it made no difference what was actually happening in the room. They are working with a script and following a predetermined emotional arc, tracking the central dramatic conflict carefully so that they can share it with the audience. They are watching the conflict arc, making sure that it rises and falls at the appropriate times for the narrative. They are giving something to an audience and they know what they want it to be.

At Redmoon, we chose not to know what we wanted to share with the audience, but to find that together. Moreover, we decided that what we wanted to share with the audience was not a narrative line or a particular point, but was instead an experience. We wanted them to be a part of the creative process, to share the exhilaration of agreement.

I would like to think that I've been doing this much of my life, spurred by genuine curiosity, but it became a self-conscious process after being interviewed by Hillary Frank. At the

time, Hillary was working with NPR and also with Ira Glass on a new radio program called *This American Life*.<sup>196</sup> She interviewed me for a cultural spot on Bob Edward's *Morning Edition* in 2001.<sup>197</sup>

The story was to be about Redmoon's Halloween event, but Hillary's interview twisted and wound and careened onto topics far and wide. It was tremendous fun. I found myself recalling events that I had long ago forgotten and making connections I had not known were there.

The resulting radio piece was sound, completely engaging and fun, and it made Redmoon seem both interesting and real. What stuck with me, though, was that Hillary and I had taken a ride together. I wasn't sure who was driving. They were her questions but, unlike most interviews I've done before or since, she wasn't tied to a predetermined line. She was following what she was given. She was heat seeking. And she was so good at it!

Since that time, like many, I have been enthralled by the storytelling on *This American Life* and by *Serial* and by Hillary's own podcast *The Longest Shortest Time*.<sup>198</sup> I am sure that this is their technique. They follow the heat; they let each question lead to the next question. As is their audience, they are discovering the story for themselves. We are party to the discovery. We are involved.

This is the experience I wanted to bring to the theater. As we were discovering what was interesting in the rehearsal room, so I want the audience to discover what is interesting in the performance. More than that, I want them involved. I want them to be in the experience with us. I want them to experience the excitement of "Yes... and." I want them to feel the power of agreement. If we are rehearsing a better world, I want them to rehearse it with us.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Expanding the Frame

I was riding my bicycle with my son one afternoon. He was strapped into a plastic seat behind me. He was two, maybe three, years old, making it 2001. He was never much of a talker. We could be together for hours without exchanging a word. It's still like that.

This particular afternoon we were riding through Humboldt Park, the neighborhood adjacent to ours. We had made it to the park itself, a 200-acre landscaped green space designed by the great Jens Jensen. It was in the midst of a restoration project, bringing back Jensen's original designs as best they could be determined. Indigenous plantings were being sewn into the perimeter of the man-made lagoons; they were rehabilitating the boathouse and approximating an old school split rail fence, but with steel.

Behind me my son said something. I turned around to see that he was pointing at something across a long green field. "That," he said.

It was a baseball game. I rode over and we got off the bike to watch the game for a bit. Each time I started to get up to go, he shook his head. We watched to its conclusion.

Two years later he joined his first team in Humboldt Park. They wore full uniforms and hit off a tee. He began collecting baseball cards and committed to memory statistics that he couldn't even understand. He learned baseball history, the holders of records, the names of each baseball stadium.

Turns out he had a gift, an ultra-flexible arm that caused his pitch to have an unusual "movement" that made him very difficult to hit. Ten years later, he was the starting pitcher for his high school in the regional championship.

He knew it when he saw it: "That."

My "that" moment may have been a single photograph cut from an unidentified French newspaper, with a short caption underneath. It identified the company as Royal de Luxe and the name of the production, grandly: "The True History of France."<sup>199</sup> No matter; it was the photograph that took me. I knew it when I saw it. I immediately went to see what I could find out about Royal de Luxe at the library at Northwestern University where I was pursuing my doctorate in Theater and Drama. I couldn't find any other record of Royal de Luxe there.

I sat down with the photograph and worked to decipher its appeal.

The following is pulled from my own notes at that time, which was around 1991. I had intention of turning these notes into a paper of some kind if I could get a professor to see their value. It wasn't going to be easy; they were academics. They wanted to read texts, not photographs. Likely my fanboy exercises weren't going to make the grade:

*What makes Royal de Luxe so cool? Let's take a look at this picture.*

*From what I can tell these seem to be Napoleonic soldiers engaged in a war game of some kind. They are faced off against other Napoleonic soldiers inside what appears to be a Roman amphitheater. At this particular moment the camera has frozen the flight of a piano, flung from a catapult, at what I assume to be the peak of its ascent. In the background I see constructed two dimensional replicas of soldiers, mechanically operated like toys.*

*Viewing this image, I am suspended, as the piano. I am leaning into the imagination of its descent and impact with the ground. I am filled with anticipation of the sound it will make as it torques and stretches its interior structure before exploding. The imagined sound and sights of breaking strings, of cracking hard wood, of the crush of turf fill me with a visceral excitement.*

*I marvel at the physical ingenuity of the moment. I see the utter simplicity of the catapult mechanism, the counterweights, the fulcrum point, the tension cables, but I can't get over its power. It is not mysterious, but it is awe inspiring nonetheless.*

*I marvel at the audacity of the venture. A grand piano in mid-flight, arcing toward an inexorable violent and catastrophic end is a symbol of extravagance. It seems to me a gesture of extreme commitment to theatricality. No expense has been spared. It becomes difficult to imagine this event being replicated night after night, the sheer scale of the gesture almost defying repetition.*

*I wonder at the context. The incongruities are arresting. The pomp of the costumes, the lack of an opposition force, the juxtaposition of the ancient Roman arena, the Napoleon era costumes, and the medieval war machinery all play alongside overtly theatrical constructions like painted toy soldiers.*

*Add to that a consciousness of my own presumed position as a viewer, a paying customer sitting, as I would inevitably be, in the one-time seat of a Roman peasant or slave. The composite creates a dizzying and invigorating swirl of reference between war, nationality, spectatorship, gaming and propaganda.*

*The layers are impossible to unpick, but encourage unpicking nonetheless. I delight in the play of it all. A grand piano flies through the air with surprising grace. It is slightly off kilter but otherwise looking remarkably poised and unaffected, as though someone might at any moment take a seat and start playing a Chopin Sonata or, better yet, something grand by Debussy, maybe Arabesque No. 1.*

*The top left corner of this photograph, which I previously referred to as the 'background' of the shot, deserves further attention. A quick look reveals four soldiers in a line, moving toward the piano's eventual destination. A second look,*

*without much scrutiny, reveals that three of the figures are flat cut out figures of soldiers. They are painted to look like the other soldiers in the play.*

*If I were watching this show, I would not need to look more closely to see that the three flat figures would move in tandem with the living performer. They would march in sync with him, knees and arms rising and falling with his movements. In the photograph it takes a second and third look to understand this. I can see that their knees are strapped to his and jointed so that they will move with his, likewise his arms. He carries their weight by virtue of simple but ingenious shoulder harness that looks as if it may even allow their heads to turn together.*

*What does all this say? What is it that these mechanical figures are doing? Are they enslaved to him or he to them? His head is in a clamp and both his legs and his arms are bound to them. His movement has been restricted so that it only permits those movements that animate his companions. He realizes them. He is their means of propulsion and action. He also controls them. He turns his head and they follow. He chooses the pace and the destination. They move according to his impulse. They are nothing without him. Is it possible, though, that likewise he is nothing without them? He is certainly purposeless. His actions are absurd and fruitless without those of his indentured companions. More than that, I wouldn't give him another thought were it not for his special connection to his fellow soldiers.*

*And what does this say of war? Of companionship? Of fellowship and social agency? Of coercion and social agency?*

*Whatever it says seems linked to that piano heading toward a delightfully horrible conclusion. A piano catapulted through the air. A piano is by itself, without anyone even touching the keys, an expression of high culture. It is the promise of civility, sitting there in the corner of the living room, top propped artfully open or closed.*

*82 keys, each one poised to sound a pure note, 82 keys that elicit the genius of Mozart and Beethoven and countless others, are arching toward a violent end, a spectacularly, explosively, violent end.*

*And we are watching! We are watching and cheering, or at the very least exhilarated by it all. It's beautiful and spectacular; it's grand and innovative and physically compelling; it is dangerous and violent and massive. We are watching and cheering, or at least not stopping it. It is war.*

*Oh I don't have any sense that the directors of Royal de Luxe are making a statement about war. There's no evidence that this is a political diatribe or even a very pointed social commentary. It is a series of exciting images, each one*

*stacked upon the next in such a way as to provoke my active participation as a viewer and a thinker and admirer. It's an open book waiting to be read.*

*Why is Royal de Luxe cool? Because they are cool. They weld and make shit that's funny and tight. They get dirty and physical and wild and they do reckless things in a culture overrun by rules and regulations and insurance protocols. They are cool because they are transgressive and appealing at the same time, and that's a dangerous and provocative combination and I love it.*

That.

To be fair, I had had a few "That" moments leading up to the pivotal one with Royal de Luxe.

Growing up, one of my favorite places to be was my father's shop. My father oversaw a manufacturing facility where catering trucks were fabricated from the ground up. Z Frank, the city's largest Chevy dealership, provided Chevy truck chassis and my father's shop did everything else. They build the steel frames, the refrigeration units, the propane heating modules, the electrical systems. They added drawers and hinges and locks, faced the exterior with quilted aluminum and topped it with a custom colored sparkling fiberglass roof.

Every day at 10:30am a fully operational catering truck came to the delivery dock to serve the workers. The truck backed in through the barbed wire gate and squeezed in next to the other trucks delivering raw goods. A smiling man named Lewis climbed out of the white cab and performed for us the dramatic results of our labor. He opened the back first, revealing the hot dogs spinning on their heated rack. He opened the side panels. On one side were the chips and candy and other packaged goods. On the other side were the sodas and juices.

To a boy of six or seven, this was a magical place.

I can still reconstruct the shop layout. Over in the metal shop sparks were flying, blue from the welding and orange from the grinding. The roofing room was heavily ventilated and sat behind a ribbed plastic screen. The smell around there was intoxicating, simultaneously revolting and addictive. I would stand outside the door and look through the gaps in the plastic as they poured and cured the fiberglass tops and walk away light-headed from the fumes. Rivet guns were used to attach the paneling which came sheathed in a protective plastic coating which, when peeled, shined with a rare and irresistible gloss. That newly revealed aluminum was so perfectly shiny that it was nearly impossible not to touch, yet as soon as you did, you destroyed its perfection. There was a tool cage where the hardware and hand tools were stored. A man named Leslie worked in that tool cage.

Mostly I worked with Leslie, sorting screws and bolts and nuts. But the secret pleasure of going to my father's shop was that Wesley, Leslie's brother, was teaching me to weld. I wasn't to tell my father, but every visit, we snuck in a short lesson or two. At ten years of age, I was seaming together steel tubes, laying down a trim bead, and grinding it down to a smooth single piece.

Converting individual parts into a single functional whole was a process that slowly, over time, I began to decipher and understand. Nobody explained it to me. I didn't know the names of anything. I couldn't read plans. I didn't know any data about tolerances or sheering strength or voltage. But my hands could do the tasks. My fingers knew the different thicknesses of wire, the weights of bolts, the wall thickness of the steel tube. I could hear the difference between a good weld and a bad one. The smell of the room told me when the fiberglass was ready to come off the mold to reveal its sparkling glory.

So, when I walked into a theater space in college for the first time, I was immediately useful, and because I was useful, I was also comfortable. From the first day I moved easily through the lighting and sound systems. I had the basic carpentry skills to be a hand in constructing a set or solving problems that might arise with stage mechanics. It didn't take me long to figure out how to run a fly system or to design and fabricate moving set pieces. Standing in the middle of the stage, looking off into the wings and to the lighting grid above, I could feel the shape of the drama that was trying to manifest itself. I could sense when things were off, when something was unstable or improperly fastened. Insofar as the theater was a physical system, I understood it intuitively.

Similarly familiar was the social system that propelled the theater.

Where my siblings and friends had cut their path through school with their intellects, I made it through on my wiles. I learned how to understand from a teacher's posture the kind of answer that was wanted. I knew when to talk and when to shut up, and how far I could push. Based on the shape and geography of the clusters in a room, I knew where to sit to be seen and where to hide; I knew who was safe, who was helpful and to whom I should tie my wagon. While my brothers were learning to determine the arc of a parabola, I was calculating the metrics of power; I was learning how to locate latency and activate potential. While they were studying history, I was learning how to listen for the unsaid.

"Feet on the floor. Feet on the floor." Seated at my desk in third grade, I said it over and over to myself. I was still saying it when I heard my name being screamed at the front of the class and, looking toward the teacher, I saw that I was not at my desk, but at the window, looking

at a pair of birds nesting in a nearby oak. In the fourth grade, I was running up the stairs and bumped into something. At the top of the stairs I turned around to see Mrs. Knuth on the floor of the landing, her face twisted in rage.

There were two chairs in the principal's office, both with their backs to the glass partition that separated the office from the hallway that was the main thoroughfare for students. Behind a long counter sat a desk. At that desk, hidden mostly from the view of a seated ten-year-old, was Mrs. Perry, the principal's secretary. I had been in one of those two seats many times. I knew them well. I knew the sticky feeling of the blue pleather coverings, the wood armrests layered with a wax finish that would scrape off and then pick out from under my fingernails.

That particular afternoon, my mother was called in and we sat waiting for the principal together. We sat in twin chairs facing the wood paneled counter. No one spoke. It was as though we were both in trouble. I felt ashamed and scared. My fingers scraped lines into the bottom of the wood armrests.

My mother went in to see Principal Falkoff without me. When I leaned my head slightly, my left ear almost touched the frosted glass that separated the waiting room from the principal's office. I could hear the words, but not really follow the conversation until I heard one sentence: "This boy will amount to nothing!"

We called my mother "The Bomb." She could go off without notice. It was explosive and scary, and when The Bomb went off, you didn't want to be anywhere in the vicinity. That afternoon in the principal's office, it went off. The next week I had a new teacher. I don't think I ever sat in front of Mrs. Falkoff again or even spoke to her. Whatever happened on the other side of the glass concluded our relationship. My mother, on the other hand, kept the relationship alive

for decades. Any piece of press I got, she sent to Mrs. Falkhoff. Whether it was breaking a swimming record or a positive review, it was mailed to Mrs. Falkhoff in a white envelope. No note, no return address, just the neatly folded newspaper or magazine article.

Thereafter, when I was sent to the principal's office, I sat in the waiting room for some indeterminate amount of time until Mrs. Perry released me back to my classroom. I came to love Mrs. Perry. I would come in all worked up about one thing or another and Mrs. Perry would smile and ask me to take a seat. She might send me to get a drink of water, sometimes even twice. She would type or answer the phone or put things into file cabinets and I would pick at scabs or the bottom of the chair or just swing by legs back and forth. She was listening; I'm sure of it. Whatever else she was doing, Mrs. Perry was listening for me to settle and once I did should would send me back to class. No punishment. No talking to. Just time.

Up until that afternoon in Mrs. Falkhoff's office, I thought of authority as a singular entity. It was Authority with a capital "A" and it included all Adults: my parents, my friends' parents, the principal and teachers and cops and security guards and lawn owners. After that afternoon, I began to track authority more carefully. Mrs. Perry was one form of authority; Mrs. Falkhoff another; my mother a third. There were all kinds of power systems and all sorts of authority. I began to understand that I could choose my allies, and that was a form of power in itself.

Many years later I learned that Mrs. Perry was the mother of Jeff Perry, one of the founders of Steppenwolf Theater. We were performing *Hunchback* there in 1999 when I met Jeff. I told him that I had known his mother and that she had been a buoy to me in turbulent times. He was moved. She had passed a few years earlier. "She was for me as well," he said.

In my first play, in college, I was cast as a cop. I was the muscle for a corrupt Sergeant. Wherever he went I was to follow, a couple of paces behind and slightly to his right. My big moment was to gut punch an old man and to shoot my gun in the air to discourage retaliatory measures. Practically speaking, that meant was I was nearly always on stage with little to do but observe and learn.

I watched the director give the stage shape and form. He moved scenery and actors to manipulated tempo. He built tension and then allowed it to release. He raised and lowered light levels, shifted color, and layered in sound to create an emotional platform on which the performances could stand and be heard. He was establishing and disrupting the rhythms of social behavior, building expectation and defying it. He was moving the audience closer in and further back, giving them bits and pieces of information, but always withholding something crucial. He was creating relationship at every level—between the actors, between the actors and the things they touched, between the lights and sound and objects on stage, and ultimately, between the audience and the stage.

For the first time in my life, I was engaged in my studies. I was in my first year at Colorado College and I had decided to take a class on Einstein's Theory of Relativity. I have no idea why. I loved it but it was an exercise most unnatural to me. I could barely understand any of it. It was like assembling a jigsaw puzzle of thousands of pieces with no guide. I had to scrutinize each word and sentence and search for a possible connection between it and the next. The shapes of the theory slowly took form as I stepped back and looked with great distance before

descending back in to search for the next connection. It was very difficult, but I could feel my mind expanding and it was thrilling.

In the theater, there was no such effort needed. It all felt so familiar. It was intuitive and easy and fun. I knew nothing about it and at the same time, most everything I needed to know.

Just two months before walking into the theater at Colorado College, I had read Plato's "Doctrine of Recollection."<sup>200</sup> I struggled to understand it. It didn't click. The idea went something like this: The soul is an ideal form. It is complete. It needs nothing; it cannot be added to or subtracted from. When the soul takes human form, it is compromised. It now exists in the material world and, as such, is incomplete. So, it follows, education is not so much adding as it is reminding or awakening what the soul already has or knows, but which was forgotten or lost in this human form. Learning is recollection.

This seemed very silly and unlikely to me. I was pretty sure that the Theory of Relativity was nowhere in me, not in my body nor my soul. Nor could I find any trace of calculus or the periodic table or Latin for that matter.

I walked into the theater and the Doctrine of Recollection made complete sense. I was not learning about theater, I was remembering. All the knowledge was already there, I just needed to be reminded. I needed to learn the vocabulary and see the systems and how they interacted, but the knowledge was already fully in place.

My emotional life had been a source of continuous trouble. In the theater it was an asset, a resource rather than a liability.

There are records of the explosive temper tantrums I threw. These were wild screaming fits that were, apparently, as funny as they were awful. There is an audio recording of one such fit. My brothers got a hold of a tape deck and placed it under the dining room table before dinner and pressed record. During the course of the meal they began to imitate me. When I picked up my spoon, they picked up theirs. When I drank, they drank. "Stop it," I yelled at them. They pretended not to be doing anything but as soon as my parents stopped paying attention, they resumed the mimicry.

