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Collaborative Theatre/Creative Process

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ABSTRACT

Theatre production is a collaborative creative activity. Recent theory and research into group creativity recognizes the relationships between individuals, groups, and the contexts in which creativity emerges. It also suggests that between the interactive creative processes of the collaborators and their work, the work itself becomes a kind of creative entity. In this essay, I explain how all creativity is now seen as collaboration, outline this process, and illustrate the differences between seeing theatre as an aggregate, collective activity and the more integrated view, in which the process is synergistically collaborative. An understanding of the cognitive and behavioral processes of group creativity can enhance and facilitate any creative work, making it valuable to the field of theatre, not only for the director, who is primarily responsible for the process, but to anyone working on a production.

It seems clichéd to say that theatrical production is a collaborative creative process. It is clearly manifested through a community made up of theatre practitioners and their public rather than through any single individual. But what do we really mean by “collaborative?” Is this simply a collective activity or something more synergistic? And what do we mean by “creative process?” Is that the same thing as the process of production? Some might say that theatre production is interpretive, not creative; that the playwright alone is creative. Others might say that in a “director’s theatre” everyone, including the play, serves the director’s “vision” of the play. Actually, when examined in light of research into the cognitive and behavioral processes of creativity, not only are the terminology and questions clarified, but the answers are also far less subjective than one might expect. These answers point to two fundamental ideas: First, there is a cognitive and behavioral process of creativity that we all share as human beings; it is the same, though flexible, for all of us. Secondly, all creativity is collaborative. That is, no one individual is ever solely the originator of a creative work, because all creative work draws on a multiplicity of sources, a multiplicity of contributors who interact, either directly or indirectly, with both the creator(s) and the creative work itself.

Research into creativity generally and group process specifically indicates that, as Frank Barron puts it, “The lone creator is an insufficient metaphor. All creativity is a collaboration” (59). In a group activity like theatre production, one expects that a creative process is operating for every individual involved, and operating simultaneously. Every individual involved is both creative and interpretive, artist and craftsman. At the group level however, there is more to it.

The process that takes place in creating a work of theatre is not only “social” in the popular sense of the word, it is also organically synergistic, and well beyond the control of any isolated individual (even the director). By distinguishing “creative process” from the “rehearsal and production process,” and then comparing them, an understanding of the dynamics of theatrical collaboration begins to emerge that sheds light on what is actually going on in both processes combined. Awareness of how this collaborative process works can be extremely useful for anybody working in the field, not only for the stage director who is responsible for negotiating and facilitating that process, but to anyone working on a production. How that understanding is specifically applied to playwriting, design, rehearsal, and production practices will depend of course on the circumstances of the production and the practices of the individuals and groups involved. Nevertheless, being able to recognize the organic stages of this natural process – and seeing how they integrate (or don’t) with the production – will enable companies to apply them to what they are doing and to make adjustments when necessary, thereby facilitating and enhancing the work.

This essay outlines the creative process, first in a simplified, linear, individual way, and then by expanding it to a collaborative group process and demonstrating that it interacts with the broader field and culture of which it is a part. This will illustrate why we need to recognize theatrical collaboration as truly synergistic rather than simply as an aggregate creative activity, a group of individuals working at the same time on the same creative project. It is an activity in which each of the participants engages not only their own creative process and the processes of their collaborators, but they also engage their cultural, social, and professional contexts as well. Finally, the essay attempts to explain how, from a psychoanalytical perspective, theatrical collaborators are also interacting with the personality of the emerging production itself. The artwork as collaborator is not simply a personification or metaphor here. Not only is creative theatrical activity a synergistic activity among individuals, but looked at psychoanalytically, the emerging artwork has itself begun to function like another person, a creature in dialogue with the personality of the creative system.

The Creative Process

Before we can grasp the complexities of the collaborative group process, it will be instructive to look at a simplified linear explanation of that process. One of the earliest formulations was by Graham Wallas, who in 1926 theorized a simple four-stage process of preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification (41). By 1950, researcher J. P. Guilford had observed that “in the writings of those who have attempted to give a generalized picture of creative behavior, there is considerable agreement that the complete creative act involves four important steps” (451). Over the years, similar outlines of this process have been described in various numbers of stages. Though they may be characterized by different names, or elaborated in slightly different ways, by now there is considerable agreement about the actual stages of that process. And although it makes the process easier to understand initially, keep in mind that this is

really an oversimplification. The beginning of one process often proceeds directly from another, stages may overlap or even happen simultaneously, and the overall process seems to operate more like an organism than a linear rationality. In the same way that cell division and differentiation happen in an orderly way in an organism, this process, though multifaceted, also happens in an orderly way.

