

DRAMATURG'S NOTE

"...unlike many theatres now, the BLUEBARN is encouraging the audience to view and process the show through frameworks—white supremacy culture and empathy. In addition, there's a clear, stated reason for producing this play, at this time—a predominantly white theatre is inviting its predominantly white audience to reckon with whiteness, together."

Why are we here? Why have we come together live, at a specific moment, to share story, space, and breath? to communally witness an imagined reality of people from another place and time? Theatre's uniqueness as an artform is directly derived from its ephemerality, it's "here one moment, gone the next" quality, and, as a result, its frequent aspiration to unite humans through a collective experience of meaning making and emotional journey. Theatre's aspiration is what leads us from form to function, what's the purpose of stimulating audience's thoughts and feelings, especially with a heated, controversial piece like Will Arbery's *Heroes of the Fourth Turning*?

One answer comes from Aristotle's *Poetics*. Aristotle posits that theatre ("dramatic poetry") places imitations of human behavior in front of spectators so that they may personally experience heightened emotions (fear and pity primarily), sympathizing or feeling for the characters, and eventually attaining a heightened passionate state (a catharsis) which cleanses the emotional system. The feelings purged from the audience's systems, they can then return to daily life more well-balanced, productive citizens. Why are we here? —to be swept up and then purge all those troublesome feelings.

Another answer comes from Bertolt Brecht: theatre is an instrument of social change designed to provide audiences insight into themselves and their political reality. "Art is not a mirror to reflect reality," Brecht famously stated "but a hammer with which to shape it." Audiences shouldn't emotionally lose themselves in performances, but rather be analytical spectators, watching at a distance. This way, audiences can notice the correlations to contemporary events outside the theatre and learn directly applicable lessons. Why are we here? —to better understand socio-political influences and how we might alter them.

A false dichotomy arises if Aristotelian and Brechtian goals of theatre are pitted against one another, especially since contemporary theatregoers don't tend to list emotional catharsis or intellectual distancing among the reasons why they attend theatre. More often, it's a combination of the two purposes that attracts audiences: being introduced to new perspectives, narratives, or cultures while being engrossed in the performance. Colloquially, this is noted as the theatre's ability to evoke empathy as the audience "walks in another's shoes." Contemporary theatre artists have been wrestling more than ever with the purpose question because of this. The squishy concept of "empathy" isn't an end in and of itself. Taking into account that theatregoers in the United States tend to be affluent, older, and white, walking in another's shoes easily slides into almost a colonizing activity.

Audiences believe they are feeling with people of other cultural backgrounds, social identities, or lived experiences (many of them historically marginalized or oppressed), and yet theatre is a safe, limited-time event for the audience, not requiring emotional labor, self-inquiry, or an effort to change. What's happening on stage asks nothing of the audience.

A third answer for the purpose of theatre comes from Indian artistic tradition: the transmission of emotional tastes, juices, or essences - "rasas" - from artists to audience. A rasa is an aesthetic, emotional flavor; the same Sanskrit word is used in Ayurvedic texts describing flavors in food. Like a cook seeks to ignite the response of a diner's tastebuds, artists aim to spark the response of emotional spirits in the audience. These aren't intended to be the actual emotions, as one would feel them generated in an immediate, real-world experience, but the flavor of the emotion. The emotion is felt, and then it dissipates. In this way, the audience is able to be an analytical spectator (similar to Brecht) and have their own emotions moved (Aristotle).

U.S. mainstream theatre trends toward Aristotelian and is influenced heavily by Brechtian. *Heroes of the Fourth Turning* by Will Arberry is deceptively neither, despite containing characters who tempt audiences to sympathetic responses as the characters' humanity shines through their politics and a tendency for liberal- or left-leaning theatremakers to want to openly demonstrate disagreement with the characters' arguments in the production. Using the foundational idea of rasas, the artists at BLUEBARN leaned into the sparking audience's "emotional taste-buds" in order to avoid them empathizing with the abhorrent characters speaking words of erasure, injury, and deception. Then, unlike many theatres now, the BLUEBARN is encouraging the audience to view and process the show through frameworks—white supremacy culture and empathy. In addition, there's a clear, stated reason for producing this play, at this time—a predominantly white theatre is inviting its predominantly white audience to reckon with whiteness, together. And then *do something about it*. Like the emotions experienced on stage are felt by us in the audience, the characters are us.

The function of theatre isn't predetermined by other people, history, or traditions. The purpose of the artform is determined by those who make it, which include the audience. The artists at BLUEBARN believe that to come together, live, at a specific moment, to share story, space, and breath, to communally witness an imagined reality of people from another place and time allows for the provocation of "thought, emotion, action, and change." The production begins this chain of provocation, but you the audience are an integral link. The answer to "why are we here" is in you. What will you do with the experience of *Heroes of the Fourth Turning*? How will you allow it to impact you beyond this moment? To excite not only your heart and mind, but move you to do and be different as a result?

Rachel Grossman
Dramaturg
Heroes of the Fourth Turning