Just as planned, I lost it. I picked up my dinner plate and threw it across the table at my oldest brother's head. Missing, it crashed against the wall behind him, shattering and sending food everywhere.

On the tape you can hear my mother scream and my brothers laughing loudly. "We recorded it," can be heard and then more laughter. There is the sound of the tape recorder moving, air moving past the microphone and then settling. "We recorded the whole thing! Look!" followed by more laughter.

And then there is a tremendous noise, something almost seismic. Based purely on the recorded sounds, it's impossible to understand what happened. There is shouting and movement and percussive impact. It sounds like the interior of a clothing dryer.

As the story goes, it's the dining room table. Realizing that this had all been a joke, I threw the dining room table over, sending it and everything on it to the ground. The dishes still piled with food, the glass candelabra, a ceramic bowl full of small glass ornaments, drinking glasses filled with milk, I sent it all flying. This next part can be heard on the cassette: I grabbed

the tape deck and began to smash my head onto it, holding the microphone in my hand and screaming into it: "You wanna see? You wanna see! You wanna see what I do?"

I was grounded from Halloween. From my bedroom window I watched the parade of costumed kids to and from our front door. Batman and Robin, Robin Hood, a witch with Cinderella, Charlie's Angels, Spock, Bo and Luke, the Dukes of Hazard County, each one holding a plastic pumpkin or a bag I knew to be filled with smarties and tootsie rolls and pops, with Hershey's minis and kisses, with pixie sticks and probably even Baby Ruths.

The punishments were worthless or worse. Groundings, extra chores, spankings... it didn't matter. It's not as though there was a moment in time when consequences were being tabulated and found to inadequately counterweigh the release of a good tantrum. There was no thought, only emotion and the action that it compelled.

Anger and frustration led to trouble. That was clear math. A little less clear but no less undeniable was that even what might be regarded as positive feelings also led to trouble. As an infant, the story goes, when excited I let out a high pitched and prolonged squeal that cleared rooms. More accurately, it cleared me out of rooms. I can remember being dragged from restaurants, candy shops, Christmas at grandma's house, anyplace exciting enough to induce "the shriek" as it came to be called. Later, I stopped squealing and took up running. When something exciting happened, I took off at a full sprint, around sofas, up and down aisles, into packed crowds at the fourth of July parade.

Mine was the wrong family for someone so completely taken by their emotions. My father's family was defined by work. He had grown up in the Depression, with every extra nickel

sent to his family to help them get out of the Polish ghettos before they could no longer leave. On my mother's side feelings were simply irrelevant and self-indulgent nonsense.

One day our dog was gone. "Where's Winnie?" I asked.

"Winnie had to go away," my parents responded. "He died. Winnie died." I was stunned. Had they thought I wouldn't notice? "And don't make a big deal about it! Dogs die."

There was a kind of impenetrable logic to it all. All those big feelings were just so much trouble. They were distracting and off-putting and just a way of demanding attention which was in short supply to begin with and mostly unpleasant when it came anyway. Exciting things happen; sad things happen. Things happen that will make you angry and scared and confused. Deal with it, and quickly too, because there are things to do.

Productivity was the aligning force. Getting things done was of indisputable value. I had plenty of stamina to make that work to my benefit. I once cut the entire lawn with hedge trimmers because the lawn mower got jammed and no one was home to fix it. I liked it. I liked seeing my impact. I could turn around and see the freshly cut grass a brighter shade of green, shining from the attention I'd given it.

Could it be that with the theater I'd found a productive channel for all that emotional energy?

I needed to believe that my work in the theater could have consequence. I wanted to know that it was moving something or somebody; that it was provoking some change, some awareness, some action. I began to get fixated. I needed to see it doing something. I needed to see it somehow creating kindness or beauty or justice in the world.

I wanted to leave a trace. And I was not alone. I watched as other artists and thinkers contended with the same desire and come to a similar strand of hope.

I was beginning to be invited to speak at ideas conferences. With the rising popularity of TED came a wake of imitators and permutations of the same.<sup>201</sup> At one such conference that I attended I noted that four out of 16 speakers quoted Marcel Proust. "The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes."<sup>202</sup> It's a favorite of people who hope to inspire change. It focuses on the untraceable but very substantial task of individual enlightenment. Whether it is a shocking image or a well-timed joke, an arresting image or a well-crafted argument, the hope is that the work can, for a moment, lift the veil and open a new horizon.

In my own talk, I had a different quotation, but to communicate the very same aspiration. The author of my passage was Samuel Beckett, a devotee of Marcel Proust. Proust is much more elevated and lyrically poetic. Beckett is more visceral and grounded in the body. So Beckett takes a similar thought and frames it in a much more immediate and corporeal way: "Habit is the ballast that chains the dog to his vomit."<sup>203</sup>

I first heard this phrase from the mouth of a man I consider to be one of Samuel Beckett's great interpreters. I was working as an assistant director to Frank Galati on a piece that he was doing at Northwestern University.<sup>204</sup> He was mashing together a bunch of Beckett's early short plays. The Beckett Estate is notoriously persnickety about variances from Beckett's original text, which is to say they don't allow variances from the original text. Under the non-professional auspices of a university theater, looking to teach and explore Beckett, allowances were found.

Frank was using that precious latitude to look at Beckett's short one act plays and how they worked through themes of power and coercion, creativity and will.

We were stuck. The young actors were voicing the text, but finding no new truths. The video that was to bring the audience closer to the performance with up close shots of the mouths of the performers had lost its impact. The movements on stage had become remote, emptied of their meaning through routine. Frank called us together on the stage. He was seated behind a table in the audience. He took a deep breath then said it.

I now know it to be a famous and often quoted line, but that was my first hearing. Frank said it very slowly and carefully, as was generally his way. He savored each word, discovering the meaning and resonance as his mouth formed the sounds. Said that way, each word twists the meaning of those that precede it. As the sentence takes form, it defies the expectation of the listener. It demonstrates its own truth: "Habit is the ballast that chains the dog to his vomit." Only at the end, when the word "vomit" unexpectedly revealed itself, did I see how deep the patterns of my own mind were ingrained. Hearing each word in sequence, I kept thinking I knew where the sentence was going, only to find at the end that such thinking would always and inevitably land me in my own regurgitations.

The cast went back to the play and it was fresh again... until it wasn't.

There aren't many things that I can say hold true across the many artists I know, but I think this comes close: We want to unchain the dog.

Whether it is painting or writing or performing or making sculpture or fine objects or new sounds, we hope that it will act upon our audience in such a way as to open them. We hope to increase their possibilities, or even just their sense of possibility. It gets framed any number of

ways: jar them out of complacency; provide a new framework for understanding; shock them into a new way of thinking; puncture the mundane; rupture the status quo; "fresh eyes."

"Unchain the dog" has just the right tone for me; it's as dramatic as it is irreverent, as acerbic as it is hopeful and fun.

We joke that my daughter has a disease called "Always Wants More." Its take hold even at the moments she is most satisfied. Midway through a chocolate sundae, she will realize that she needs caramel sauce on top. The desire will possess her and, ultimately, ruin the experience of the sundae sitting front of her, the one that was so very exciting just a moment before "Always Wants More" took hold.

I know all about it because I am cursed with the same affliction.

I planned my evenings around the 72nd minute of our production of *Cyrano*. It was a co-production with the Court Theatre at the Museum of Contemporary Art. It was not entirely successful, but we landed the key moment. 72 minutes in, the stage lit by a single instrument, Cyrano sat in a chair while Roxanne checked his bandage. And it finally dawned on her; it had been him all the time, his words, his letters, his sentiments. The actress barely did anything. She was very economical. She was behind him, out of his sight, standing perfectly still. With no visible change to her countenance, she spoke the lines of revelation and out came the hankies. Without fail. I loved being there for that moment. I loved watching the actress deliver that moment. More often than not, though, I didn't watch her at all. I watched the audience. I loved seeing them sniffle and wipe their eyes. I loved seeing the piece have impact.

Having that kind of control is thrilling. It is terrifically difficult to do. I have failed more often than I have succeeded, but the successes were a deep and gratifying delight. It's the gratification of authority. I authored that world, that experience, that emotion. The audience is traveling an emotional journey that I conceived and planned and crafted and rehearsed and executed. Each visual cue, each sound, every hesitation and hold has been carefully laid out. Every aspect has been considered and delivered with intention. It's artist as God, as maker of universes.

Difficult as it is to do, it happens all the time. Audiences are moved. They are transported. It is, after all, the experience the patron sought when they sat in the seat; it's why the ticket was purchased: Take me somewhere new. Divert me. Move me; show me something I haven't seen; provoke an emotion that I normally can't or don't access. Show me the love I'm capable of feeling; help me understand the desperation that sometimes takes hold and won't let go; let me feel the beauty and heartache in human connection.

For years I watched the audiences at my shows looking for signs that the dog was somehow roaming free. I wanted to see some evidence that a transformation had taken place, even the smallest sign that what I had created was having the desired effect. Instead, I saw something else. Every time, no matter whether I thought it a good show or a bad one, an especially strong performance or a weak one, I could practically see the audience boxing it up. As they stood from their seats, they were putting the experience away, cramming it into a box so that, by the time they left the theater house, it could be slid up onto a mental shelf that had been cleared for just this purpose. The shelf was labeled "Theater," or maybe "Art," or, depending on the sophistication level of the audience member and their filing system, it might be "Puppetry" or

"Experimental Theater" or "Performance Art." No matter, by the time they hit the street it was put away, safely contained and set aside.

This seemed to be as true for the work I admired as the work I disdained. I remember being absolutely thunderstruck by Robert Lepage's *The Dragons' Trilogy*.<sup>205</sup> It was a five-hour epic performance with very little spoken dialog. He created a gestural world of tremendous depth and emotional resonance. When the actors came out for their final curtain call, I was emotionally spent. I had nothing more to give and so I was a bit taken aback when the audience immediately leapt to their feet, applauding vigorously and meeting the cast with a rousing reception. "Bravo!" they yelled. The actors came out for four ovations, each time they were met with undiminished enthusiasm.

I assembled myself. I wanted to see this audience. I wanted to observe them as they moved into the world. How would they take this theater experience into the world? After five hours of theater, after having been so completely transported, after that rousing curtain call, what would this moment of transition from art space to real world look like?

It's true that the audience of that show moved to their cars with less urgency than usual, but the response was generally the same. By the time they hit the doors leading out to the street, they were talking about traffic and where they had parked and the best route home. They were fidgeting with keys and closing down the experience with single sentences fragments. "Great show." And "He's a genius." And, inevitably, "Where'd you park? How are you gonna get home?"

What happened in the theater or museum or gallery space was different from life; it was apart. Apart it would likely remain. Or so I feared.

Even in the best of circumstances, when the artistic enterprise reaches its audience, it's a leap of faith to think them changed by it. Countless are the times I have sat in an audience and felt them moved only to stand with them at the end of the show and find no evidence of the experience. They look the same as they did upon entry. There is no sign that the theatrical experience will have any kind of bearing on their future life. To believe them affected in any way requires a leap of faith, one without much evidence or support.

I created all kinds of scenarios to reassure me. I told myself that the experience in the theater acts as a kind of "time release." It stays with the viewer. It stews and percolates and takes hold in some way they barely recognize, but it does its work. Slowly, over time and with reinforcement, it transforms the way someone might think or feel or react. I told myself that the experience they had in the theater creates new associations which can blossom and flower into new sets of thoughts, or a new range of emotion. Or the experience might sit latent until it is needed. It may get pulled into mind by a moment of vulnerability or desperation, bringing clarity or newfound empathy.

I believe these scenarios. Or I usually do. But I didn't want to have to work to believe in what I was doing. I didn't want it to be a mental exercise. I didn't want to have to imagine my impact, I wanted to feel it. I wanted it in my body, a visceral knowing. I wanted to see my impact. I wanted to see the world a little brighter and lighter for the attention I'd given it.

Always Wants More.

Marshall Ganz maximizes social impact.<sup>206</sup> He teaches community organizing at Harvard's Kennedy School. Among other notables, he taught a young Barack Obama. Professor

Ganz has a very precise program that he has been developing for years. He is absolutely convinced that the most persuasive call to action starts with the personal story. Every ask has to start with the bare personal truth of the speaker.

I was in Cambridge, Massachusetts at a weekend long intensive workshop. There were twenty or so of us in a large open room with many chairs and no tables. Professor Ganz asked us to tell our stories. Who were we and why were we there? I was there to learn something more about civic engagement and social organizing. To date I was entirely self-taught. Any number of people had recommended Professor Ganz to me. We were still more than a year from launching *The Great Chicago Fire Festival*, but already we were reaching out to neighborhood organizations. If the festival was to be a success, it needed to reflect the diversity of the city. It needed to showcase everyday Chicagoans, tell their stories and give their talents a stage. It was a massive community organizing effort, and I was told that I could find no better guide than Marshall Ganz.

So it was that I found myself seated in a circle feeling... outclassed.

There was a Palestinian woman who described the day her father, a medical doctor, left to go to work in the occupied territories. He never arrived; he was killed by IED while waiting at a checkpoint. She was organizing grade schools with equal populations of Palestinians and Jews. There was a man from Chicago working on prison reform. His childhood friend had been sentenced to life without parole at age 15. There was a Brazilian man teaching economics to children in the *favelas*.<sup>207</sup> He had grown up there himself and worked his way out by developing a business that provided lunch delivery service.

What was I going to say? I grew up privileged and loved in a sturdy house with a full refrigerator and a yard with a swing set. I didn't know what in my particular story inspired me to seek change. I didn't know what moved me to serve. I knew I cared. I knew that while most of the kids I grew up with were pursuing wealth, I was waiting tables so that I could make a strange brand of theater in my working and poverty class neighborhood on the Northwest side. While they were moving into the suburbs and buying homes, I was spending my days working in a shop in Chicago's notorious Police Precinct 1, sometimes making parades with the community there, sometimes building sets and props, sometimes standing on a front stoop explaining that until the kid returned the tools I know they stole, they would not be allowed back to our art class.

Professor Ganz asked us to focus on what he calls "choice points," moments in our lives where our true selves were revealed. When faced with uncertainty, what choices did we make? When did we encounter injustice and how had we come to care? What was our experience with the unseen, the oppressed, the hungry? And what in our own personal history gave us the sense that anything could be done to help them?

My insecurity mounted with each well-constructed story. I was not the victim of some terrible crime. My parents were not stolen from me by senseless crime. I was not standing in front of bakery windows hungry. I was not ex-patriated at a pivotal age and sexually abused in my new country.

When compared to the others, my choice points seemed mundane and silly, horribly unclear and inconclusive at best. In addition to lacking the requisite drama, they contradicted themselves and didn't add up. In the sixth grade, when social factions suddenly appeared, I saw that the girl in my class with the deformed hand was excluded. I bought her an eraser, drew her a

card, and presented it to her one morning before class where everyone could see. On the other hand, I remembered back at that same period of time standing on the garage roof snickering with friends. We were watching Brett Petersen ring my doorbell and cuss in frustration and confusion because we had invited him over 15 minutes earlier only to watch him get angry while we ignored him.

I was ashamed to recall how I had picked on David Mitchell in the showers for being big and awkward and obsessed with cleaning his ass even after being in the pool for two hours. I also remembered nearly coming to blows with the school bully when he put his attention on Danny, an autistic boy with a stutter. During college I chose to be critical of the shanty town demonstrations in favor of divestment, humiliated a vulnerable young woman's unconsidered proposal to mount "Our Town," and generally acted the bully in my philosophy classes. I also started a newspaper dedicated to constructive political debate and fostered creative voices by editing the literary magazine, producing a campus album, and directing plays.

My choice points revealed widely divergent selves, as often bully as advocate, as much asshole as hero.

Professor Ganz encouraged us to do a deep dive. We needed to look unflinchingly into our past to find the truth behind our motivations. What did we believe and why? What in our lives led us to this point?

I was a boy. I had too much energy and I got in trouble. I found the swimming pool and expended enough energy there that I was finally able to sit still and listen and produce something other than chaos. Mostly I was a happy kid. I had skinned knees and a banana seat bicycle that I

rode down tree lined streets braced by two-car garages. I wanted to run and jump and throw rocks and light things on fire.

It's true that not so far under the surface, I was driven to destroy it all, to burn it all up or scream it all down. It's true that I dreamed that one day my real parents would pull into the driveway and ring the bell and take me to my real home.

Who didn't?

I felt like an impostor. Even after decades of making theater, I didn't feel comfortable calling myself an artist. I hadn't earned the title. The artists I knew had grown up knowing they were artists. It was the only thing they had ever wanted to do. They were singing or drawing or acting from an early age. They had suffered for their unconventional choices; they were the isolated and the persecuted; they were unique and different. More than that, they were gifted, blessed from birth with a passion for a medium and with sight beyond their years and some preternatural capacity to realize it. It never occurred to me that I might be an artist. That was a designation reserved for precocious kids who wore extravagant scarves and sat outside the circle.

I was less comfortable still calling myself an organizer, or so I was finding in my workshop with Marshall Ganz. The community organizers around the circle had been compelled by dramatic life experience to a deep and undeniable calling. They, too, had earned their position in that circle by converting trauma to action, individual persecution to heroic community concern.

No matter how hard I looked, there was no compelling "story of self." I was a series of reactions, bouncing off one boundary and the next, always searching, longing to find my place

but finding none. I was no more an organizer than I was an artist than I was an athlete. I was all and none. The tidiness of a story of escaped me.

I thought of my favorite passage from Harold Brodkey:

I distrust summaries, any kind of gliding through time, any too great a claim that one is in control of what one recounts; I think someone who claims to understand but who is obviously calm, someone who claims to write with emotion recollected in tranquility, is a fool and a liar. To understand is to tremble. To recollect is to reenter and be riven. An acrobat after spinning through the air in a mockery of flight stands erect on his perch and mockingly takes his bow as if what he is being applauded for was easy for him and cost him nothing, although meanwhile he is covered with sweat and his smile is edged with a relief chilling to think about; he is indulging in a show-business style; he is pretending to be superhuman. I am bored with that and with where it has brought us. I admire the authority of being on one's knees in front of the event.<sup>208</sup>

I brought the passage in to Professor Ganz. He was charmed but unmoved. He wanted a story and he wanted it to be no longer than two minutes.

It occurred to me that this was the exact same problem that I was having with the arts. Why was it always about the self? I was tired of hearing stories exalting the great and venerable individual. I wanted to make something about the group, about a community, about a city. I wanted to expand the frame, pan out to reveal a larger picture, a larger subject. The group, it seems to me, is not less complicated or interesting or worthy of inspection. Why must it always be about the self?

And all these compelling stories, I was just growing tired of them. I looked around the circle and suddenly I hated them all. I hated them with the same petty black part of my heart that I held for all the artists that I had met over the years whose flamboyant self-confidence and personal dynamism was the unspoken subject of their art. I wasn't sure I believed any of it. Were they really all that fabulous?