When applying it to the organism we call theatre production, it can be helpful to distinguish between the theatrical *production process* – what most theatre people mean when they talk about their “creative process” – and what creativity researchers and theorists refer to as *the creative process*, the cognitive and behavioral activity by which creative solutions to problems are achieved. When the two processes are compared, one can see that there are already similarities between traditional approaches to theatre work, for example in stage directing and production design as shown below, and the creative process as explained by researchers. When seen in the light of the creative process, the various approaches to production process can be understood in new ways.

The basic creative process of four stages first put forth by Wallas has been very simply stated by Harold Rugg this way:

First, a preparatory conscious period of baffled struggle; second, an interlude in which the worker apparently gives up, pushes the problem back or down or 'out of mind' – more properly into another compartment of 'mind' – leaving it for the unconscious to work upon; third, a sudden and unexpected 'flash of insight,' coming with such certitude that a logical statement of it can be immediately prepared; fourth, a period of verification, critical testing, and reconstruction. (6)

It is interesting to note that Dean and Carra, in their textbook, *Fundamentals of Stage Directing*, outline four periods of work in the traditional rehearsal process: study, blocking, enrichment, and verification (293). While this organization of the theatrical process skips over the second “unconscious” stage mentioned by Rugg (“incubation” in Wallas), their rehearsal process can be easily compared to his first, third, and especially fourth stages: the first being that of study, the third resulting in blocking and enrichment, and the fourth continuing the enrichment, testing, and reconstruction (when necessary) through verification.

In 1952 Brewster Ghiselin elaborated a seven-phase model in a more detailed way. The phases are comprehensive enough to include other formulations, detailed enough to account for gradations of experience and activity within that process, and more accessible in relation to theatrical production. They are explained more completely here to clarify what each one is. These seven phases are:

1. **Impulse:** “Creation begins typically with a vague, even confused excitement, some sort of yearning, hunch or other preverbal intimation of approaching or potential resolution” (14) to a perceived problem. This can be compared to the idea or desire for a play or production and the first formulations of a production concept. In fact, problem finding and problem stating are important keys to this part of the process. Ghiselin quotes playwright Anton Chekhov as saying

that "...to deny that artistic creation involves problems and purposes would be to admit that an artist creates without premeditation, without design, under a spell" (6).

2. Preliminary Labor and Preparation: This phase involves organizing, structuring, and researching the problem (the staging of a play or production idea). "The creative person," wrote Donald MacKinnon, "is one who in his intellectual endeavors reconciles the opposites of expert knowledge and the childlike wonder of naïve and fresh perception" (253). To do this, one needs preparation. MacKinnon also observed that either too little or too much information can hamper "the attainment of a creative solution" (253).

3. Incubation: Ghiselin calls this "the creative process in its unconscious action" (20). In this phase, further progress may be delayed for some time. This can be difficult when the search for a creative solution, either individually or in a group, is on a schedule. It is one area where awareness of process can be especially helpful. To recognize this phase when it presents itself and know what to do about it can both facilitate the work and reduce anxiety. Here one needs to trust the process, to have the courage to let it work. Researchers Dacey and Lennon caution, "In this stage, gathering more information or mulling over the problem further will prove counterproductive. Efforts to solve the problem must be abandoned and allowed to sink into the unconscious mind" (35). What can be done? Rudyard Kipling gave this advice: "Drift, wait, and obey" (Ghiselin 85). Research shows that the best approach is mental relaxation, especially in relation to the problem, with a certain amount of physical exercise. Eventually and often without warning the solution or the insight appears.

4. Intuition: In this phase, intimation on the fringe of consciousness alerts us that illumination may be imminent. "What is necessary, says Ghiselin, "is to be able to look into the wings where the action is not yet organized, and to feel the importance of what is happening off stage...." "Spontaneity is common," he notes, "but what is given is usually far from complete. Commonly the new element appears simultaneously with some such vague intimation of further development" (5). He describes this creative impulse as "the disturbance at the surface of the water which betokens activity beneath" (10). This is still a phase that requires some patience.

5. Inspiration or Illumination: Here is the sudden insight, idea, solution, or relationship so often referred to as a "light bulb moment." Rudolph Arnheim observes that many artists through the ages have "preferred to think of themselves as the instrument rather than the player" (285). This is often a symptom of the inspiration/illumination phase. It is important to point out as Ghiselin does that "one can save oneself much trouble by recognizing the limitations of the will in creation" (16). He cites general agreement on this, from "Picasso to John Dewey," concluding that "Will belongs to the conscious life only. It is effective in attaining objects in view, but it cannot enable us to move in directions that have not yet been discovered" (17). He cautions that "this is not to be taken as evidence that planning is detrimental, but only that plan must not be enforced by will. Plan must come as a part of the organic development of a project, either before the details are determined, which is more convenient, or in the midst of their production, which is sometimes confusing" (17). Plan for it; build some flexibility into your rehearsal schedule.

6. Organic Development: Here craft and work are applied in collaboration with the emerging ideas, insights, and associations. Here the varieties of approaches to production that characterize contemporary theatre are all accommodated within the same human creative process. Obviously important to the work itself, it is even more important to creativity than one might think. Beyond the phase of incubation, the process must, as Ghiselin puts it, “crystallize in terms of some medium in which the worker is adept. Without craft, it will escape” (25).

7. Verification, Correction, or Revision: Largely conscious, this is a process of testing, refining, and consolidating. This is traditionally facilitated in theatre with run-throughs or the addition of various production elements like props, costumes, sound, etc. It is the second of two predominately conscious phases in the process cited by Ghiselin, the other having been the preparation phase. Once the application of the craft begins to give shape and substance to the work, “management of the medium becomes more complex and the technical processes merge indissolubly with the creative process” (18). The emerging production, the result of organic development, “begins to be guided by a sense of sufficiency or insufficiency in formulating insights and attitudes” (18).

Again, in theatrical terms, compare this seven-phase approach to the design process outlined by J. Michael Gillette in his textbook *Theatrical Design and Production*: commitment, analysis, research, incubation, selection, implementation, and evaluation (21). While Ghiselin’s “intuition” and “illumination” are assumed in Gillette’s “selection” phase, Gillette’s “selection and implementation” fall into Ghiselin’s “organic development.” The different purpose of each outline accounts for the slight differences, but the comparison helps clarify the creative nature of the design process.

Obviously there are many approaches to theatrical production. There are some, like those just mentioned, that are firmly rooted in traditional modern methods, others that are much more contemporary or experimental. Whether the approach is collective, collaborative, or autocratic however, the actual process of creativity, the cognitive and behavioral human process that takes place in the creation of a work of theatre, is the same. As a group process it is also organically interactive in ways that are functionally beyond the control of any isolated individual. It functions because the individuals do. The understanding of the creative process outlined above was originally formulated in relation to individual creativity. It can also be applied to social or group creativity. In order to do so, the characteristics of the creative group need to be considered.

The Creative Group

In the introduction to their edited volume *Group Creativity: Innovation Through Collaboration*, Paul Paulus and Bernard Nijstad observe that “Most research and writing on creativity has focused on individual creativity, the ‘lone genius,’ with little recognition of the social and group factors that influence the creative process” (3). During at least the last fifteen years, however, there has been a growing interest and research in what is referred to as either

group or social creativity (e.g. Sawyer 2007; Uzzi and Spiro 2005; Paulus and Nijstad 2003; Montuori and Purser 1999; Purser and Montuori, 1999; Amabile 1983, 1996). As early as the 1994 update to her 1983 study, *Creativity in Context*, Teresa Amabile notes in relation to the emergence of literature on the subject that “it appears that the case for a social psychology of creativity has been made successfully” (16). Studies in this area have also been applied to stage performances in theatre, music, dance, and improvisational theatre by people like R. K. Sawyer (1997, 2003, 2007).