I distrust summaries of any kind. The picture is always so much more complex. All these tidy little boxes, these tightly crafted personal stories, these perfect little truths and action plans, I wanted to smash them all. "You wanna see? You wanna see?"

This was the same thing I'd been fighting in theater all these years. Neat stories, finely crafted, driven by dynamic characters, all coming to a well-timed climax before resolving to a satisfying conclusion. Argh! People are complicated, life and beauty are complicated. Humanity is a messy tangle, full of Gordian knots and fraying ends. Real truth can't be held; it flows through the hands like water or smoke—no less real, but always changing and transforming, becoming, reforming, and dissipating. People aren't to be understood. They are to be appreciated. Lives can't be wrapped up and presented in little consumable chunks. They are messy and awe-inspiring and impossible to grasp.

Best I could do was this: But for the nearly invisible exertions of relative strangers, I'm not here. I don't know where I am. Maybe I'm in jail; that's a real possibility. So is a world in which I'm an asshole lawyer or real estate mogul living in a big suburban home, crushing little people for a living. My brothers were certifiable geniuses. My father was the son of a tailor who'd escaped persecution in Poland. As a child my mother hid in shame on the floor of the limousine that drove her to school. I didn't seem to belong in this family or in their contented suburb. The unexpected kindness of a school administrator, the raised thumb from a leather clad motorcycle rider I had been admiring so ardently from the backseat of our station wagon, the coach who drove me to national competitions, the crossing guard who learned my name... these were the people who saved me; these were the almost imperceptible strands that reeled me back in when I was almost under. And these were the moments that taught me to care. These were the

almost overlooked gestures that convinced me that we all matter and that we matter more together than apart, that what I was meant to do was to make those kindnesses more possible, more obvious, more... likely.

That's all I got, I told them. It's not a perfect story, but, that's the point, our stories are still being written. We're not finished, we're still transforming. That's why I'm here.

To borrow Beckett's phrase, Royal de Luxe unchained my dog. It never occurred to me that theater could look like that. I spun loose and free. The theater space was so confining! A whole new world of form and whimsy and impact opened up to me.

The second major batch of Royal de Luxe images came in the form of two books full of photographs and drawings and a little text.<sup>209</sup> The book revealed that the company had shifted its artistic focus from site specific, object centered performances to giant marionettes. I say this knowing that unless the reader has had direct experience with Royal de Luxe, the image evoked by the label "Giant Marionette" will not likely even approach the scale of their work. Even now, after having been warned, the image evoked is still way too small.

"El Geant," The Giant, as they called their first giant mechanical marionette, stood nearly 50 feet tall. I know that because I calculated it against the four-story building standing on either side of it.

The photograph that introduced me to The Giant places it on a wide European boulevard. I think it's in Barcelona, but there is no caption. The marionette dangles from a steel truss bridging two scaffold towers. He is being manipulated by teams of Napoleonic soldiers in their dress reds, apparently the same soldiers that had launched the piano. In order to lift the Giant's

knee, a team of two will efficiently scale the scaffold to the third level, grab one of two ropes waiting there and leap. The weight of their fall will pull the rope attached by pulley to the truss at the top of the scaffold system and his knee will rise. As they hit the ground, the other team will be preparing to leap from the opposite scaffold to rise the other knee. Each knee requires two teams taking turns with one another and alternating with the two teams on the opposite scaffold. The scaffolds themselves are interlinked at the bottom, set on giant truck wheels, and pulled by a single diesel engine.

That!

It took me hours, if not days, to figure out this system. I discovered this work in the early 1990's. The world wide web had only just been invented. No one had a website. There was no search engine facilitating access to images captured around the world, no easy access to local news throughout the globe, no constant stream of information waiting to be tapped. My work started with a single photograph, snipped from a French newspaper, sent to me by a friend through the postal system. At bottom was a brief description of the event and nothing more. It took me months just to figure out the name of the company.

Once I found the name "Royald de Luxe," I was able to gather a few other images, mostly pulled from local French press, from friends or located through extensive library searches of French newspapers on microfiche.

Each image was a treasure. I poured over them, scrutinizing each detail. What was happening mechanically? How was this thing moving? What were those uniformed performers doing? Who was doing what? How did the event function? What were its social parameters? Obviously, the streets were shut down to normal traffic. For how long? Was this just a parade, or

did he do something? Was there a narrative? Had people come across this thing? Or was it widely publicized? Had people lined the streets knowing that a giant was coming? Was there music?

When I finally got hold of those books on Royal de Luxe it was like finding the end of the rainbow. Here was a succession of images. Images of The Giant in a number of different cities and a number of different scenarios. Here he was being illuminated by a massive bank of car headlamps, a virtual wall of lights, probably 30 feet high by 40 feet wide. There he was being given water by a local fire department, a fireman standing at the peak of a hook and ladder, spraying water from the hose into an open mouth, The Giant's eyes half closed in satisfaction. Here was an image of what can only be an opera singer putting him to sleep by singing into his ear.

Based on a series of images, parsed out to me by fate and happenstance, and some arduous labor, I assembled my own story of what was happening. And I determined that my own experience extrapolating from what was given to create a more comprehensive picture of the whole was not dissimilar to the experience of the spectators who had first-hand experience with Royal de Luxe. They were not getting a fleshed out narrative. They were getting images, huge, provocative, moving, confounding and exhilarating snapshots from which they would construct their own story.

I was surprised to see that the book had as many photographs of the audience as it did of the objects. I'd been so keyed into the mechanics of the objects, that at first I hadn't noticed.

Here is a shot of a dozen or so people. Some are laughing, others are staring mouth agape; one is poking another; a couple are pointing; one is turned to look at the face of the person standing next to him. We don't know what they are looking at; it could be anything. All we know is that these people are captivated by something they find marvelous. Their response is not uniform. Here's a shot of a man with his arm draped around the woman standing next to him. She is about to burst with emotion, but it's not clear which. It may be laughter but it might be tears. There's a strong feeling pushing at her face and as it's just before the eruption, it remains unclear. He looks a little frightened, slightly taken aback, but maybe it's something else. It's confusing because behind them a younger couple has been taken by a fit of laughter that appears to have been going on for some time. She has a tear on her cheek and they are leaning into one another for support.

Here's another shot of a group of seven or eight. Whatever they are looking at it is blowing their minds. They are much more uniform in their response. They are focused on the same thing. We can't see it, but their lines of sight converge on the same off place, just out of frame. Their faces are rendered almost neutral by awe, mouths slack. Whatever they are looking at is more than they can fully comprehend. They are in the moment before the thinking begins; the mind will start its work momentarily.

What's remarkable about this shot is that they read as a single group. But they are not a group. They are completely disjointed. Two are together on a balcony in the background; three are standing on something and hanging on to a light post for support, and the others are on the ground. To read the photograph carefully, it is clear that they are not there together at all. The couple on the balcony probably know one another, but the rest appear to be strangers to one

another. They are different ages and colors, there is distance between them, some are on ground level, some one story up, others have created a kind of impromptu mezzanine, yet they read as a group, as one. The experience of *The Giant* has drawn them together.

Reading these photographs of the audience was as instructive as the photographs of the spectacle devices. They revealed a wholly different dynamic than the one offered in a theater.

Intentional audiences are predictable. They behave according to a set of customs that are reinforced at every turn. It is a commercial exchange. Money for entertainment. They are seeking an experience and have readied themselves for it. They've stepped off the street, stood in line at the box office, handed their ticket to an usher and received a program. They've found their seat and settled in. They are ready to be moved or scandalized or awed. That's the exchange and everyone involved knows the routine.

The unintentional audience member is a wholly different beast. They are completely unprepared and without expectations. Whatever happens to them is unbidden. They are, as a whole, disinclined to be moved or scandalized or awed. People are committed to their routines. To pull someone out of their agenda and all the way into a theater event of any duration requires something truly special. It has to be spectacular enough to take them off their path and then compelling enough to sustain their interest. It's easy to win over an unintended audience member for a moment. Most everyone will stop for long enough to find the right box into which to put the event on their mental shelf; some will stay for as long as they feel their schedule permits; but to get someone to drop their agenda and give over to the event's timeline—that takes something special.

What I was seeing in the Royal de Luxe photographs was the power of the combination of the two different kinds of audience. Some had come upon the work and stopped their day to take it in. Others had made their way to the site expressly for the purpose of seeing the show. The guy on the bike was on his way somewhere else and got waylaid by an unimaginably giant marionette. The couple leaning into one another both have backpacks on and one is holding a camera with an overly long lens. They came to see this giant and all that might accompany him.

This mix is crucial, I realized. It shifts the frame. People begin to take note of one another. As excited as they are about The Giant, they are also excited to see the effect he's having on the others. They begin to enjoy watching one another watch. An audience made up of both intentional and unintentional spectators expands the frame. Focus shifts freely in and out, away from the giant and to the others around him and then back to the giant. It's a conversation.

The guy who has stopped his bike and is trying to stand on its seat is extending the frame. He's as interesting as The Giant because he's about to fall and if he doesn't that'll be all the more incredible. The elderly couple on their balcony in their bathrobes and the florist standing on a stepladder in front of his shop and the four kids in the same soccer jersey have all become part of the show and part of the pleasure of being there. And so the event is expanding and its boundaries are becoming indeterminate.

There was nothing separating the experience these people were having from their real lives. They were in their real life. They were with friends and strangers. They were in their streets, in some cases peering out from their homes or workplaces. Whether they had happened upon this or had come with express intent, the frame had been shattered. The beginning, middle

and end were impossible to determine. What was choreographed and what happenstance? The tidiness of the theater had been completely discarded.

The spatial frame was broken, but so was the temporal frame. When did this event start? When would it be over? On the most superficial level, the event started when the company came into town and ended with their departure. It was a long weekend, up and gone with two gigantic spectacle devices. For many, though, the event is still alive. It's a story told while sharing photographs on phones. It has become a mythology, a history told and retold, both real and unreal, linked to a locale and divorced from it. The event is the transformation of a place. The plaza where The Girl met The Elephant has a different meaning now from the one it had before the encounter. People understand its potential differently. Performance is part of its history and lineage now. And the event started before the troupe arrived. The municipal government worked for 18 months to prepare for its arrival. Divisions who had never collaborated, spoke and planned and worked together. Channels of communication were opened that will not shortly close. Together they did something that they never thought they'd do or care to do. They transformed the image of their city and, as Helen Marriage told me, over a decade later, on the wall of the chief of police of Amiens, France, next to a photograph of a him with President Macron, sits a photo of him standing between the girl and the elephant, surrounded by thousands.

Whatever was happening on this French street was not going to be easily boxed up and put away. That much was certain. It's not even about The Giant, I realized. The Giant is just the excuse. He may be the cause, but he's not the event. He may be the precipitating incident, but he's not the experience.

I have come to think of it as a lever. The lever is a simple machine, one of six simple machines developed during the Renaissance by scientists and engineers. Many were developed to accomplish the broad ambitions of a new breed of architects seeking to meld science and art into buildings of new scale and height and glory. The lever is a see-saw, with the center point adjusted so that the heavier child can be lifted by a lighter one. It consists of two parts: a beam and a fixed hinge, or fulcrum.

Archimedes famously once said, "Give me a long enough lever and a place to stand and I'll move the world." The Giant is a lever. He's pushing down on one end. On the other side, he's moving a city. What we are watching is The Giant exerting his force on one end of the lever. What we are experiencing is the lift on the other.

In 2004 I went to see Royal de Luxe in Amiens, France. That's where the idea of the lever came to me. I noticed that while my direct attention was on The Giant, I found myself more moved by the way he was transforming the public. The production was called *The Sultan's Elephant*.<sup>210</sup> It featured two giants, a girl and an elephant. The elephant was absolutely enormous. He dwarfed most of the three and four-story apartment buildings that served as the backdrop for much of the weekend's performances. The Girl was considerably smaller, not quite to scale with the elephant, but close. She stood about thirty feet tall.

Rumor and conversation led us to a public plaza at a designated time. In the center of the plaza was a space capsule. The capsule was made out of wood, a rocket from a world Jules Verne may have invented.<sup>211</sup> Around the capsule was debris from the impact of the capsule falling to the earth. The concrete was cracked and broken, presumably from the impact of the rocket's landing. Every once in a while, there was a hiss and steam released from below ground

through the cracks in the plaza surface. Music could be heard far away but getting closer. As it approached, we saw two trucks. One held a five-person new age rock band in full riff. The other had a team of red clad performers perched dramatically upon the crane arm that would eventually hold the weight of The Girl. They were followed by a dozen or so soldiers on foot.

They set to work straight away, without pause and with military precision. Before long, the capsule lid had been peeled open and ropes were lowered into it. There was a dramatic pause and a shift in the music, and they began to pull The Girl from the capsule. As she appeared from above the rim of the space rocket, her eyes were already blinking. Her head was turning. She was as surprised to find us there as we her.

I peeled my eyes away to look at the audience. What I saw was that I was not alone. Every fifth person or so was doing what I was doing, looking around to take in the whole. They were watching others watch. They were looking at a friend or their group of friends, or they were looking across the plaza at the gathered masses. People were leaning into one another, laughing, laughing and pointing. As much as they were enjoying the spectacle of The Girl rising out of the space capsule and marveling at the mechanics that enabled the focused work of a dozen or so dedicated performers to animate her so persuasively, they were equally taken by the way that the entire thing was affecting the assembled mass. The performers were manipulating The Girl, pulling on ropes strung through pulleys to raise her arms and turn her head, and she, in turn, was pulling on us.

We followed her through the city. Her weight was held by a cantilevered arm that arched out from heavy motorized vehicle. A team of red velvet clad soldiers animated her. On the ground, a team of two worked each of her knees. They took turns: first one pulled a rope that

lifted her knee, and then another. The work was clearly exhausting, but if the timing fell off, even the slightest bit, the coordination with the rest of the team would be thrown off and the illusion would be broken for the thousands watching her every move. It was a thrilling display of focus and physical discipline.

At the same time as we marveled at their tightly coordinated vigor, we watched the life-like movements of The Girl. She blinked and turned her head to look out at us. She nodded slightly, humbly, to accept our attention. She moved gingerly, this giant girl who stood three stories high and whose feet were the length of a human being.

Despite his greater size and complexity, despite his majesty and all the performance energy thrown his way, The Girl is far more interesting than The Elephant.

The Elephant is brilliant and the subject of most of the promotional photographs that saturate social media after the event takes over a city. He is entirely mechanized. It's operated by people pushing and pulling knobs, actions difficult to link directly to the actions of the hydraulic animal. Atop each limb, in an ergonomically designed steel perch, sits a single performer. In front of each operator sits a series of levers, together, and with a remarkable degree of focus, they move the limbs that appear to ambulate the beast down the city streets. Two more operators sit beneath the pachyderm's giant head; they operate his trunk and head and can even flap his ears. Working in coordination they can turn the elephant's head toward a nearby gawking throng and curl the trunk and spray them with water.

Nonetheless, after an hour or so of watching the elephant, I was done.

His friend is far more compelling. I went to find her day after day. She wears a knee length green skirt and when she blinks it makes your heart flutter. She is manually operated. She functions like The Giant, the result of the physical manipulation of a team of performers.

To move the elephant, the manipulators sit at a remove. They are distant from the animal and from one another and therefore from us. They are playing video games. Their focus is terminal. It's a closed loop. They work the levers and the levers in turn release fluid into a series of pistons that are hidden from view.

The Girl is operated by a team of coordinated manipulators pulling ropes attached to her knees and arms. Their intense physical effort brings her impossibly to life. They are indentured to her, in direct and constant service to her. They pull and yank and ropes connected through pulleys to her knees and arms. They sweat and pull and coordinate their actions with one another. It is visceral and immediate. Their work brings her to life. They exist for her. She exists because they work. It is a wonderful, moving, celebration of work and creativity, of our potential to create.

Just as we could expand the frame of our vision out from the team of uniformed performers to see how their actions brought this most unlikely puppet to life, so we could expand the frame further still to see how this puppet brought the city to life. We followed as she walked through the city, stopping traffic, turning heads, opening window shades and windows and front doors. She mounted a gigantic bronze scooter at one point, pushing it through the wide Boulevards of Amiens with one foot. She brought people out onto balconies, running into the streets from apartment buildings and shops, to stand next to their neighbors and strangers, to

stand with fellow citizens and international tourists like myself and watch her pass. As she was amazed at the city, so we were amazed at her.

However great the visual spectacle of this giant marionette riding a push scooter down the historic boulevards of a small French city, the experience was so very much greater. What we felt in our bodies and understood as social beings was a grander and more sweeping event. The work of the performers on one end of the lever was visually stunning. They were bringing wood and paper and cloth to life. She was alive and moving, innocent and wondering, constantly transforming. At the other end of the lever, whether we consciously registered it or not, was something more amazing still.

What we were experiencing was the transformation of a people. We were watching community form. We were witnessing the dissolution of the individual into the communal.

We arrived in small groups to gather around a whimsically constructed piece of sculpture, a simulacrum of a space capsule, presented as though it had crashed to the ground. We took our place around the wood object. We stood in small clusters, in twos, threes, and fours, waiting for the promised show to begin. We spoke to our friends, took photographs, drank water from plastic bottles. By the time The Girl left the plaza, the small groups had dissolved. As she made her way down the wide streets, we coalesced around her. We were her entourage. We offered her our admiration and wonder and she lent us purpose and affinity. We were one.

And it was beautiful.

That was what I was seeing in the photographs. It was not the audience's enjoyment of the art object, it was the enjoyment of others' enjoyment of the art object. It was the profound and instinctive pleasure and lift of the experience of the communal. In the photographs you could

see people looking at The Giant, but you could also see them looking past him to the people on the other side of him, above him and below him, in windows and on rooftops, all having the same uplifting experience, together. That's why they are leaning into one another that way. That's why they are poking and pointing and looking turning to look at their friends. It's so much bigger than that gigantic marionette.

The art object is doing something. It's applying pressure here to move something over there. And the something that it's moving? It's us. It's the city itself. This is what Mark Schuster was talking about when he wrote of “signature ephemera.” The image of a city is much more than its plan and structure; the image of a city is defined by the accumulation of social experiences held in the collective memory of its populace. To those of us who accompanied the giant puppet through its streets over the course of the weekend, Amiens, France would never be the same. It was forever transformed by our collective experience.

That!

The layered dynamics of the audience, moving out in concentric circles, makes me think of the meteoric rise of Marina Abramovic.<sup>212</sup>

To be sure, Ms. Abramovic was an art star prior to 2010. She had earned herself a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York as a living artist; that only happens to artist of substantial accomplishment and acclaim. She hit another level altogether with her new piece, that accompanied the retrospective at MoMA. The piece was called *The Artist is Present* and people lined up for it as they would a rock concert.<sup>213</sup> They stood for hours and even stayed overnight. They ran up the museum steps and generally behaved like children on Christmas

morning when the museum opened. "Please walk," the guards would say and for a moment these over enthusiastic museum patrons would slow to some comic half run/walk, before losing control and once again taking full stride.

The artist was indeed present. For the six-week run of the exhibit, Ms. Abramovic sat in a wooden chair and made herself eminently available. Across a small wood table sat another chair and it was the privilege of sitting that chair that had people running through the museum. Audience members stood or sat around the perimeter of a square taped onto the museum floor. A small break in the taped square suggested an opening; through that opening, one at a time, audience members were permitted access to the interior of the square where they took the seat opposite Ms. Abramovic.

In *The Artist is Present*, Ms. Abramovic made herself available to the complexity of a relationship, emotionally, spiritually, and physically—only this time it was not to a performance partner but to whomever took the seat across from her. Without words or overt signaling, the two would sit across from one another and connect. Oftentimes the seated participant was moved to tears by the experience. Sometimes that weeping was mirrored in the artist. Almost always, a beautiful and inspiring and visible dynamic developed between the two.

For decades, Ms. Abramovic had been regarded for her the intensity of her full-bodied commitment. In one of her most famous works, the audience watched as she and her performance partner and longtime life partner, Ulay, squared each other up and then, at some unspoken moment, ran full boar at one another to violent contact.<sup>214</sup> Pulling themselves up off the floor, they collected themselves, slowly circling, taking one another in, until they eventually squared off for another collision. By all accounts, it was an immensely powerful thing to behold,

a minimalist expression of the wrought complexity of interpersonal relationship—the longing to be together, to be one, and the inevitable pain and violence that accompanies the effort.

Everything was present. You could see and feel their love and longing, their desperate sorrow at having hurt one another, the physical exhaustion and labor and frustration and aggression. As an audience member, it was impossible not to be affected and just as impossible not to be impressed with Ms. Abramovic's discipline. Time and again, for hours, the two artists threw themselves into one another, colliding with horrifying force. And for hours, they took genuine stock in one another and their relationship, each time finding the truth that stood between them, the sorrow and the love, the anger and the longing, before finding the moment that brought them running toward one another once again.

These performances were almost universally well received. They were attended by hundreds of people over their short two- or three-night runs. They toured to high status museums and galleries in high culture American and European cities. But they never caught the public imagination the way that *The Artist is Present* did. *The Artist is Present* moved Abramovic into rare ground. An HBO documentary was made about the project.<sup>215</sup> Marina Abramovic was on the cover of Elle magazine and laid her head against James Franco's chest for *Vogue*.<sup>216</sup> Robert Wilson made a theater piece about her.<sup>217</sup> Ms. Abramovic raised over \$600,000 on Kickstarter for the first phase of an effort to establish an institute committed to teaching the Abramovic method and durational performance.<sup>218</sup> Long term plans include a \$20 million conversion of an industrial facility in Hudson, New York.

Both the curatorial notes for *The Artist is Present* and the critical responses to it placed it on a continuum with Ms. Abramovic's other work. It was talked about within the context of Ms.

Abramovic's artistic discipline and commitment. Much was made of the duration of the event.<sup>219</sup> Ms. Abramovic was there every day for 42 straight days, 10 hours a day. She sat in a specially designed chair with a built-in latrine so that nothing would distract from her being fully present for each and every moment of the show. As with all her other work, the conversation centered around her uncompromising commitment. A performance of this duration would demand unprecedented physical, emotional, and psychological endurance. Attention was paid to her preparation, to her dress, to her lack of makeup. The promotional photographs of the show are of Abramovic, up close, face impressively neutral, her gaze penetrating the camera. She is the subject, present to whatever comes.

All of this is undoubtedly true. But it was also true of her work prior to this performance. None of those pieces grabbed the public's attention the way this did, or even close. Her prior work stayed within the art ghetto, admired by those in the know, seen by the small community that sees such work, generally ignored by popular culture. This piece broke Abramovic out. Why?

I think it is because *The Artist is Present* shifts the frame. Abramovic is the lever. She is the locus of our attention, but our experience is of the whole. We can keep the frame tight, focusing on Abramovic's disciplined presence on her specially designed chair for hours, days and weeks on end. It's interesting and powerful, but it remains demonstrative. The artist creates a product and we come to see it. But as the frame expands, it engages its audience. First it expands to encompass Abramovic's interlocutor. The object of the work is no longer the artist's body, but becomes the living dialog between the artist and the person seated across from her. Expand the frame wider still, and the piece begins suggests a whole new sphere of influence. It is not about

an artist and her guest; it is about all of us watching, all of us being affected. The piece is about our hunger to connect, our loneliness, our need to be seen. And that's how it is staged: in "the round," as it were, surrounded by audience on all sides, so that we can't isolate Ms. Abramovic, or even the pair of them. Any view of the artist includes a view both of her partner and of other members of the community of watchers. The artist is moving and being moved by her partner and we are, in turn, moving and being moved by the two of them. We are the power of art to transform a group. We are part and party to it. That's exciting stuff. That's worth running up the stairs for.

I don't think it's an accident that after decades of confronting her audience with the limits of her on physical body and emotional truthfulness, Abramovic's "breakthrough" work came when she empowered the audience. In earlier pieces they had been part of her work. In *Rhythm 0* (1974), the audience was allowed to play her body using any of 74 objects. In 1977's *Imponderabilia*, at the Galleria Comunale d'Arte in Moderna, Bologna, the audience was compelled to squeeze through a door frame in which she and her longtime partner stood naked, staring at one another. In many of her installation pieces, the audience moved in and around the performers, creating and recreating the scenography for her work with their movements. In *The Artist is Present*, though, the audience affected her and she them. Effectively, what they did together became the piece. They worked together to create an unpredictable and vibrant emotional spectacle and people were arrested and moved. The audience participated in creating the piece. They shared in the artistic experience. Her virtuosity empowered them. Her legendary discipline served to allow her audience to feel their own power and vitality and consequence.

People ran up the steps of the Museum of Modern Art to see and feel art matter, to see how the artist's attention broke the chains and let the dog run free. They watched as the person sitting across from Marina Abramovic found themselves crying or laughing or shouting. They watched as the audience member brought Ms. Abramovic to tears or to scream. They saw the unexpected develop between the two and spread to the perimeter where the spectators too were involved, crying or clenching their jaws so as not to scream.

The breakthrough came when the art was about the dynamic and unexpected experience of being there together. Together they shared silent conversation that mattered, that changed and altered both the artist and the "spectator." People ran up the stairs when the art being offered was as much about them as it was about the artist and her artwork. It was worth camping out for when it was about being together.

One of my favorite photographs of *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* in 2015, the one on land, the second one, the one that ended in a glorious fire and not sad sizzle, is of a long twisting line of people.<sup>220</sup> At one end of the line sits a table. At the table are two elderly ladies, each with a stack of blue paper next to them. Behind the women, a house can be seen. It is mostly shingled in varying tones of blue, but a few bare spots of plywood stand out glaringly. The other end of the line is not visible. Nothing is happening in this photograph; yet it serves as the ultimate confirmation to me.

The people are patiently waiting for the opportunity to create a shingle that will go on the house that bursts the frame of the photograph. When they arrive at the table they will receive instruction from one of the two women there. They will be asked to take their time, to give the

task their full concentration, to respond to the prompts as truthfully as they possibly can. They are given a pen and a blue shingle. On the shingle is a single prompt: "I overcome...".

When they are finished writing on the shingle, it will be conveyed to the house, where it will be tacked to cover one of the spots where the plywood base shows through. The culminating event of the spectacle will be setting the house on fire. From its ashes, a new city will rise. The house is an explicit symbol of our ability to overcome, as individuals and as a community. Making a shingle for the house is to symbolically join the community.

People waited in this line for as long as 40 minutes. They waited with their families and by themselves. They started conversations or they did not. Unseen in the photograph, to the right and across an expanse of parkland, were four food trucks; between them and the food trucks was a stage with any of a number of local bands. Further along, just east of that stage, another stage featured dancing: flamenco, break, and even a Chinese Dragon dance. Behind the line, also outside the photograph frame, were aerialists dancing from an elevated ladder and a group of kiosks from which people were selling handcrafted goods.

With all that being offered, people chose to stand in a 40-minute line.

They wanted a moment of connection. They wanted a moment of reflection and they wanted their reflection to participate in a greater moment of celebration. They wanted to be witnessed, even if only prosthetically, through an object. So they stood in line.

The photograph tells the story. Just out of focus, in the background of the photograph, the house is seen, all purple and blue. Two four-by-eight sheets of bare plywood stand out. That's where the shingles will go once they are filled out by the audience members in the line. The line is a bit sad. Some of the people in it are looking at their mobile phones. Others stand in small

groups. They appear isolated from the activity that buzzes around them. Slightly out of focus, to the right of the line, is a mass of people in front of a stage. They are individually indiscernible. They are moving as a whole, looking toward the performers on a stage in front of them. I like to think of it as a 'before and after' shot, a kind of initiation ritual. These people are standing in line, ready to give of themselves individually before fully joining the community of celebrants around them. The "Before" expresses the hunger and the need; the "After" expresses the promise fulfilled.

Of course, I choose to see it that way. As such it perfectly supports my operating theory: just as it did for the Ancient Greeks, theater can still play an essential role in our democracy. Out in parks and streets and public spaces, theater can return to its democratic roots. It can bring a diverse people together for a powerful, visceral experience of their commonality. It affirms the foundational premise of democracy: that we are here together, impacting one another, sharing an increasingly limited set of resources.

The idea for the shingling of the house was adapted from a popular event at *Burning Man*.<sup>221</sup> Each year at *Burning Man* a temple is constructed. The first year I was there, the temple was publicly constructed, with volunteer participation, according to the design and under the leadership of David Best.<sup>222</sup> It was made from sheets of CNC-cut plywood. It was a gorgeous structure, at one time ethereal and substantial, grand and fleeting. People visited the temple. They walked through it, pondered its beauty, and many wrote something on a small block of wood or on the structure itself, and left it in the building, knowing it would burn later.

Or maybe I took it from Bread and Puppet Theater, where I had spent a couple of summers back in early 90's. From 1975 to 1998, Peter Schumann and his cohorts created an event called the *Domestic Resurrection Circus* on a privately-owned farm in North Central Vermont. The first year I attended there were over 40,000 people there. There were three elements to the event: the circus, the sideshows, and the pageant. The circus was a series of short, puppet-centered political satires. "The sideshows" was a name given to a group of shows happening at different sites on the land, each one autonomous, widely varied in style, content, and duration. The pageant was a kind of massive public ritual. The ritual tells a story of life, death and rebirth and, to the best of my knowledge, always includes both participation from the audience and fire.

Peter Schumann was borrowing the form as well, of course. He knew the Christian traditions that run through Europe, parading icons of Saints through crowded streets where people will pin photographs to them, or currency, or notes to dead relatives, before they arrive at their final location to be ritually burned. These traditions continue in the ethnic neighborhoods of some U.S. cities. I have seen the Festival of San Antonio in Boston and the Saint Giglio Festival in Williamsburg. They are both wildly popular events, filling the streets with food and song and attended by locals and tourists alike. For some it is a sacred event and for others it is an urban spectacle. For some it is a family tradition going back generations, a time to gather and celebrate and reflect. For others it is a time to behold the rich spectacle of tradition and faith and community. For all it is a gratifying moment of connection.

Or maybe I took it from the Ancient Jewish tradition of Tashlikh. On the first or second day of the new year, some Jews will go to a flowing body of water and "cast off their sins" by

tossing breadcrumbs into the water and watching them flow away. Before walking away, it is customary to look back once more and shake off the hems of the garments, to make sure that all the sins have been disposed of. Or perhaps I took it from the reform temple my friend told me about that has replaced the breadcrumbs with writings on rice paper. Or Las Fallas in Valencia wherein each neighborhood of the city created their own *falla*, an artistic effigy out of cardboard and *papier mache*, laden with firecrackers. Constructed according to a theme and often in broad political caricatures, these 40-foot-tall structures are set to flame in a regional festival that has become a worldwide attraction.

Since the beginning of recorded time, communities have been reaffirming togetherness through theater. They have been gathering around fires in ritual costumes and masks; they have been parading and sharing song and dance; they have been creating magnificent gestures. The hunger is deep and real and perennial.

This is the more I am always wanting.

We generally find the answers we are looking for, and I freely admit that this is likely the case for me.

Before I ever stood on a stage, I was interested in theater as a gathering space. I had read of the Ancient Greek Theater festivals and I loved the idea of a whole city gathering in a specially constructed open-air amphitheater to affirm and fortify their democracy. Slave and gentry and aristocracy alike gathered to watch serious tragedies and bawdy comedies. There were parades and ceremonies and awards presented to the best plays.

This was no casual affair or accidental happenstance. It was a priority of the state. The city shut down. All commerce ceased. Politics were put on hold. Attendance was expected. There were high-prestige organizing committees and juries. The plays themselves were designed to facilitate civilian participation, featuring a choir made up shopkeepers and politicians and artists, all wearing masks that subsumed the idiosyncrasies of individualism into a group identity.

This made a deep and intuitive sense to me. We need to witness one another. We need to stand in the same place and share experience. We need to see and feel our commonality. Individual actions matter because they affect the community and the community, in turn, sets the context for the individual. The Ancient Athenians saw that a healthy democracy depends on the lived experience of a shared fate and they structured a theater festival to provide it.

We need to be reminded. It's easy to forget.

We've been trained to focus on individual actions. The stories that constitute our cultural lexicon are of heroic and flawed leaders, genius artists and entrepreneurs and the grand failures of the hopeful others, great thinkers and notorious idiots, sport legends, hapless victims, and could-have-beens. So we focus on the remarkable discipline of Marina Abramovic, on her vision and genius, on her red dress and the specially made chair that holds her urine.

That's the American story. It's baked into the Constitution. We are a nation of individuals, each of us with the individual right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Individual purchasing power is the central component to our free market economy. We are individual consumers, each empowered to make our own economic decisions unconstrained by regulation or governmental interference of any kind.

Yet this exaltation of the individual belies the truth of our interconnection.

Draw the lens back and the camera reveals a very different set of stories. From further back, we see that the power of *The Artist is Present* comes from the social dynamic, from the concentric circles of concentration and awareness. It may start with Ms. Abramovic seated a simple wood table, but it comes alive when someone sits across from her and it really begins to churn as the frame expands to include the viewers around the taped rectangle, and further back still it reveals the video cameras documenting the event for posterity, the interior of museum itself, the art in it, and the spectators waiting for entry or loping awkwardly up the stairs to be a part of it.

From further back it becomes increasingly clear that our individual liberty will not save us from our collective fate. The dissonance is loud and, I believe, profoundly felt. We may be able to buy prosperity, but our fate remains communal. We can't buy our way out of global warming or nuclear apocalypse. Security walls will do nothing to curb the impact of global epidemics or a vagrant asteroid, or, for that matter, more mundane natural disasters like hurricanes and earthquakes or even technical disasters like the collapse of the worldwide web, a wicked artificial intelligence, or a bio-technical mishap.

We are a network, not virtual but real, each of us a node tied to many others and they, in turn, to others still. No matter the strength of any single individual, no matter how hard the tug, its movement is dependent on the movement of others. Yet if we all lift together, the whole piece will rise.

Standing together in shared space brings it home. We stand together with our neighbors and friends, with acquaintances and absolute strangers, and we feel the truth of our shared fate. We, this almost accidental collision of humanity, we are in this together. What happens here in

this public square will not likely not be determined by any single person's great actions. What happens in this shared space will be a reflection of the commons. It will be shaped and determined by the way that individual actions agglomerate to become a collective movement. And so it will be with this ever shrinking planet that we share with increasing billions of others. So we'd better start rehearsing. At least, so goes my thinking.

Art has the power to transform. It creates new human possibilities. I am sure of it.

I am sure of it the way that my religious friends are sure of the existence of God. They completely understand how others might deny the existence of God. They know their position is unprovable and easily argued. They know that their stance can appear more hopeful than actual, but God explains so much of their experience of the world as to be undeniable. So it is with me and the power of art. If I track it carefully, I can find some small scraps of evidence, but art's influence hides in the gaps between life's memorable events. It doesn't evidence itself because transformation is an internal process. It remains hidden from view, as often from its host as from the artist who may have inspired it as from anyone else. It is part of the mysterious education of the human soul....

It's the million-dollar question, or billion, or more: how do you change a person's mind? How do you get them to vote this way or that? To purchase this product or sign this petition or care about their neighbors? How do you present information that creates new awareness? How do you even create the possibility of new thinking?

We are somehow surprised, again and again, to find that people are not rational. Argument rarely wins the day. Study after study shows that belief trumps rationality. Information is sorted into pre-determined ideological frameworks. How do you shift the framework?

After Redmoon closed, I began working with a small group of people to establish a restorative justice hub in Bronzeville.<sup>223</sup> It would be the 7th such hub in Chicago. Other hubs are popping up in cities like Oakland, Detroit and Philadelphia.

A restorative justice hub is an alternative to the traditional justice system. Let's say that a teen has vandalized an apartment building and been caught stealing a bicycle from a storage space. Traditionally, the police will arrest the youth, run them through the juvenile court system, and hold the teen in a juvenile detention for some period of time. As punishment and deterrent, the teen will be removed from society and housed by the state. Ultimately, he or she will be released back to their community. Recidivism rates are atrocious. More often than not, that youth will find their way back into the justice system, to serve more time, to be further alienated from their community.

The restorative justice system provides a very different model. At the center of the restorative justice practice is the "peace circle," more often referred to simply as a circle. The victim, the accused, and a small, self-selected handful of their community will gather in a circle. The community members of the victim might include other aggrieved parties, like the owner of the bicycle, or they might just be people who are particularly invested in the community in one way or another. The accused will often bring friends and family, people to whom they feel accountable and from whom they feel supported.

Here's the simple genius of the peace circle: all parties involved will sit in the circle and witness one another. They will take turns sharing until the problem is worked out to everyone's satisfaction. And it works.

The process is facilitated by someone called a "circle keeper." I have been training as a circle keeper. You know the most common counsel given to aspiring circle keepers? "Get out of the way. Do less. Let the circle do the work."

Generally, there is a small object, a talisman of sorts, that will designate the speaker. For as long as it is held, the floor belongs to the holder. It is passed around and around the circle, in one direction, one person at a time. The conversations are wild and unexpected and absolutely predictable. Faced with one another, the people in the circle are all uncomfortable. There's guilt, there's anger, there's doubt and insecurity and frustration. There's fear.