In relation to traditional professional theatre methods, an evolving systems case study (a method put forth by Gruber and Wallace in 1999) of the collaborative creative process was conducted in 2000 at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland, Oregon (Bickerstaff) utilizing a DIFI (domain-individual-field interaction) framework suggested by Feldman, Csikszentmihályi and Gardener. It found that the processes and creative activities of the theatre company, at the individual, group, and organizational levels, were consistent with findings and theories about the creative process, but that something more complex was taking place in rehearsal and production at the group level. On the surface, this group process can simply appear to be social interaction that exerts influence on the individual creative processes that are done collectively. On closer examination however, the group as a group has characteristics beyond the individuals involved and proceeds organically through its own creative process as well. Taking the individual creative process to the group level raises questions about the interaction of those processes and about the group process as well. Is group creativity simply collective or is it actually collaborative, truly synergistic, originating and developing from a confluence of individual sources? Some in the field of theatre might say collaboration depends on the individuals; sometimes theatre activity seems more collaborative than at others. It seems less collaborative when old autocratic approaches are used and more so when a group of peers are working openly and organically to “solve” a production. In fact, our use of the word “collaboration” often reflects that assumption, but even that assumption skirts the original question.

Peter Hall, in his 1999 book *The Necessary Theatre*, makes the observation that “In this century, the theatre has become more and more a collective activity” (46). Acknowledging changes in the role of the stage director, he recognizes that it is “the spontaneous work done on the hoof which is creative,” and that “how that text is expressed is always a matter of spontaneous group creation” (48). In fact, describing “the organic process” of theatrical work he asserts that “work based on collaboration and consensus... must surely make a return to autocratic ways impossible” (50-51). Cognitive research in this area, from a wide variety of approaches, combined with emergent theoretical assumptions, theatre practices, and experience in the field, points to a collaborative, synergistic process that includes, yet functions beyond the individual. It is a process that engages and synthesizes individual processes into a holistic creative activity, what Keith Sawyer calls “group genius” (*Creativity in Performance* ix). As Charles Marowitz noted in *The Other Way*, after a stage director works with the same actors for an extended period of time, “a group intelligence is engendered which becomes greater than the director’s and actor’s intelligence combined” (224). This “group intelligence” is characteristic of

true collaboration and symptomatic of group creativity. Beyond understanding the individual creative process and the collaborative nature of the creative group, it is important to understand that “all creativity is a collaboration” (Barron 59). One way to understand the synergy of collaboration is through the intersection of contemporary literary theory and creativity research.

The Creative Collaboration

As noted earlier (The Creative Group), traditional western approaches viewed creativity through the individual while current study and emerging theory recognizes the inherently social nature of creativity. Two important theoretical works that do so, one by James Ogilvy, the other by Frank Barrett, challenge the assumptions of individualism that underlie the focus on the individual in early creativity research. As Ogilvy stated, “Maybe we need to decouple our concepts of creativity and individualistic genius” (220). He demonstrates this “decoupling” in his essay through deconstructionism, scientific studies of intelligence, Jungian psychology, and philosophy. Barrett lays out a very clear explanation of the social “dialogic” nature of knowledge creation from a constructionist perspective, extending it to “activities such as thinking and creativity” (Barrett 133). He begins by observing that “postmodern critiques have challenged the accepted centrality of the individual subject. Even the notion of individual authorship of ideas and books has been undermined” (133). Ultimately he concludes, “the constructionist perspective, in proposing that knowledge is a relationally embedded activity, allows us to see how our daily lives are shaped by dialogic interaction and the immensely creative power of language to configure and fashion our activities” (149). Foucault, for example, places what he calls the “author function” within a cultural discourse “depriving the subject (or its substitute) of its role as originator, and of analyzing the subject as a variable and complex function of discourse” (118). These understandings of the collaborative nature of creativity then go beyond attributing what was formerly considered an individual function to a group of individuals. Instead, the group and its individuals participate in a creative synergy within a larger context.

In relation to theatrical activity, an essay by Roland Barthes may serve as an appropriate analogy for the synergy of group collaboration in that larger context when he speaks of the “death of the author.” Not only is theatrical creation in this comparison beyond the level of the individual, it is beyond the authorship of the group as well. “We know now that a text consists not of a line of words, releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God), but of a multi-dimensional space in which are married and contested several writings, none of which is original: the text is a fabric of quotations, resulting from a thousand sources of culture” (Barthes 52-53). Any act of writing is a result of more than a single author or artist; it is really the result of social processes, cultural influences, and works of numerous others, including the “reader” (audience), “a fabric of quotations, resulting from a thousand sources of culture” (Barthes 53). If we were to think of the collaborative theatrical process as a kind of “writing,” resulting in a performative text, then in any act of theatre, as with any act of writing, the “text”

that we see and hear is also attributable to the work and influence of numerous others, even to others beyond the immediate collaboration of that production and its audience.