A solution is found amongst those in the circle. Sometimes it is a straight line from the original offense: the offender might be expected to fix the damage and to read to an elderly occupant of the building, say three afternoons a week for a few months. Sometimes the path is more convoluted. The victims may have no interest in future contact. In this case the offender might work with a mentor at the restorative justice hub for a period of time serving the community in a less direct way.

The fabric of the community has been torn. A crime has taken place. People have all kinds of feelings around that crime. It is tense and difficult. Rather than turn to others to solve their problem, they gather around a circle and tend to it themselves. They talk it out. Literally. They look into each other's eyes. They share. They encounter one another, and in so doing they

become accountable to one another. They sit down divided and they rise with the very real possibility of being whole.

In my experience, the momentum of the circle reliably shifts at a certain moment that I can only call "the encounter." It's a particular moment and it can't be forced. It will never happen the first time around the circle, but I've seen it happen at almost any point after that. The talking piece will move around the circle until the two primary parties truly see one another. It is often the first time they look into one another's eyes without evasion. I feel it. Every time. It's a stomach drop of recognition and usually someone else in the circle will tear up or even cry. It took me a while, but by now I've learned to see it coming. It works like the lever. It starts with a witnessing. Someone will see someone else working for honest and that one person's work will change the circle. It will loosen and lift slightly, making the work of others more possible and more likely. And so it will go until the circle has changed completely, with each recognizing the next at least to the point where true reconciliation is possible.

This is what Marshall Ganz was asking me to do. In order to shift the framework, you have to own your framework. Share who you are and what you believe because without that, no one is listening. They are suspicious. They are only listening for what you want from them and why you want it. Do your work so that you are able to share yourself honestly because only then will a real conversation happen.

So here it is. Here is my belief system, in which all gets distorted and twisted, on which everything has been built and from which most has come: human connection is as rare as it is beautiful, as difficult as it is important. It is as beautiful to experience as it is to behold.

Theater calls people together. It is a living form that creates a social experience. That is its core value. At a time when relationships have been reduced to digital tabulations, starved on likes and follows, theater is fodder for genuine togetherness and connection. That is its unique cultural contribution and its value is inestimable. When the frame expands, the audience experience becomes part of the spectacle and things begin to transform. It all comes to life: the audience and the performance and the site. Each influences the next; divisions blur and boundaries give way.

The fortunate among us can recall the power of being truly seen. It may be by the secretary of our grade school principal, by a neighbor or a gifted teacher; hopefully by a parent. We remember in our bodies the stabilizing force of another's loving gaze. We can recall how powerfully grounding it is to be witnessed, to be held and accepted by another.

It is really too much to expect of a community that they can hold one another in that regard? I don't think so. I have seen it happen. It happens in nearly every rehearsal room I've ever experienced. It happens in peace circles, on basketball courts and in locker rooms, in knitting circles and reading groups. It happens every day and in a variety of environments. We are saturated by virtual contact and hungry for community.

The marketplace is already responding. Fear and emptiness have always fed the marketplace. The more scared we are, the more we spend. The more empty we feel, the more we consume.

So the artisanal movement promises small communities of like-minded consumers bonding through things. There has been an explosion of craft-based encounters: painting and pinot, cooking classes, butchering. There's community through yoga: yoga retreats, yoga and

chocolate, yoga and beer, yoga and travel, yoga and pregnancy. Social clubs are making a comeback: clubs for creatives, for cigar smokers, for gamers. People are seeking connection and they're willing to pay for it. There's a resurgence of social clubs, restaurants are beginning to feature communal dining tables, and a new market for experiences has arisen in which the patrons are forced to engage and encounter their fellow ticket buyers.

But where will we encounter the other? Where will we reduce fear? These are self-selecting groups, heavily filtered by class and taste. They are disturbingly homogenous and do little to draw the diverging strands of our public together. Fear is emptying our public spaces. The Little League my son played in down the street has been converted into a private travel league. Pick-up games are replaced by league time. Adults have largely abandoned public recreation for membership communities: gyms and social clubs and private leagues. Underfunded park districts increasingly turn to private rentals to earn revenue. It is not at all infrequent to find the local field house closed, with valet parkers and security stand out front next to signs apologizing to the public for any inconvenience.

The Ancient Greeks were right. Public space is where we encounter our fellow citizens. Public space is where we practice being with others unfamiliar and different from ourselves. Public space is where we reduce fear. It's where we recall our connection to one another. It's where we experience in our guts, our faith in one another. Public space is where the promise of democracy is restored. We see and feel and log into our bodies our shared fate and mutual concern. It's where we live the reality of our common cause.

This is what I was seeing in the photographs of Royal de Luxe. This is why, despite there being only one performance object, the people in the photographs never appeared to be looking

at the same place. They are in a circle! As much as they are looking at The Giant, they are looking at one another. They are encountering one another. The joy on their faces is the same joy that I'd seen in the rehearsal room, the same joy I've seen at the end of a peace circle. It's the joy of being seen and held, of being witnessed and, simultaneously, the joy being a witness. It's exuberance! The ideal of the community has been restored. In that moment, they believe again. They believe that people can overcome fear and care about one another, that they can think beyond the immediate to something bigger than themselves, that together, people can do extraordinary things.

That!

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### Epilogue

I first heard that the City of Chicago wanted to host *Royale de Luxe* while on a phone call with Commissioner Boone. We were discussing the 2014 *Great Chicago Fire Festival*, which was more than a year out. We were talking about fundraising. She told me that she had just begun a similar hunt for funds for *Royal de Luxe*. She hoped that one effort would not compromise the other.

Apparently, she had completely forgotten that it had been I who had introduced her to *Royal de Luxe*. Many years earlier, I brought the book into her office at the Joyce Foundation and we looked at the photographs together. It was during my time as Artist in Residence for the City of Chicago, under Commissioner Boone's predecessor and mentor, Lois Weisberg. I didn't bother reminding Commissioner Boone that of my inadvertent role in likely creating my biggest fundraising competition. Instead, I told her that my friend and Loeb Fellowship compatriot Helen

Marriage had been responsible for bringing them to London and that it may be instructive for them to talk. I could make help make that happen if she wanted.

I had heard Helen give at least two talks about the Herculean effort it took to get the City of London to accommodate Royale de Luxe and their Giants. Electrical wires needed to be taken down, buses re-routed, the entire center of London was closed to traffic. Helen talks about the countless times they seemed to reach an impasse and the countless times she was able to swing a pivotal person around at the critical moment in order to keep it alive.

I told the Commissioner my favorite story from Helen, about Royale de Luxe in Berlin: It was two weeks before the scheduled event. They had surmounted innumerable apparently insurmountable hurdles, but now they were stuck. Jean Luc, the artistic director, had been driving around Berlin and had seen a particular spot on the old Wall, the historic division between East and West Berlin. The Girl, he insisted, must jump the Wall.

The city officials rejected this proposal out of hand. There was simply no way they could make it happen. The event was less than 14 days away. It would demand a complete re-write of the entire public safety plan. Utilities would be compromised. A major thoroughfare would have to be closed. It just was not a possibility. But Jean Luc insisted. He threatened to pack everything up and go home: The Girl, The Elephant, the cast of 35, the crew of 20. Everything.

The Mayor of Berlin called the Mayor of Paris. The Mayor of Paris referred him to the Mayor of Nantes, where Royal de Luxe makes their home. Only the Mayor of Nantes might have enough sway to get Jean Claude to see reason, the Mayor of Paris was said to have said. The Mayor of Berlin got on the phone with the Mayor of Nantes. Through a translator, the Mayor of

Nantes told the Mayor of Berlin in no uncertain terms that he must make the jump happen. No doubt about it, Jean Luc would absolutely walk away. Berlin had to find a way to get it done.

And so they did. Berlin made it happen. And, of course, the photograph most commonly associated with Royale de Luxe in Berlin? The Girl jumping the wall.

Chicago had better get ready, I told Commissioner Boone. They'd better be ready to collaborate. They'd better be ready to sit in the circle with an artist and find a way to hear what he had to contribute.

If only I had listened to my own counsel. If only I'd heard the corollary to my own advice. I needed to get ready. I was going to need the same commitment to my vision as Jean Claude had to his. To make something truly extraordinary happen, I was going to need to be willing to wait until just the right moment, and then, still, be willing to walk away.

Two years after the first disastrous *Great Chicago Fire Festival*, my friend Helen Marriage made it all work under a new moniker and in a very different city. Commemorating the 350th anniversary of the Great Fire of London, Helen's presenting organization Artichoke built a scale replica of London's period architecture onto a barge in the middle of the River Thames and set it ablaze.<sup>224</sup>

By all accounts it was a spectacular event. Unfortunately, I wasn't there. Given its blemished past, I'm not sure Helen wanted the association with *The Great Chicago Fire Festival*. The photographs are thoroughly persuasive. It was no fizzle.

Helen did everything I should have done. From the most general to the most particular, she:

- simplified the event down to a single gesture, a spectacular fire on a barge in a river;
- hired a single professional designer with direct experience in the task at hand;
- put the replica on an industrial barge;
- piggybacked the spectacle on a festival of someone else's making.

If I had put my focus solely on creating fires on the river, likely I would have succeeded. We would have had great photographs and the photographs would have exploded on social media and they would have compelled future funding and we could have built from there. Why couldn't I just do that?

Always wants more. I wanted *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* to be everything.

Grand public spectacle was not enough for me. All too often, spectacle is little more than a distraction. It is what Nero called "Bread and Circus." In art theory circles, the term "spectacle" is most often a critical term, associated with form without content. It is the "extra" that is used to make an artwork more attractive or appealing, but does not add to its function or message. Guy Debord's 1967 *Society of the Spectacle* is a seminal work that sets into motion an entire school of critical theory premised on the idea that we have become a world in which image has been successively divorced from meaning to the point that genuine conversation and exchange is an impossibility.<sup>225</sup>

I designed spectacles to opposite effect. I have seen spectacle be a source of real connection. I have seen a parade break down social barriers and build the most unlikely bridges. I have been privileged to build relationship through spectacle. I have seen the very superfluity criticized by theorists serve as a kind of untainted and therefore neutral invitation to gather. Call

them what you will, Civically Engaged Theater, Spectacle, Social Practice, it doesn't matter. The point is that these events oftentimes become an occasion for connection.

So for me, *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* needed to be an occasion for genuine connection. For it to be more than a mere diversion, it had to be woven into the social fabric of the city in a meaningful and genuine way. That's why we created a summer of programming in public parks in some of Chicago's most challenged neighborhoods and used the profile and spectacular promise of *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* to bring people together. We focused on the theme of grit and resilience, of rebirth, as a conversation starter. There was spoken word poetry and music. And there was a professional photography studio built into the back of a horse trailer. People were asked to reflect on their personal stories of grit and resilience and to answer the question of what they had overcome in their own lives. The answer to that question would be super imposed over an intimate and intense black and white portrait.

"I overcome homelessness."

"I overcome drug addiction."

"I overcome fear of trains."

In the closing ceremonies, these black and white portraits would become the image of rebirth. After the fire, they would be projected onto the sails of boats that would come floating down the river. It was, after all, the people of Chicago that rebuilt our city in 1871, that dug through the ashes of their homes to lay a new foundation. The portraits were to signal the neighborhood bazaar along the river, where handcrafted wares were being sold from kiosks along the river. The portraits would also provide the backdrop to the two community stages set up in the public plazas. On one was a full program of spoken word poetry and music performed

by neighborhood talent. On the other was dance of all varieties from break to dragon dance to arial arts.

It was a failure of imagination. I couldn't imagine it differently.

In my mind, *The Great Chicago Fire Festival* was not gratuitous spectacle. It was a Signature Event. It was not going to be a distraction from the reality of our city, but a reflection of it. Anything less than that was to miss the mark. So, following Mark Schuster's prescription, we needed neighborhood engagement and we needed it to be real. And we needed it to be reflected on the river. It wasn't enough to have the events in the parks over the summer. It wasn't enough to collect the portraits and have them woven into the spectacle. We needed the visible presence of the neighborhoods on river. We needed the bazaar and the neighborhood stages. We needed them present in the audience, carrying flags and banners with their neighborhoods' names, seated together.

Too much. It was all too much. My focus was spread too thin. Things slipped. Small things that didn't make much difference individually slipped, and big important things like creating a secondary ignition system slipped.

I needed to embrace a longer view. Incremental thinking is not my strength.

When, shortly after the successful remount of the *Great Chicago Fire Festival* in 2015, I went to tell the Commissioner of Cultural Affairs that Redmoon would be closing its doors after 25 years, she stopped in her tracks. She turned to look at me and tears streamed from her eyes. She walked over and hugged me.

I wanted to be operating at a certain scale. I wanted to operate at the Scale of the City. I had a dream of a civic theater. If we could operate at that scale, cultural momentum would carry the day and funding would follow. I was willing to make that bet.

Well, I bet and I lost. We couldn't make it work.

She apologized for crying. It had already been a tough day.

After nearly three years of working on Royal de Luxe, Commissioner Boone had been forced to pull the plug on the project.

She had successfully wended the project through various departments, worked the funding community, and convinced the inimitable Jean Claude. They were to start the giants out in the neighborhoods and then work their way downtown. There would be an appearance on the Chicago River, an encounter in Millennium Park. The money had been raised. The permits had been won. Royal de Luxe was fully onboard.

At a moment when the city is fracturing along all the old fault lines and even finding new ones, the unity that the giants could bring seemed undeniably valuable, more powerful and important than ever.

But with the school closings and the police scandals and the tax increases and the unprecedented gun violence, they didn't feel they could launch a massive cultural initiative. The political backlash would be too great. They had to let it go.<sup>226</sup> This massive cultural event that is actually designed to spectacularly address a splintering city was allowed to fall away because of what can only be understood to be a lack of political will.

Maybe this project won't work, I thought. Civic Theater requires so much from so many with so many diverging interests serving so many different masters. It's concentric circles and if

we can't get even the smallest circles to stand in the same space and see one another, how will we ever make it work in public?

It was my turn. I cried.

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- <sup>1</sup> Johanna Burton, Shannon Jackson, and Dominic Willsdon, "Introduction," in *Public Servants: Art and the Crisis of the Common Good*, vol. 2, Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016).
- <sup>2</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Sixth Printing edition (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991).
- <sup>3</sup> Burton et al., p. xvi.
- <sup>4</sup> Bernadette Quinn, "Arts Festivals and the City," *Urban Studies* 42 (May 1, 2005): 927–43.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 928
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 939
- <sup>7</sup> For more on these different practices, I recommend Mike Lydon's book *Tactical Urbanism*. Mike Lydon and Anthony Garcia, *Tactical Urbanism: Short-Term Action for Long-Term Change* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2015).
- <sup>8</sup> Krzysztof Wodiczko, "Strategies of Public Address: Which Media, Which Publics?" in *Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, vol. 1, 1987, 44–45.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>13</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, "Traffic: Space-Times of the Exchange," in *Traffic* (CPAC, Musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux, 1996).
- <sup>14</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Les Presses du réel, 2002).
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.
- <sup>17</sup> Jacques Rancière. "Problems and Transformations in Critical Art", *Malaise dans l'esthétique* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 2004). Translated by Claire Bishop, assisted by Pablo Lafuente, 2006, 37.
- <sup>18</sup> Claire Bishop, ed., *Participation*, Documents in Contemporary Art (Whitechapel, London/Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006).
- <sup>19</sup> Bishop, Claire. "The social turn: Collaboration and its discontents." *Artforum* 44, no. 6 (2005): 178.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.
- <sup>21</sup> D. Soyini Madison, *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance* (SAGE Publications, 2005), 322.
- <sup>22</sup> Dwight Conquergood, "Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance," *Literature in Performance* 5, no. 2 (April 1, 1985): 1–13.
- <sup>23</sup> After leaving the Illinois Art Council, Ra went on to take a more aggressive political position as head of CHANGE, a progressive political organization founded to fundamentally disrupt Illinois state politics. Ra was chosen by Chris Kennedy as a running mate for his losing gubernatorial bid. Here is an article... <https://chicagocrusader.com/who-is-ra-joy/>
- <sup>24</sup> "Homepage," Arts Alliance Illinois, accessed February/March 2017, <https://www.artsalliance.org/>. Arts Alliance Illinois formed in 1982 in response to funding cuts to the arts in Illinois. The website articulates the organization's goal that "Illinois' creative sector is representative of the richness and diversity of the state's population."
- <sup>25</sup> "On the Table," Chicago Community Trust, accessed February/March 2017, [http://cct.org/about/partnerships\\_intitatives/on-the-table/](http://cct.org/about/partnerships_intitatives/on-the-table/). The Chicago Community Trust is a prominent community foundation. From the website, the Trust's mission is to "lead and inspire philanthropic efforts that measurable improve the quality of life and prosperity of our region."
- <sup>26</sup> "Homepage," The MacArthur Foundation, accessed April 2018, <https://www.macfound.org/>. The MacArthur Foundation is one of the foremost grantmaking institutions based out of the city of Chicago. From the website, the Foundation "supports creative people, effective institutions, and influential networks building a more just, verdant, and peaceful world." In 2017, McArthur awarded over \$250 million in grantees across the globe (see [macfound.org/about/financials](http://macfound.org/about/financials).)

<sup>27</sup> For a conversation about the tax incentivized arts district in Chicago, see Joravksy, Ben. "Shedding Light on the Shadow Budget," *Chicago Reader*, December, 10, 2009, <https://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/shadow-budget-tif/Content?oid=1251320>.

<sup>28</sup> "About the Goodman," Goodman Theatre, accessed April 2018, <https://www.goodmantheatre.org/About/>. Founded in 1922, the Goodman theatre, according to their website, is "Chicago's oldest and largest not-for-profit theater."

<sup>29</sup> "Our Mission," Albany Park Theater Project, accessed April 2018, <http://aptpchicago.org/our-mission/>. The Albany Park Theater Project (APTP) is a youth theater troupe of mostly first-generation high-school students. Each year, the youth ensemble worked with a professional artistic team to devise a new work, highly anticipated each year by the community. APTP also offers a tutoring program and college-prep to its participants.

<sup>30</sup> Jones, Chris, "Goodman Introduces 'The Alice' Education Center." *Chicago Tribune*, May 18, 2016, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/theater/news/ct-goodman-alice-education-center-dael-orlandersmith-20160518-story.html>.

<sup>31</sup> Rick Lowe had an art studio in his Houston neighborhood and was making art that was focused on issues of social justice. Increasingly, his activities attracted the attention of neighborhood youth. Just as he was coming to his own realizations about his work, he was confronted by one of the kids in the neighborhood. The kid wanted to know what the paintings had to do with his life, his lack of opportunity, with the gangs and police that made the neighborhood unsafe for everyone. Rick turned his attention to that question and started Project Row Houses which became an exemplar of art as social practice. Project Row Houses is a community platform that enriches lives through art with an emphasis on cultural identity and its impact on the urban landscape. We engage neighbors, artists, and enterprises in collective creative action to help materialize sustainable opportunities in marginalized communities. Rick told me that story when I met him in 2013. It was so much like my own story of Redmoon's early years, that I stopped using mine.

Mel Chin has a different story. By the late 80's he had a well established career as a sculptor. His interest in politics and the exercise of power compelled him to embrace an increasingly wide contextual frame. At first this meant site specific work, work that consider the formal and material environment in which it was made. Later that meant work that consider and spoke about the social contexts that created the frame. Eventually, the frame opened wider still to incorporate (at times) the residents of the neighborhoods in which his art was being presented. Chin's "SafeHouse" was a widely celebrated installation in the St. Roch neighborhood of New Orleans. Safehouse is a former residential dwelling, its front façade transformed into an operable 10-foot-in-diameter bank-vault door, complete with a rotary combination lock. "SafeHouse" was a part of a larger social practice piece called "Project Paydirt" or the "Fundred Project". All of it was a response to Chin learning that NOLA has a \$300 million dollar lead abatement problem. When Chin learned that lead abatement would cost \$300 million in New Orleans (the second most contaminated city in the U.S.), he issued a call to action, enlisting students to draw "fundreds," replicas of hundred-dollar bills. When he has reached the goal of \$300 million in faux bills, he plans to deliver the drawings to Congress, as part of a populist plea for remediation funding. A bank vault door Chin constructed to protect the bills and a wooden pallet supporting 500,000 of the sheets are on display in the exhibition.

This may be a Chicago biased view of things, but I don't think any single artists has done more to blur the lines between social practice and artmaking than Theaster Gates. Theaster grew up in Chicago going to church and singing gospel. He studied urban planning and worked for the CTA. He made ceramics. He started to create events, performances, dinners, meetings and saw their potential to revitalize urban neighborhoods. Now "Gates creates sculptures with clay, tar, and renovated buildings, transforming the raw material of urban neighborhoods into radically reimagined vessels of opportunity for the community. Establishing a virtuous circle between fine art and social progress, Gates strips dilapidated buildings of their components, transforming those elements into sculptures that act as bonds or investments, the proceeds of which are used to finance the rehabilitation of entire city blocks."

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<sup>32</sup> “Art, Design, and the Public Domain,” Harvard University, accessed March 8, 2017, <http://www.gsd.harvard.edu/design-studies/art-and-the-public-domain/>.

<sup>33</sup> “Arts + Public Life,” University of Chicago, accessed March 8, 2017, <https://arts.uchicago.edu/artsandpubliclife>.

<sup>34</sup> “Art Place,” Art Place, accessed March 2017, <https://www.artplaceamerica.org>. From the website, ArtPlace “focuses its work on creative placemaking, which describes projects in which art plays an intentional and integrated role in place-based community planning and development.”

<sup>35</sup> In addition to being a practicing registered nurse, she continues to be one of the most prolific puppeteers that I know. Claire has been a regular contributor to the Bread and Puppet Theater for over 3 decades as a performer and puppet maker. She is a print maker, a curator, a painter, and a director. All of those activities have a pointed political purpose. Claire opened the Museum of Everyday Life where she serves as the “Chief Operating Philosopher”. For more information see: [museumofeverydaylife.org](http://museumofeverydaylife.org).

<sup>36</sup> Tria is my wife. She is without question the greatest influence on my life both in quantity and quality. Where I grew up an athlete, she grew up an artist. Our first years together were more than anything else, about her teaching me what being an artist meant. She taught me about openness, about descending into enthusiasm, about paying careful attention and respect to personal impulse and taste. She was and continues to be the most generous person I have ever met.

<sup>37</sup> Jessica Thebus runs Northwestern University’s graduate directing program. She is herself an accomplished theater director credited with shows at Steppenwolf and Goodman Theaters, as well as Oregon Shakespeare and countless other local houses. Jessica’s early influence on Redmoon was profound. Having “grown up” at the Piven Theater workshop alongside Tria Smith, the two of them brought a deep understanding and appreciation of Viola Spolin’s theater games. Those games and the “play” that they inspired, were the building blocks of our generative process. As we devised work together, Piven Theater’s particular take on the games, as translated through Jessica and Tria, invigorated our ensembles and structured our devising process.

<sup>38</sup> Robert Rolston became Quintron. He moved down to New Orleans, married Miss Pussycat, and opened the Spellcaster Lounge. His unique vision and playfulness attract thousands of people to the Ninth Ward each year for a blend of performance and music and cultural commentary that is one of a kind and endlessly fun and a surprising social service.

<sup>39</sup> Jeff Dorchen writes, directs, performs, sings, composes, interviews, and podcasts. Jeff was one of the principal members of a writer driven ensemble in Chicago called Theater Oobleck. They worked without a director under the premise that the writing should be able to direct itself as it is performed. Jeff has since moved to Los Angeles where he continues to write essays, plays, and screenplays. He is a regular contributor on a couple of the podcast “the is hell” and his essays can be found at: [mejeffdorchen.oblivio.com](http://mejeffdorchen.oblivio.com). Jeff adapted and wrote original text that served as the foundation for Redmoon’s breakthrough production of Herman Melville’s Moby-Dick at The Pegasus Players in 1995.

Mickle Maher was also a part of Theater Oobleck (see Jeff Dorchen). At one point he and Jeff spun off to create another theater company organized around the written world called Theater for the Age of Gold. Of all of the people I have collaborated with over the years, I think Mickle may well be the True Genius. Mickle is a writer of depth and humor and wisdom. He can find heart in the most absurd premise and bring it out for an audience. His *Hunchback Variations* is one of the most strangely moving theatrical events of my lifetime. Mickle’s writing for Redmoon aligns, not coincidentally, with some of our most loved work: Hunchback, The Cabinet, he translated Rostand’s *Cyrano* into rhyming verse for our collaboration with the Court Theatre that was mounted at the Museum of Contemporary Art.

<sup>40</sup> See “The Joyce Foundation,” <http://www.joycefdn.org/>. The Joyce Foundation awards grants to organizations working in the Great Lakes region.

<sup>41</sup> Gene Weingarten, “Pearls Before Breakfast: Can One Of The Nation’s Great Musicians Cut Through The Fog Of A D.C. Rush Hour? Let’s Find Out,” *The Washington Post*, April 8, 2007, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/>.

<sup>42</sup> The production was called *The Marriage of Cristobal and Dona Rosita*. It was the Synergy Theater. It indelicately mashed together “The Billy Club Puppets,” “Dona Rosita the Spinster,” “The Puppet Play of Don Cristobal,” and

some selected poems of Lorca's as well. Here is an appropriately unflattering

review: <https://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/the-marriage-of-cristobal-and-dona-rosita/Content?oid=881911>

<sup>43</sup> For an authoritative and extremely demanding read on the influence and impact of Peter Schumann read Stefan Brecht's lengthy (nearly 800 page) book: *Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theatre*. Stefan is the son of Berthold Brecht and his take on Bread and Puppet is also an ode to his father's work and beliefs about the theater.

<sup>44</sup> Reviews of Moby Dick at Pegasus Players

<sup>45</sup> Martha Lavey served as artistic director of Steppenwolf Theatre for 20 years, from 1995 to 2015. Her time there directly paralleled my time at Redmoon. She was a powerful and challenging mentor, providing personal counsel and theatrical insight from our first time together when told me that she really loved our production of Moby-Dick but simply had no idea what to make of the repetition of the figure of Ahab did to serve the tale. Her challenges and insights were instrumental in the growth and evolution of Redmoon.

<sup>46</sup> Steppenwolf Theater Company, [steppenwolf.org](http://steppenwolf.org). Steppenwolf Theatre company infamously started in the basement of a church in the mid-1970s, and has since become one of the most revered theater company and producer of new works in the country.

<sup>47</sup> "Homepage," Pegasus Theatre Chicago, <http://pegasustheatrechicago.org/>. Pegasus Players starting in 1978 originally in Chicago's Uptown neighborhood and described itself as "an independent, autonomous theatre company."

<sup>48</sup> George Wolfe served as the artistic director of The Public Theatre in New York, NY from 1993 until 2004. See [Publictheater.org](http://Publictheater.org).

<sup>49</sup> Lawrence Van Gelder, "Quasimodo Swings Into Action Across a Gray Paris Sky," *New York Times*, November, 9 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/31/theater/reviews/31hunc.html>.

<sup>50</sup> Donovan Foote has been the Design Director at Steppenwolf since 2013. See his work at <http://woodenwater.blogspot.com>. Chris Burnham published New York Times bestseller Nameless with Grant Morrison in 2015. [Chris Burnham.com](http://ChrisBurnham.com).

<sup>51</sup> Mary Houlihan, "Redmoon Rising in Logan Square," *Chicago Sun-Times*, October 28, 2001, sec. Sunday Showcase.

<sup>52</sup> The Nantucket Project is an annual idea festival on Nantucket Island. [Nantucketproject.com](http://Nantucketproject.com)

<sup>53</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho* (New York: Grove Press, 1984.)

<sup>54</sup> Ed Eagle, "All-time perfect games in MLB history," May, 2018, <https://www.mlb.com/news/perfect-game/c-265862286>.

<sup>55</sup> Harold Broadkey, " "Innocence," in *Stories in an Almost Classical Mode*, 1<sup>st</sup> Vintage Books ed., (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 161-195

<sup>56</sup> Jim Lasko , email message to Diane Goldin, September 17, 2014.

<sup>57</sup> The Palio is an annual horse race through the streets of Siena, Italy which began in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. .

<sup>58</sup> Chicago Fire is a show on NBC that chronicles the lives of a team of Firefighters and paramedics in Chicago.

<sup>59</sup> After School Matters links high school with summer and after-school jobs and internships. It was started by first lady Maggie Daley in the early 90s. [afterschoolmatters.org](http://afterschoolmatters.org).

<sup>60</sup> See House Designs in Appendix.

<sup>61</sup> Also known as a "fixed trunnion bridge." For further exploration of the history of Chicago "as seen through its bridges," see Patrick McBriarty's *Chicago River Bridges*.

<sup>62</sup> Richard Ciccone's 2001 article, "Introducing Slats Grobnik, Mike Yoriko's alter ego," provides a nice overview of Royko and his creation of the fictional Slats Grobnik. [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2001-06-13/features/0106130008\\_1\\_mike-royko-slats-grobnik-gun-club](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2001-06-13/features/0106130008_1_mike-royko-slats-grobnik-gun-club)

<sup>63</sup> Steampunk is a genre of fiction or fantasy that borrows imagery from mechanics of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially the steam engine. Thomas the tank Engine, of course, refers to the book and TV series "Thomas and Friends," about a friendly, talking train.

<sup>64</sup> Jack Helbig, "The Ballad of Frankie and Johnny," *Chicago Reader*, June 12, 1997, <https://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/the-ballad-of-frankie-and-johnny/Content?oid=893625>

<sup>65</sup> The Larry O'Brien is the trophy awarded the winner of the NBA Finals.

<sup>66</sup> “Free and forever clear” were the words used by the famous architect and urban designer Daniel Burnham in his 1909 plan for the city of Chicago. <http://www.chicagomaritimemuseum.org/>.

<sup>67</sup> Much of the research about the Great Chicago Fire was done in the archives of the Chicago History Museum, [Chicagohistory.org](http://chicagohistory.org).

<sup>68</sup> Tria Smith and Shawn Stucky, *The Great Chicago Fire*, (New York: AV2 by Weigel, 2014.)

<sup>69</sup> Ted Cox and Lizzie Schiffman Tufano, “Rahm Stands by Fire Fest, but says ‘Changes, Adaptations’ to Be Made,” *DNAinfo Chicago*, October 8, 2014, <https://www.dnainfo.com/chicago/20141008/downtown/rahm-stands-by-fire-fest-but-says-changes-adaptations-be-made/>.

<sup>70</sup> Chris Jones, “Open letter to Redmoon: What to get right next time,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 9, 2014.

<sup>71</sup> For a taste of the scathing reviews and conversation that erupted after the Fire festival, a simple google search of the Festival will reveal a colorful conversation. To get a sense, Deanna Issac’s described the festival as “A Failure that speaks for itself... Especially when there’s a crowd of 30,000 chilled witnesses including the governor and a cleared chagrined mayor, waiting, waiting for the heavily hyped, multimillion-dollar, jaw-dropping spectacle that never happened” in her article “The Great Chicago Fire Festival sets into motion the Great Chicago Spin Machine,” *Chicago Reader*, October 9, 2014, <https://www.chicagoreader.com/Bleader/archives/2014/10/09/the-great-chicago-fire-festival-sets-into-motion-the-great-chicago-spin-machine>.

Scanning through the comment section of the same article displays some of the more scathing public commentary floating around after the failure to ignite, exemplified by outbursts like the following from someone named “Carri.” On October 9, 2014.

“Hire some engineers for the commissioning effort to verify the design works. What an amateur job you have going on here. Don't look stupid get someone who knows what to do. I'm afraid its too late to get funding as your reputation is zero right now. Go back to painting.”

Chris Jones’s Review in the *Chicago Tribune* credited the accomplishment of the festivities and the excitement of gathering with diverse Chicagoans in an under-utilized part of the city. He writes, “It felt like downtown Chicago was teeming with community and excitement in the minutes before the show, offering up a rare coming together of Chicagoans of all stripes.” However, he later scolds the operation for its lack of professionalism.

“The cold, hard truth of the spectacle business, as any producer of an Olympic opener or a Super Bowl half-time show will tell you, is that you can have all the great ideas in the world, but without stellar execution, they’re all about as useful as damp matches....there seemed to be no contingency plan, no plan B, other than inaction and delay.” From “Review: Great Chicago Fire Festival by Redmoon,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 5, 2014, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/theater/reviews/chi-great-fire-festival-redmoon-review-column.html>. See also Chris Jones, “Open Letter to Redmoon: What to get right next time,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 9, 2014. <http://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/theater/news/ct-redmoon-fire-what-to-get-right-column.html>.

Another useful reference is a recording of *the Morning Shift* on WBEZ-FM from October 6, 2014, which included an interview with me as well as feedback from listeners calling in. Someone names Anthony, who claims to be a supporter of Redmoon, comments, “People are taking it not only as a failure of the fest but also a failure of the city.” 17:07, <https://www.wbez.org/shows/morning-shift/great-chicago-fire-festival-receives-harsh-reviews-after-it-fails-to-launch/32280373-6a83-43f4-b732-bc4a541e2cc1>.

<sup>72</sup> Of course, I am referring here to Aaron’s Sorkin’s epic HBO series “The West Wing,” which chronicles the fictional presidency of Josiah Bartlet, who is played by Martin Sheen.

<sup>73</sup> BluesFest, Taste of Chicago, Summer Dance Chicago and World Music Festival are free city-wide annual festivals which were piloted with Weisberg’s oversight in the 80s and 90s, and today are widely regarded as iconic and indispensable cultural events in the city of Chicago. Read more about them here: [https://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/dca/supp\\_info/](https://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/dca/supp_info/).

Cow Parade is a public art exhibit of fiberglass cow sculptures originally created by Walter Knapp in Zurich, Switzerland. Weinger and Chicago businessman Peter Hanig brought the idea to Chicago in 1999, commissioning local artists to create the life-sized cow sculptures, which were then auctioned to raise funds for local charities.

Cow parade is now a corporation that stages Cow Parade events in cities throughout the world. See <http://www.cowparade.com/our-story/>

Puppetropolis was a ten-day festival in 2001 which laid the groundwork for the Chicago International Puppetry Festival, a biennial festival conceived in 2002 by Blair Thomas & Co. <https://www.chicagopuppetfest.org/>

<sup>74</sup> See Malcolm Gladwell, "Six Degrees of Lois Weisberg," *The New Yorker*, January 11, 1999: 52.

<sup>75</sup> For a comprehensive overview of the Shakman suit, Anne Freeman, "Doing Battle with the Patronage Army: Politics, Courts, and Personnel Administration in Chicago." *Public Administration Review* 48, no. 5 (1988): 847-59. doi:10.2307/976900. Freeman paints a favorable picture of Shakman, arguing that the case did exactly what it was supposed to: debilitate the "patronage army" which allowed the "political machine" to rule in Chicago to date. In contrast, this 2002 anonymous opinion piece in the *Chicago Tribune*, "Time for Shakman for evolve," articulates the perspective many had that Shakman should be scaled back, and that more employees should have been exempt from it under Daley: [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2002-02-03/news/0202030030\\_1\\_shakman-decree-city-workers-city-hall](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2002-02-03/news/0202030030_1_shakman-decree-city-workers-city-hall).

Another helpful, though lengthy, resource is the 51-page interview with Michael Shakman from 2008. The interview gives insight into Shakman's intention for the lawsuit during his campaigns, and the unintended bureaucratic impacts of the case in Chicago throughout the following decades.

[https://www.illinois.gov/alplm/library/collections/oralhistory/illinoisstatecraft/general/Documents/ShakmanMichael/Shakman\\_Mic\\_4FNL.pdf](https://www.illinois.gov/alplm/library/collections/oralhistory/illinoisstatecraft/general/Documents/ShakmanMichael/Shakman_Mic_4FNL.pdf).

<sup>76</sup> Read John Bebow's profile of Noelle Brennan, "Noelle Brennan," *Chicago Tribune*, August 3, 2005, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/chi-0508030260aug03-story.html>.

<sup>77</sup> Colleen Mastony, "The artful life of Lois Weisberg; Former cultural affairs commissioner sells fruit and is working on a memoir," *Chicago Tribune*, February 19, 2012, [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2012-02-19/news/ct-met-lois-weisberg-retired-20120219\\_1\\_artful-life-cultural-affairs-lois-weisberg/2](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2012-02-19/news/ct-met-lois-weisberg-retired-20120219_1_artful-life-cultural-affairs-lois-weisberg/2).

<sup>78</sup> The statement from Patrick Buchanan, conservative commentator and Republican presidential candidate, is quoted in Diane Haithman's 1992 *LA Times* article "Fear, Politics and Anxiety at the NEA: Art grants: Many applicants believe the White House is pressing to pick an uncontroversial successor to John E. Frohnmayer," [http://articles.latimes.com/1992-03-04/entertainment/ca-3108\\_1\\_grant-application](http://articles.latimes.com/1992-03-04/entertainment/ca-3108_1_grant-application).

*New York Times* reporter William H. Honan quoted Senator Dick Armey commenting on Robert Mapplethorpe in "Congressional Anger Threatens Art Endowment's Budget," 1989, <https://www.nytimes.com/1989/06/20/arts/congressional-anger-threatens-arts-endowment-s-budget.html>.