Closer to the immediate experience of the group and within that much broader cultural and historical context, there is a creative system that exerts influences on the synergy of the group and its individuals before and during the process. The creative group that is aware of that system and its influences can more adequately integrate it into the process. An examination of this system demonstrates the dynamics of the group's engagement with their cultural, social, and professional contexts.

The Creative System

A multiple-perspective framework for the study of creativity developed by Feldman, Csikszentmihályi, and Gardener describes the interrelation of individuals, fields, and domains throughout the creative process. "Domain" in this context is defined as "the formally organized body of knowledge that is associated with a given field" (20). In a separate essay, Csikszentmihályi further defines a domain as "any symbolic system that has a set of rules for representing thought and action" (Domain of Creativity 153). The discrete domain that is theatre is likewise "made up of its own symbolic elements, its own rules, and generally has its own system of notation" (Csikszentmihályi, *Creativity: Flow* 37).

The term "field" in popular usage refers to an entire area of study or kind of activity, like the "field of theatre." In this systems context however it is defined in a more narrow sense, referring only to "the social organization of the domain" (Csikszentmihályi, *Implications* 315). A field is made up of those practitioners who decide what belongs to a domain and what does not. In theatre, this domain would include people like designers, actors, directors, producers, critics, artistic directors, teachers, boards and foundation officers, award committees, and other editors and chroniclers of the art.

It is the interaction between these three systems – within the broader cultural context – that more adequately characterizes the synergy of influences on both the individual and group creative processes. For example, individuals in theatre may come from a variety of backgrounds, experience levels, training, working methods, and assumptions about the domain. Their position and influence within the field and their beliefs about how the domain is to be managed is usually negotiated within the context of the production process and may either influence or be influenced by the field at large, which in turn has the potential to affect the domain. This systems approach is useful to theatre because it not only helps us begin to recognize the relationships between creative groups and their environments or contexts, like production companies within producing organizations, but also suggests that the dynamics between collaborating individuals are also an interactional synergy of processes.

Theatre is a complex manifestation of creative behavior, one that includes individual, collaborative, and cultural levels that are relational and integrated. As Murdock and Puccio point out, "A primary characteristic of a multifaceted concept is integration: Parts are not necessarily

distinct from the whole, and even if parameters are theoretically well-defined, in application there are natural relationships and conceptual overlaps” (251). This is an important point in the case of theatre where the individuals involved are by necessity integrated with the whole.

Within this complex of interrelationships however, the fundamental process of creativity outlined in the second section of this essay remains the same for each individual and for the group. Those processes need to be integrated with each other and with the group process overall. One component in this system of relationships that also goes through a creative process, one that has not been accounted for yet (perhaps because it is assumed to be a result of the process) is the emerging production itself. It too, should be considered a “collaborator,” a part of the synergy of process. Using a psychoanalytical approach we can understand how, in Anton Erenzweig’s words, “Any work of art functions like another person, having independent life of its own” (102).

The Creative Work as Creative Collaborator

Psychoanalytical approaches to the study of creative process, which focus on mental operations that result from personality traits, consider creativity to be a process of the artist’s personality. Erenzweig (102) outlines that process in three phases: (1) fragmentation of parts of the artists self that are then projected into the work, (2) structural integration of the work through unconscious scanning of fragments, and (3) structural re-introjection leading to better integration of the artwork’s “self”. It is in this third phase he states, that the independence of the artwork is most noticeable: “The work of art acts like another living person with whom we are conversing” (104). By characterizing a creative group as a collective artist, the group creative process can be seen to develop along Ghiselin’s outline as the production’s “self” emerges. In the Oregon Shakespeare Festival study mentioned earlier (Bickerstaff) an example of this approach is used to summarize the OSF process:

...if we consider the company to be a creative entity, then as the differentiated individual personalities of that entity are integrated into the process, they each become sources of dissociated fragments called production elements. They each contribute to the overall effect of this first stage in the fully collaborative part of the work. As this process continues, the members are gradually integrated into a shared discovery of the play through their individual working processes. The dissociated fragments of [each person’s] experience, personal associations, intuitions, and understandings about the play and its evolving performance were being projected into the work along with other production fragments in the form of text, visual, and aural elements.