<sup>79</sup> "National Endowment for the Arts: Controversies in Free Speech," *National Coalition Against Censorship*, <http://ncac.org/resource/national-endowment-for-the-arts-controversies-in-free-speech>.

<sup>80</sup> The NEA requested for a budget of 150 million in 2017, <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/NEA-FY18-Appropriations-request.pdf>. Spending for 2017 was 4 trillion: <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/53624>. President Trump's proposed budget, which was largely unaltered before being passed, for 2018 did not include funding for the NEA. The organization requested 29 million "to begin the orderly closure of the agency." <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/NEA-FY18-Appropriations-request.pdf>. Pg. 1.

<sup>81</sup> For instance, the NEA's partnership with ARTPLACE, which works with stakeholders to "position arts and culture as a core sector of comprehensive community planning and development in order to help strengthen the social, physical and economic fabric of communities." <https://www.artplaceamerica.org/about/introduction>.

<sup>82</sup> Swag- "The new generation's alternative word for 'cool'." From [urbandictionary.com](http://urbandictionary.com)

<sup>83</sup> See James Warren, "Life after Lois – Lois Weisberg," *TimeOut*, March 23, 2011, <https://www.timeout.com/chicago/things-to-do/life-after-lois-lois-weisberg>. Also Jim DeRegatis's "Chicago's Department of Cultural Affairs is dismantled as 29 are laid off," December 16, 2010, <https://www.wbez.org/shows/jim-derogatis/chicagos-department-of-cultural-affairs-is-dismantled-as-29-are-laid-off/7fb3a5fa-90a6-4d01-b06b-faa5dd6f7761>

<sup>84</sup> Andy Wong, "Obama Backs Chicago 2016 Olympic Bid," *CBSNews*, July 7, 2009, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/obama-backs-chicago-2016-olympic-bid/>.

<sup>85</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=whsRh0000QE> "Chicago Reacts to Losing 2016 Olympics (Epic Fail)"

<sup>86</sup> Same video, 1min. 22sec.

<sup>87</sup> “Chicago’s murder rate soars 72% in 2016; shootings up more than 88%.”

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2016/04/01/murders-shootings-soar-chicago-through-first-three-months-2016/82507210/>.

The 2016 census estimated that 21.7% of Chicagoans were living in poverty.

<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/chicagocityillinois/IPE120216#viewtop>.

<sup>88</sup> “Foreword,” *Chicago Cultural Plan 2012*, 7,

<https://www.cityofchicago.org/content/dam/city/depts/dca/Cultural%20Plan/ChicagoCulturalPlan2012.pdf>

<sup>89</sup> 36 recommendations that emerged from the report, and recommendation 11 was for a “Chicago river cultural festival events taking place at key locations along the River, in and around the River, connecting communities to culture.” From “Elevate and Expand Neighborhood Cultural Assets,” *Chicago Cultural Plan 2012*, 28.

<sup>90</sup> I actually attended the conference with Rocco Landesman and wrote a reflection for Howlround.com.

Landesman was concerned about the increasingly constricted field of the theater, with its abundance of practitioners and low demand amongst the public, as well as the temptation for theater-makers to cave to demands to marketability rather than artistic vision. Read more in “Theater Geek,” *HowlRound*, June 19, 2011, <http://howlround.com/theater-geek>.

<sup>91</sup> For more about CEOs for Cities, [ceosforcities.org](http://ceosforcities.org).

<sup>92</sup> You can read all about ArtPlace’s partnership with Redmoon until out closing in 2015 on their blog dedicated to our collaboration

<https://www.artplaceamerica.org/funded-projects/great-chicago-fire-festival>.

<sup>93</sup> There is very little information available about the One Chicago Fund. A Google search reveals two relevant hits: one is the fund’s operating location at a start-up incubator, called 1871, in downtown Chicago,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/16/fashion/weddings/thomas-obriant-jr-and-david-boul.html>. The second is David Boul’s marriage announcement, which describes the fund as a “a nonprofit organization that supports civic projects in Chicago.” <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/16/fashion/weddings/thomas-obriant-jr-and-david-boul.html>.

<sup>94</sup> Unfortunately, with the closing of Redmoon Theater, all archived communications, including the emails between me and Commissioner Boone, become inaccessible.

<sup>95</sup> Both Harvard University and University of Chicago made money available to pay students interested in working on the Great Chicago Fire Festival. Students from Harvard’s Graduate School of Design helped with numerous different studies of the Chicago River. Students from the University of Chicago worked with collaborating community based organizations to facilitate neighborhood celebrations. We received early commitments from the Pritzker Pucker Family Foundation and the Bluhm Foundation that helped establish a stature within that community.

<sup>96</sup> Rebecca Rugg came to Redmoon from her position as artistic producer at Steppenwolf Theater. One of the more critical followers of the Fire Festival, journalist Deanna Issacs, wrote up a biography of her in the *Chicago Reader*. “Great Chicago Fire Festival gets a producer,” July 18, 2013, <https://www.chicagoreader.com/Bleader/archives/2013/07/18/great-chicago-fire-festival-gets-a-producer>. Hilton Al’s calling her “a brilliant dramaturge, and one of the best all-around theater workers out there,” in a 2014 *New Yorker* piece about Tavi Gevinson entitled “Youth Culture.”

<sup>97</sup> Dean Richards, “The Great Chicago Fizzle? What went wrong with the Great Chicago Fire Festival,” Dean Richard’s Sunday Morning, *WGN Radio*, October 5, 2014, <http://wgnradio.com/2014/10/05/the-great-chicago-fire-event-controversy/>.

<sup>98</sup> See the rest of the on-camera interview at “Great Chicago Fire Struggles to Stay Lit,” *Chicago Tonight*, *WTTW News*, October 6, 2014, <https://chicagotonight.wttw.com/2014/10/06/great-chicago-fire-struggles-stay-lit>.

<sup>99</sup> Alderman Burke was one of the most verdant critics after the Festival, specifically lamenting the “wasted” taxpayer dollars in interviews with the press and during meetings. In the interview with WTTW, he says, “One would think if there’s enough money to spend on something like this that maybe the money would be better spent being contributed to... help feed people that are going hungry or to donate to a shelter that takes care of abused women, or many such things.” Quoted in Hal Bardick, “Ald. Urke calls Great Chicago Fire Festival a ‘fiasco,’”

*Chicago Tribune*, October 6, 2014, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/politics/chi-ald-burke-calls-great-chicago-fire-festival-a-fiasco-20141006-story.html>.

<sup>100</sup> Jon Ronson, *So You've Been Publicly Shamed*, Riverhead Books, New York, 2015, 67-78.

<sup>101</sup> Foucault, Michel, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Vintage Books, New York, 1979, Page?

<sup>102</sup> Ronson.

<sup>103</sup> The “fail fast, fail often” mantra is preached by, for example, IDEO, an iconic Silicon Valley consulting firm started by Stanford design professor, David Kelley. See Megan Crabtree’s “8 Ways to Fail Your Way to Success,” *IDEO*, May 31, 2017, <https://www.ideo.com/blog/8-ways-to-fail-your-way-to-success>.

<sup>104</sup> “Judge lifts Shakman decree federal oversight on Chicago hiring,” *abc7*, June 16, 2014, <http://abc7chicago.com/politics/judge-lifts-shakman-decree-oversight-on-chicago-hiring/116359/>.

<sup>105</sup> Lori Rackl of the *Chicago Sun-Times* wrote about Steve in her 2014 article “Meet the man who saved ‘Chicago Fire’- and many lives over long career.” <https://chicago.suntimes.com/entertainment/meet-the-man-who-saved-chicago-fire-and-many-lives-over-long-career/>.

<sup>106</sup> IATSE stands for the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees. [iatse.net](http://iatse.net).

<sup>107</sup> StoryCorps is an NPR program which collects everyday Americans’ stories. All interviews are archives at the Library of Congress in Washington D.C. [storycorps.org](http://storycorps.org).

<sup>108</sup> John Byrne and Hal Dardick, “Emanuel May Double down on Great Chicago Fire Event despite Fizzle,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 8, 2014, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/breaking/chi-emanuel-mrs-olearys-cow-might-have-come-in-hand-at-great-chicago-fire-festival-20141008-story.html>.

<sup>109</sup> Marcus Riley, “Rahm Plans to Continue Chicago Fire Festival,” NBC Chicago, October 8, 2014, <https://www.nbcchicago.com/news/local/Rahm-Plans-to-Continue-Chicago-Fire-Festival-278609301.html>.

<sup>110</sup> Dean Richards, “The Great Chicago Fizzle? What went wrong with the Great Chicago Fire Festival,” Dean Richard’s Sunday Morning, *WGN Radio*, October 5, 2014, <http://wgnradio.com/2014/10/05/the-great-chicago-fire-event-controversy/>.

<sup>111</sup> Redmoon, “Frankenstein Action Plan” (Unpublished manuscript, 1995-1996).

<sup>112</sup> Redmoon, “Sink, Sank, Sunk Action Plan” (Unpublished manuscript, 1999).

<sup>113</sup> A city plan is generally commissioned by a municipality, who will search and then hire a design firm specializing in urban design and planning to create a schema for the development of the area that includes drawings that demark green spaces and streets and parking, as well as policy and zoning recommendations, etc.

<sup>114</sup> J. Mark Schuster, “Ephemera, Temporary Urbanism and Imaging,” in *Imaging the City: Continuing Struggles and New Directions*, ed. Lawrence J. Vale and Sam Bass Warner (New Brunswick, NJ: Center for Urban Policy Research, 2001), 361–97, <https://culturalpolicy.uchicago.edu/sites/culturalpolicy.uchicago.edu/files/schuster-ephemera.pdf>.

<sup>115</sup> Jim Stockard (curator of the Loeb Fellowship, friend of Mark Schuster), in discussion with the author, 2012.

<sup>116</sup> Schuster, 12-13.

<sup>117</sup> The book tells the story of a family of ducks searching for a home who, with the help of a kindly policeman, settle in the pond of the Boston Public Gardens. Robert McCloskey, *Make Way for Ducklings*, Re-issued 1999 edition (Prince Frederick, Md.: Puffin Books, 1999).

<sup>118</sup> Schuster.

<sup>119</sup> See, for example, Greg Hinz, “City Cultural Chief Lois Weisberg Leaves Her Post — with a Blast,” *Crain’s Chicago Business*, January 19, 2011, <http://www.chicagobusiness.com/article/20110119/BLOGS02/301199994/city-cultural-chief-lois-weisberg-leaves-her-post-with-a-blast>. And Jim DeRogatis, “DeRogatis: Lois Weisberg Speaks Out,” *WBEZ*, January 20, 2011, <https://www.wbez.org/shows/jim-derogatis/lois-weisberg-this-is-one-of-the-worst-things-that-ever-has-happened-to-the-city/546bdccd-2931-412e-b8fc-372c99977eb8>.

<sup>120</sup> Megy Karydes, “Chicago’s Redmoon Winter Pageant: An Innovative, Eye-Catching Performance,” *USA Today* 10 Best, December 2, 2014, <https://www.10best.com/destinations/illinois/chicago/articles/chicagos-redmoon-winter-pageant-an-innovative-eye-catching-performance/>.

<sup>121</sup> “Lakefront Protection and Public Trust – FOTP,” accessed May 9, 2018, <https://fotp.org/issues/policy/lakefront-protection-and-public-trust/>.

<sup>122</sup> Daniel Hudson Burnham and Edward H. Bennett, *Plan of Chicago*, Centennial Edition. (Chicago, Ill.: Great Books Foundation, 2009).

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- <sup>123</sup> Daniel Hudson Burnham, *Report on a Plan for San Francisco* (San Francisco: Published by the city, 1905).
- <sup>124</sup> Sue A. Kohler and Pamela Scott, *Designing the Nation's Capital: The 1901 Plan for Washington, D.C.* (Washington, D.C.: United States Commission of Fine Arts, 2006).
- <sup>125</sup> "The Cleveland Group Plan of 1903: The Cleveland Memory Project," accessed May 9, 2018, <http://www.clevelandmemory.org/groupplan/>.
- <sup>126</sup> The City Beautiful Movement was an architectural and urban planning philosophy of the 1890s and 1900s, which promoted the beautification and monumental grandeur of America's cities. For more on the City Beautiful movement and its history, see William H. Wilson, *The City Beautiful Movement, Creating the North American Landscape* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).
- <sup>127</sup> See Susan Benjamin and Stuart Cohen, *Great Houses of Chicago, 1871-1921* (New York: Acanthus Press, 2008). And Kim Coventry, Daniel Meyer, and Arthur H. Miller, *Classic Country Estates of Lake Forest: Architecture and Landscape Design 1856-1940* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003).
- <sup>128</sup> "The Plan of Chicago: Implementation," Encyclopedia of Chicago, accessed May 9, 2018, <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/300008.html>.
- <sup>129</sup> Andrew Chakalis et al., "A Century of Planning in Cleveland," *Journal of Planning History* 1, no. 1 (2002): 79–93.
- <sup>130</sup> Michael was a clarinetist and a painter. He made his living doing faux finishes in mansions on the North Shore. He lived for a short time in the back of Redmoon's studio on Point Street. I lost track of him when he left Chicago in late 1999.
- <sup>131</sup> For John Riker's bio and published works, see: "John Riker • Philosophy Colorado College," Colorado College, accessed May 9, 2018, [https://www.coloradocollege.edu/academics/dept/philosophy/people/profile.html?person=riker\\_john\\_h](https://www.coloradocollege.edu/academics/dept/philosophy/people/profile.html?person=riker_john_h).
- <sup>132</sup> Schuster, 3.
- <sup>133</sup> Schuster, 3.
- <sup>134</sup> On June 4, 1989, student-led pro-democracy demonstrations in China came to a head in Beijing's Tiananmen Square, when the protests were forcibly and violently suppressed after the Chinese government declared martial law.
- <sup>135</sup> Much has been written and discussed about this photo, and who the mysterious "Tank Man" really is, including a PBS documentary: Antony Thomas et al., *The Tank Man* (WGBH Educational Foundation; Distributed by PBS Video, 2006).
- <sup>136</sup> Columbine High School was the site of a mass shooting on April 20, 1999, when senior students Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold opened fire on their classmates, killing 12 students and one teacher.
- <sup>137</sup> See Appendix --
- <sup>138</sup> Jeff Kosky is the author of *Arts of Wonder: Enchanting Secularity - Walter De Maria, Diller + Scofidio, James Turrell, Andy Goldsworthy* (University of Chicago Press, 2016).
- <sup>139</sup> Jens Jensen was a Danish-American landscape architect in the 1900s. For more on Jensen, see: Leonard K. Eaton, *Landscape Artist in America: The Life and Work of Jens Jensen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964).
- <sup>140</sup> The Aspen Institute is "a nonpartisan forum for values-based leadership and the exchange of ideas." <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/about/>
- <sup>141</sup> See Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class--Revisited: Revised and Expanded* (New York: Basic Books, 2014).
- <sup>142</sup> See Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, NY: Touchstone Books by Simon & Schuster, 2001).
- <sup>143</sup> Mike Lydon leads the New York branch of Street Plans, "an award-winning urban planning, design, and research/advocacy firm." To learn more about Street Plans, and to see examples of their work and Mike's research, see: "Street Plans Collaborative | Better Streets, Better Places," accessed May 9, 2018, <http://www.street-plans.com/>.
- <sup>144</sup> A few members of this handful: Josh McManus, Carol Colletta, Gabe Klein, Charles Landry.
- <sup>145</sup> More information about my cohort of Loeb Fellows and their work can be found on the Loeb Fellowship website: "The LOEB Fellowship | Loeb Fellows," The LOEB Fellowship, accessed May 28, 2018, <https://loebfellowship.gsd.harvard.edu/fellows-alumni/fellows-search/>.

<sup>146</sup> Schuster, 3.

<sup>147</sup> For more on Forest City, see: "Forest City Realty Trust," accessed May 9, 2018, <https://www.forestcity.net/>.

<sup>148</sup> According to its website, "Built in 1915, The Logan Square Auditorium is a historic ballroom located in the heart of one of Chicago's most vibrant neighborhoods. Enriched with elegant details and equipped with a state of the art sound system and full liquor bar, the LSA hosts a range of events from concerts to weddings, special events and festivals." "Logan Square Auditorium – A Classic Event Space For All Occasions," accessed May 23, 2018, <http://logansquareauditorium.com/>.

Pulaski Park was designed by Jens Jensen in 1912; the Field House was constructed in 1914. "Incorporating elements such as tile roofs, half-timbering, a tower, dormers and verandahs, architect William Carbys Zimmerman designed the three-story brick field house to emulate Eastern European architecture familiar to the immigrant community." "Pulaski Park | Chicago Park District," accessed May 23, 2018, <https://www.chicagoparkdistrict.com/parks-facilities/pulaski-park>.

<sup>149</sup> Dane Placko, F. O. X. Chicago, and BGA, "BGA Investigations Prompt Early Exit for Parks Chief," Better Government Association, June 1, 2011, <https://www.bettergov.org/news/bga-investigations-prompt-early-exit-for-parks-chief>.

<sup>150</sup> Northerly Island is a 91- acre peninsula, designed by Daniel Burnham, that juts into Lake Michigan at the heart of the Museum Campus. "Northerly Island | Chicago Park District," accessed May 23, 2018, <https://www.chicagoparkdistrict.com/parks-facilities/northerly-island>.

<sup>151</sup> Live Nation is a venue operator and events promoter, based in America but with operations all over the world. "Live Nation — Music & Live Events | Concert Tickets, Tour News, Venues," Live Nation, accessed May 23, 2018, <https://www.livenation.com/>.

<sup>152</sup> Studio Gang is an architecture and urban design practice operating in Chicago, New York, and San Francisco. Founded by MacArthur Fellow Jeanne Gang, Studio Gang "Work[s] as a collective of 100 architects, designers, and planners, using design as a medium to connect people to each other, to their communities, and to the environment." "Studio Gang," accessed May 23, 2018, <http://studiogang.com/studio/profile>.

<sup>153</sup> Rick Kogan, "Punch And Judy Who? Redefining The Puppet Show -- And Theater Itself," *Chicago Tribune*, April 18, 1996, sec. TEMPO.

<sup>154</sup> Michael Hawthorne, "U.S. Demands Chicago River Cleanup," *Chicago Tribune*, May 12, 2011, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-met-chicago-river-swimming-20110512-story.html>.

<sup>155</sup> Tria Smith, *The Great Chicago Fire* (New York, NY: Av2 by Weigl, 2014).

<sup>156</sup> Yochai Benkler, *The Penguin and the Leviathan: How Cooperation Triumphs over Self-Interest* (New York: Crown Business, 2011).

<sup>157</sup> Launched in 1980 by Professor Nicholas Negroponte and former MIT President and Science Advisor to President John F. Kennedy, Jerome Wiesner, "The MIT Media Lab transcends known boundaries and disciplines by actively promoting a unique, antidisciplinary culture that emboldens unconventional mixing and matching of seemingly disparate research areas." "About the Lab: Mission & History," MIT Media Lab, accessed May 23, 2018, <https://www.media.mit.edu/about/mission-history/>.

<sup>158</sup> Streetsblog is a series of blogs which "connects people to information about how to reduce dependence on cars and improve conditions for walking, biking, and transit. Since 2006, our reporters have broken important stories about efforts to prevent pedestrian injuries and deaths, build out bicycle networks, and make transit more useful. Our writing raises the profile of these issues with policy makers and makes arcane topics like parking requirements and induced traffic accessible to a broad audience." Streetsblog has blogs for the USA, New York City, Los Angeles, San Francisco, California, Chicago, Denver, St. Louis, Ohio, Texas, and the southeast. "About," *Streetsblog.Org* (blog), December 9, 2016, <https://www.streetsblog.org/about/>.

<sup>159</sup> "About | Berkman Klein Center," accessed May 23, 2018, <https://cyber.harvard.edu/about>.

<sup>160</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Christopher Brooke (Penguin Classics, 2017).

<sup>161</sup> Benkler, 4.

<sup>162</sup> F. Eugene Heath, "Invisible Hand," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, December 12, 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/invisible-hand>.

<sup>163</sup> Benkler, 19.

<sup>164</sup> “What Is Linux?,” Opensource.com, accessed May 23, 2018, <https://opensource.com/resources/linux>.

<sup>165</sup> Bread and Puppet, founded in 1963 by Peter Schumann, is known for its politically radical puppet theater, often employing large-scale spectacle, both in independent works and as part of larger protests and political movements. “Bread and Puppet Theater | Puppeteers and Sourdough Bakers of Glover,” accessed May 23, 2018, <http://breadandpuppet.org/>. For an in-depth history of Schumann and Bread and Puppet, see Stefan Brecht, *Peter Schumann’s Bread and Puppet Theatre* (Methuen, 1988).

<sup>166</sup> The Association House of Chicago “serves a multi-cultural community by providing comprehensive, collaborative and effective programs in English and Spanish. We promote health and wellness and create opportunities for educational and economic advancement.” “Association House of Chicago Nonprofit Community Services,” accessed May 23, 2018, <https://www.associationhouse.org/>.

Thresholds, established in 1959, “provides healthcare, housing, and hope for thousands of persons with mental illnesses and substance use disorders in Illinois each year. Through care, employment, advocacy, and housing, Thresholds assists and inspires people with mental illnesses to reclaim their lives.” “About,” *Thresholds*, accessed May 23, 2018, <http://www.thresholds.org/about/>.

<sup>167</sup> Dogtroep is a Dutch company specializing in site-specific spectacles; for a brief overview of their work, see: “Framing the Fantasy: Amsterdam’s Dogtroep Brings Street Theater to New Heights,” *Art Essay* (blog), November 7, 2017, <https://artscolumbia.org/performing-arts/theatre/framing-fantasy-amsterdams-dogtroep-brings-street-theater-new-heights-26681/>.

Royale de Luxe is a French company known for its street performances featuring mind-bogglingly enormous marionettes. We’ll come back to them at some length in Chapter 7, but for more information, see their website: “The Company - Royal de Luxe,” Royale de Luxe, accessed May 29, 2018, <https://www.royal-de-luxe.com/en/company/>.

<sup>168</sup> Jon Ronson, *So You’ve Been Publicly Shamed* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2015).

<sup>169</sup> Benkler, 93.

<sup>170</sup> Benkler, 161.

<sup>171</sup> The Copernicus Center “serves the metropolitan Chicago area as a major civic, cultural, educational, recreational and entertainment resource.” “Copernicus Center - Concerts, Cultural, Community Events Chicago,” accessed May 23, 2018, <https://copernicuscenter.org>.

<sup>172</sup>

<sup>173</sup> Chris Jones, “Open Letter to Redmoon: What to Get Right next Time,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 9, 2014, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/theater/news/ct-redmoon-fire-what-to-get-right-column.html>.

<sup>174</sup> Saul Bellow, *Humboldt’s Gift* (New York: Viking Press, 1975); Ariel Levy and Robert Atwan, eds., *The Best American Essays 2015* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015); Arundhati Roy, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness: A Novel* (New York: Knopf, 2017).

<sup>175</sup> Lin-Manuel Miranda is a Pulitzer, Tony, Grammy, and Emmy-Award winning composer, lyricist, playwright and actor, who shot to superstardom with *Hamilton*, which he created and starred in in 2015. Lin-Manuel Miranda, accessed May 23, 2018, <http://www.linmanuel.com/>.

*Serial* is an investigative journalism podcast developed by *This American Life*, hosted by Sarah Koenig and created by Koenig and Julie Snyder. The first season, which became something of a national obsession, focused on the 1999 murder of Hae Min Lee. Sarah Koenig and Julie Snyder, *Serial*, accessed May 23, 2018, <https://serialpodcast.org/>.

<sup>176</sup> *Sleep No More* is an immersive, site-specific work of theatre created by the British company Punchdrunk, which has been running at the McKittrick Hotel in New York City since 2011. Based on Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, Daphne DuMaurier’s *Rebecca* (or, more specifically, the 1940 Alfred Hitchcock film), and other works, the production encourages its masked audience members to engage in their own individual experience by allowing them to follow any character and go (just about) anywhere they choose. “Sleep No More,” McKittrick Hotel, accessed May 23, 2018, <https://mckittrickhotel.com/sleep-no-more/>.

<sup>177</sup> De La Guarda was an Argentine company whose shows contain a mix of acrobatics, circus, theater and music. The performers swing 40 feet above the audience’s head, while elements like water and fog are used to immerse

the audience fully in the experience. Steven Oxman, "De La Guarda," *Variety* (blog), January 8, 2001, <http://variety.com/2001/legit/reviews/de-la-guarda-1200466475/>.

<sup>178</sup> Tracy Letts' *August: Osage County* premiered at Steppenwolf in 2007, directed by Anna Shapiro. The production transferred to Broadway, where it won multiple Tony Awards. "August: Osage County | Steppenwolf Theatre," accessed May 23, 2018, <https://www.steppenwolf.org/tickets--events/seasons/200607/august-osage-county/>.

<sup>179</sup> The original Broadway production of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* was staged in 1993, directed by George C. Wolfe. The production won many awards, and the first part of the play, *Millennium Approaches*, won the 1993 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. "Angels in America: Millennium Approaches Broadway @ Walter Kerr Theatre," Playbill, accessed May 29, 2018, <http://www.playbill.com/production/angels-in-america-millennium-approaches-walter-kerr-theatre-vault-0000010052>.

<sup>180</sup> *The Lion King*, based off of the 1994 Disney movie, premiered on Broadway in 1997, winning multiple Tony Awards. It is still playing today, on Broadway and all over the world. "Disney THE LION KING | Award-Winning Best Musical," accessed May 23, 2018, <http://www.lionking.com/>.

<sup>181</sup> *Hamilton*, a musical about Alexander Hamilton featuring a majority non-white cast and hip-hop inspired music, created by Lin-Manuel Miranda, became a cultural juggernaut almost as soon as it premiered at The Public Theater in 2015. Once on Broadway, the show won numerous Tony Awards, as well as the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Now with productions across the country and around the world, the show continues to be a box office smash. Hamilton Official Site, accessed May 23, 2018, <https://hamiltonmusical.com/>.

<sup>182</sup> The *Hamilton* casts have done this numerous times, most prominently when they delivered a post-show message to Vice President Mike Pence, who was in the audience. (The incident was widely covered; for instance, see Christopher Mele and Patrick Healy, "'Hamilton' Had Some Unscripted Lines for Pence. Trump Wasn't Happy.," *The New York Times*, November 19, 2016, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/19/us/mike-pence-hamilton.html>.)

<sup>183</sup> The Flying Wallendas are a circus family who have been performing their daring high-wire acts since the 1920s. The 7-Person Human Pyramid is one of their most famous feats. "The Flying Wallendas," accessed May 23, 2018, [www.wallenda.com](http://www.wallenda.com)

<sup>184</sup> Mummenschanz is a Swiss theater troupe known as "the epitome of contemporary mask theater worldwide, across cultures and independently of language. Without spoken word, purely visually and completely without music and set design, only with masks and bodies against black background, the artists appear." "STORY," Mummenschanz, accessed May 29, 2018, <https://www.mummenschanz.com/company/geschichte/>.

<sup>185</sup> Archibald Henderson, *George Bernard Shaw, His Life and Works* (Stewart & Kidd company, 1911), 347.

<sup>186</sup> For more on Viola Spolin, see "Biography," Viola Spolin, accessed May 24, 2018, <https://www.violaspolin.org/bio/>.

<sup>187</sup> The Compass Players was an improvisational cabaret which operated in Chicago and St. Louis from 1955-1958. Several alums of The Compass Players, including Paul Sills, went on to found The Second City. The Second City, founded in 1959, has become one of the foremost improv-based sketch comedy theaters in the world, with outfits in Chicago (the original location), Toronto, and Hollywood, and famous alums including Dan Ackroyd, Bill Murray, and Tina Fey, among many others. For more on The Compass Players, see: Tony Adler, "Improvisational Theater," Encyclopedia of Chicago, accessed May 24, 2018, <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/631.html>. For more on The Second City, see: "History," The Second City, accessed May 24, 2018, <https://www.secondcity.com/history/>.

<sup>188</sup> The Piven Theatre Workshop was founded by Joyce and Byrne Piven; its mission is "is to encourage a process of creative exploration that celebrates each individual's unique voice through an ensemble-based, community-oriented approach to theatre training and performance. This mission, as it has evolved over 40 years, is pursued through the three branches of the organization: the training center for children and adults which serves over 1,000 students annually and provides mentorship opportunities for emerging theatre artists and educators, the extensive scholarship and community outreach programs, and the professional Equity theatre committed to new works and literary adaptations." "ABOUT," Piven Theatre Workshop, accessed May 24, 2018, <https://www.piventheatre.org/about>.

<sup>189</sup> Viola Spolin, *Theater Games for Rehearsal: A Director's Handbook* (Northwestern University Press, 1985), 47; Viola Spolin and Paul Sills, *Improvisation for the Theater: A Handbook of Teaching and Directing Techniques* (Northwestern University Press, 1999), 217-218.

<sup>190</sup> The character of Konstantin Gavrilovich Treplyov in Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull* is a moody playwright, equal parts sympathetic and pathetic.

<sup>191</sup> Jimmy went on to perform with all over the world in numerous shows with Cirque du Soleil, and to make a name for himself as a lip sync artist. His lip sync version of Screaming Jay Hawkins' "I Put a Spell On You" has over a million views on YouTube. "JIMMY SLONINA- Showman," Jimmy Slonina, accessed May 29, 2018, <http://jimmyslonina.com/>.

<sup>192</sup> Psychological realism is a theater movement focused on verisimilitude onstage, which has largely ruled mainstream theater since it came to prominence in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, beginning at the Moscow Art Theatre under Konstantin Stanislavski and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko.

<sup>193</sup> Augie March is the protagonist of Saul Bellow's 1953 novel *The Adventures of Augie March*, which follows Augie's life as he becomes an adult during the Great Depression. Saul Bellow, *The Adventures of Augie March, a Novel*. (New York: Viking Press, 1953).

<sup>194</sup> *Hephaestus*, originally staged in 2005 and remounted in 2010, was "a must-see circus theatre event. Evocative storytelling, amazing athleticism and the very highest levels of circus artistry bring the ancient Greek myth story of *Hephaestus* to the high wire in this death-defying circus retelling." It featured performers from the Wallendas, Cirque du Soleil, and Ringaling Bros. "HEPHAESTUS," *Lookingglass Theatre Company*, accessed May 24, 2018, <https://lookingglasstheatre.org/event/hephaestus/>.

<sup>195</sup> Hephaestus was the Greek god of blacksmithing, metalworking, and other craftsmanship. There are many myths about Hephaestus, but the usual story is that he was born with a bad leg, thrown off of Olympus by his mother, Hera, and consistently cuckolded by his wife, Aphrodite.

<sup>196</sup> *This American Life* is a radio program on National Public Radio, began in 1995, hosted by Ira Glass. The program is mostly journalistic non-fiction, covering a wide range of topics. "About," *This American Life*, accessed May 24, 2018, <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/>.

<sup>197</sup> "Morning Edition for October 31, 2001," *Morning Edition* (NPR, October 31, 2001), <https://www.npr.org/programs/morning-edition/2001/10/31/13024461/>.

<sup>198</sup> *The Longest Shortest Time*, which Hilary started in 2010, is a podcast about parenting in all its forms. "The Longest Shortest Time," accessed May 24, 2018, <https://longestshortesttime.com>.

<sup>199</sup> I have searched far and wide to try to find this article and photograph again. In all the material I have since found on Royal de Luxe, although the production—"La Veritable Histoire de France in 1990"—is often referenced, that photograph, which was torn from an unidentified newspaper, remains lost to me.

<sup>200</sup> Plato develops this theory in his dialogues *Meno* and *Phaedo*. Plato, *Meno ; and, Phaedo*, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>201</sup> TED, started in 1984, is a media organization "devoted to spreading ideas, usually in the form of short, powerful talks (18 minutes or less). TED began in 1984 as a conference where Technology, Entertainment and Design converged, and today covers almost all topics — from science to business to global issues — in more than 100 languages." "Our Organization," TED, accessed May 27, 2018, <https://www.ted.com/about/our-organization>.

<sup>202</sup> Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (New York: Random House, 1981).

<sup>203</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Proust*, The Dolphin Books, 7 (London: Chatto & Windus, 1931).

<sup>204</sup> Frank Galati is a director, writer, and actor, perhaps best known for his 1990 adaptation of *The Grapes of Wrath*, which he directed and which won the Best Play and Best Direction Tony Awards. Galati is an ensemble member of Steppenwolf, and was the Associate Director of the Goodman from 1986 to 2008.

<sup>205</sup> Robert Lepage is a Canadian director known for his creative, multi-disciplinary productions. *The Dragons' Trilogy* is a five-and-a-half hour epic recounting the story of two generations of Quebecers. First produced in 1985, *The Dragons' Trilogy* has been remounted all over the world. For more on Lepage and his work, including *The Dragons' Trilogy*, see Aleksandar Saša Dundžerović, *Robert Lepage*, Routledge Performance Practitioners (London; New York: Routledge, 2009).

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- <sup>206</sup> Marshall Ganz is credited with devising the most successful model for grassroots organizing. For more on Ganz and his work, see his website: “Welcome - Marshall Ganz,” accessed May 27, 2018, <https://marshallganz.com/>.
- <sup>207</sup> *Favela* is the Brazilian Portuguese word for slum.
- <sup>208</sup> Harold Brodkey, “Innocence,” in *Stories in an Almost Classical Mode* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011).
- <sup>209</sup> Jean-Luc Courcoult, *Royal de luxe, 1993-2001: Entretiens avec Jean-Luc Courcoult* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2001). And François Delarozière, Claire David, and Jean-Luc Courcoult, *Le grand répertoire : Machines de spectacle* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2003).
- <sup>210</sup> “The Company - Royal de Luxe,” accessed May 27, 2018, <https://www.royal-de-luxe.com/en/company/>.
- <sup>211</sup> Jules Verne, sometimes called the “father of science fiction,” was a 19<sup>th</sup> Century French novelist famous for his adventure novels, including *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* and *Journey to the Center of the Earth*.
- <sup>212</sup> Marina Abramovic is an internationally renowned Serbian performance artist. For more on Ms. Abramovic’s life and work, see her memoir: Marina Abramović, *Walk through Walls: A Memoir*, First edition.. (New York: Crown Archetype, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, 2016). Or her website: “Marina Abramovic,” accessed May 27, 2018, <http://www.marinaabramovic.com/bio.html>.
- <sup>213</sup> “Marina Abramović: The Artist Is Present | MoMA,” MoMA, accessed May 27, 2018, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/964>.
- <sup>214</sup> “Relation in Space | Www.Li-Ma.Nl,” accessed May 27, 2018, <http://www.li-ma.nl/site/catalogue/art/abramovic-ulya/relation-in-space/1830>.
- <sup>215</sup> Matthew Akers, *Marina Abramovic: The Artist Is Present*, HBO Documentary Films (Chicago, Ill.: Music Box Films, 2012).
- <sup>216</sup> “James Franco & Marina Abramovic - Vogue.it,” Vogue Italia, accessed May 27, 2018, <http://www.vogue.it/uomo-vogue/cover-story/2013/09/cover-james-franco-e-marina-abramovic>.
- <sup>217</sup> “The Life and Death of Marina Abramovic,” Robert Wilson, accessed May 27, 2018, <http://www.robertwilson.com/life-and-death-of-marina-abramovic/>.
- <sup>218</sup> “MAI,” Marina Abramovic Institute, accessed May 27, 2018, <https://mai.art/about-mai/>.
- <sup>219</sup> Holland Cotter, “Marina Abramovic’s Silent Sitting at MoMA Reaches Finale,” *The New York Times*, May 30, 2010, sec. Art & Design, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/31/arts/design/31diva.html>.
- <sup>220</sup> See Appendix [---]
- <sup>221</sup> Started in 1986, *Burning Man* is a massive event held every summer in Nevada. For a little over a week, tens of thousands of people create a temporary city in Black Rock Desert to celebrate community and art, abiding by ten guiding principles: Radical Inclusion, Gifting, Decommodification, Radical Self-reliance, Radical Self-expression, Communal Effort, Civic Responsibility, Leaving No Trace, Participation, and Immediacy. “Burning Man - Welcome Home,” Burning Man, accessed May 27, 2018, <https://burningman.org/>.
- <sup>222</sup> David Best is an acclaimed sculptor, probably best known for his *Burning Man* temples. For more on the temple and its meaning, see: “Building the Temple | Burning Man,” accessed May 27, 2018, <https://burningman.org/event/art-performance/playa-art/building-the-temple/>.
- <sup>223</sup> “Community RJ Hubs,” Community RJ Hubs, accessed May 27, 2018, <https://rjhubs.org/>.
- <sup>224</sup> “London’s Burning,” Artichoke, accessed May 27, 2018, <https://www.artichoke.uk.com/project/londons-burning/>.
- <sup>225</sup> Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black & Red, 1970).
- <sup>226</sup> Chris Jones and Robert Channick, “Chicago Nixes Giant Street Puppets,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 13, 2015, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/business/ct-chicago-giant-street-puppets-tourism-biz-1214-20151211-story.html>.

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