This in turn allowed closer examination of the work, and an exploration of those elements. Sometimes, when discoveries were made in rehearsal, they were a result of precipitous combinations or juxtapositions of information, elements, conditions, etc., like those described in the incubation and inspiration phases of organic development. When this happened, fragments came into alignment in a way that ‘worked,’ that seemed appropriate and true to the majority of experiences and associations brought to the play by the collaborators. These discoveries then

became matrix points on which further decision-making were based. Artistically and creatively, the performance reality developed organically within the social system of the production company and its interaction with the play, using elements of the symbol system, or domain, that were called into use by inspiration and discovery.

...the collective ‘scanning’ of fragments in rehearsal contributed to the organic development and integration of those fragments that were then taken back (re-introjected) into the [emerging production], contributing to ‘the better integration of the previously split-off parts of the self’ (Ehrenzweig 102). During this elaboration process, periodic evaluations occurred (i.e. run-throughs), that provided opportunities for verification, evaluation, and/or adjustment within the overall organic development. In the context of this phase, new discoveries were often made. Intuitions may suggest new inspirations or insights that then lead to future elaboration. These may require additional preparation, but generally several levels of creative process were in evidence simultaneously: incubation, intuition, insight, and evaluation, all influenced before, during, and after by both field and domain. (289-290)

In relation to the emerging production then, the integration of the creative group from its disparate members in the first stage of the process brings together dissociated fragments of the collective artist’s self that are projected into the work. These fragments are then collectively scanned in the design, rehearsal, and mounting processes (structural integration) bringing about re-introjection of choices into the emerging, better integrated, performance. Remember too that certain members of the collective artist (i.e. actors and crew) become thoroughly integrated into the emerging performance. As such they are integral to the personality of the performance that an audience experiences in their interaction with the performance. In a very concrete way the artwork as it emerges begins to function like another collaborator in the organic development, through the creative group’s interaction with and experience of it.

Conclusion

In a collection of essays on stage directing published in 1976, editor J. Robert Wills saw fit to include Donald MacKinnon's 1970 essay, "Creativity: A Multi-faceted Phenomenon." In Wills's introduction, he explained that this and two other articles related to the creative person and the creative process were included “because most available information about directing sidesteps these issues, which are in the end most central to a director's possibilities” (17). “Too often,” he goes on to say, creativity is treated as a mystery “in the mistaken assumption that knowing will confine the creative impulse” (17). He recognized then what this essay attests: research indicates that awareness of one's creative process does not inhibit its flow; in fact, it facilitates it. Because it is a *collaborative* creative process, awareness of that process in a theatrical context is valuable, not only to the director, but to the entire production team as well. How that understanding is specifically applied to individual or group playwriting, design, rehearsal, and production practices will depend of course on the circumstances of the production and the practices of the individuals and groups involved. Circumstances and approaches vary

widely. Nevertheless, recognizing and understanding the creative process and its contextual influences and interactions in relation to work in the theatre can enable groups and individuals to apply that information to what they are doing, thereby facilitating and enhancing the work.

This essay has drawn distinction between “creative process” and “rehearsal and production processes” as a way to clarify the one and then to apply it to the other. Using Ghiselin’s seven-phase outline of the creative process as a foundation, one can see that on the level of the creative group, the confluence of individual processes becomes truly synergistic, greater than the sum of its constituent parts. Likewise, the group too is a part of the broader field and domain in which it practices, and the field and domain are in turn part of an influential cultural discourse. Finally, the artwork itself is presented as a collaborator in this process, recognizing that participant’s interactions with the performance as it develops is not simply a personification or metaphor, but a necessary two-way interaction wherein certain members of the creative group become integrated with the performance of the production. Not only is creative theatrical activity a synergy among individuals in a group, its activity engages the product of the collaboration and the milieu of which it is a part. As theatre has always been, it is deeply communal and profoundly human. This study can help us begin to understand how and why.

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