

What I Talk About When I Talk About Audience Interaction

The plays I create are interactive in very specific ways. Actors and audience members are asked to share aspects of themselves in ways that may be unfamiliar even to performers who have worked in interactive theatre before. This document is meant to share some tips for interacting with audiences that I've picked up as an actor in my own plays! Hopefully this will be helpful in performing *Baby Jessica's Well-Made Play* and working with audiences.

The majority of this is coming from my experiences with *The End of the World Bar and Bathtub*, which I've performed close to 100 times. The script for *Bar and Bathtub* is 19 pages long, and on any given night I perform anywhere between half and all of it. There are certain elements that aren't written down, but which come up at almost every performance (almost like unofficial sections of the script). The shortest performance has been 45 minutes long, and the longest was over 3 hours. The more I perform, the more comfortable I get with letting go of control. The play is incredibly interactive, and over time becoming more so. While a big part of that comes from the comfort of having performed it over and over, hopefully I can share some things I've learned along the way.

But Why?

First and foremost, I want to share why I make shows with audience interaction.

I believe that being a human is innately lonely. I think everyone is a little lonely at least some of the time. We're driving down the same highway, at different speeds, in our own little cars. We can see each other in one another's cars, but we can never actually get out of our cars and into someone else's. That's why we're lonely. I want to make plays where people are asked to roll down their windows. The moments where we can lean toward each other and really say hello are the most meaningful, and my hope is to create plays that help people do this.

I also think everyone secretly wants to talk about themselves. We're taught that it's rude to talk about ourselves too much (and many times it genuinely is), but I have a feeling that everyone wants to. Everyone has secret deep thoughts about themselves that they don't know how to share or who to share with. My plays are meant to give people the opportunity to consider themselves from a new perspective and then, importantly, *to share what they discover*. I think maybe that's what sets my plays apart from a lot of other interactive plays - the audience is always given space to share back, and help steer the conversation on their own terms.

So What Are The Tips Already?

1. Believe in a benevolent audience.

- a. You have to assume that the audience is on your side. They want you to succeed, and their participation in the performance is a form of advocacy both for you and for a specific experience that they want to have. Further, in the context

of paid performances, they have spent actual money to participate, so they have a financial reason to try to enjoy themselves. If you can keep it in the back of your mind that the audience is invested in having a good time, it can alleviate some stress in the process of working together to achieve the shared goal of completing the performance.

- b. Of course, I have had *one* performance of *Bar and Bathtub* where an audience member was openly combative with me. He had been surprised with the show by a friend, and actively did not want to be there. But even then, his hostility was his way of expressing his ideal participation - which was to leave the room and no longer be a part of the show. In that case, I was able to make the audience member happiest by ending the show quickly.

2. If you ask, you have to mean it.

- a. This is something I started thinking about a lot when reading Pablo Helguera's writing on Socially Engaged Art. He's experience was that people can tell when you ask them a question and don't actually want to know the answer. This has proven true in my own experience as well. It is so important to go into performing *Baby Jessica's Well-Made Play* with a wealth of curiosity. You have to genuinely want to know the answers to the questions you ask. When I was editing the script, part of my process was taking out questions that I didn't actually care to hear the answers to. If, as a performer, there is a question that *you* don't actually want to know the answers to, I am more interested in you changing that question than in asking it out of obligation to me / the script.
- b. Also, follow your curiosity as far as it will take you! If someone says something that you want to know more about, you should feel free to ask. I joke that *Bar and Bathtub* has helped me with feeling anxious in social situations, but it's true! I've found how easy it is to carry a conversation just by asking the follow up questions that I genuinely want to know more about. It's more important to me that you and the audience member learn about each other than it is that you say every word I've written.

3. Never lie or trick the audience.

- a. There was a moment in Theatre for a New Audience's production of *The Skin of Our Teeth* in which an actor asked the audience to stand up, pick up their chairs, and leave the theatre. This was impossible both because the chairs were typical theatre chairs and therefore bolted to the ground, and because the actor started accosting the audience for *not* getting up before anyone had the opportunity to think through whether they were genuinely being asked to stand. This production, which I really enjoyed, was spoiled a little for me at that moment because I knew I could no longer trust the characters. They asked the audience to do something that wasn't possible, and then mocked us for not doing it before we had the chance to try. I never want to make someone feel like I know something they don't, like there is a secret task I want them to complete that I am withholding, or like there is a correct and an incorrect way for them to act, because I want them to simply be themselves.

- b. This doesn't mean that you have to agree with what everyone says. And you can even disagree out loud. But when you do, it has to be clear that it is you, the actor and real person disagreeing, and not that the audience member has "broken the rules" or in some way failed the shared task of accomplishing the script.

4. Give as much as you ask.

- a. When Pablo Helguera was working with a population of farmers, he realized there was a power imbalance because he was always *telling*, and the farmers were always *asking*. Because of this, their relationship became one of teacher/student, even though they were meant to be working together as peers. To address this, he began using a "you teach / I teach" process; through which, for every new piece of information he introduced, he asked them to introduce him to a new piece of information as well. This helped mend the relationship by creating a context in which every individual was recognized for having their own expertise.
- b. In performing *Bar and Bathtub*, I try to make sure that I answer any question I ask. This is formalized in *Baby Jessica's Well-Made Play*, in that my answer to every question is shared with the actor, and then the actor shares their answer to every question with the audience member before the audience member is asked to share back. It is important to me that the audience member doesn't feel like this is a play in which they are asked to sacrifice personal information about themselves into a formless void. Therefore, for every bit of information they give, my hope is that they are offered information from the actor in turn. This script facilitates the conversation between the actor and audience, but it's the conversation that is vital.
- c. This is also why I included my answers in the script for *Baby Jessica's Well-Made Play*, even though it isn't my intention for those answers to be read out loud. I want you, the actor, to know as much about me, the playwright, before being asked to share about yourself with the audience. Plus, like I mentioned above, I *do* think I am infinitely interesting, and want to talk about me!
- d. I recognize that this may come with a personal emotional toll, and I encourage you to find ways to prioritize your own health and safety! For the first few performances of *Bar and Bathtub*, I had to find very intentional ways to "shake off" the performance afterwards. For me, eating dinner after a performance has been an effective way of transitioning out of the world of the play and back into my actual life. As you learn the play, I suggest looking for little rituals that can help you jump out of the performance, once you're done!

5. The script is a scaffold! It's only there to suggest what might happen.

- a. I firmly believe that the script is simply the suggestion of the most likely sequence of events. It is *not* the rules for what must happen. I encourage you to take whatever detours excite you, chase what feels interesting, and follow your own interests as they arise.

- b. The first thing that happens in *Bar and Bathtub* is we talk about names. In one performance, an audience member revealed that she was pregnant, and struggling to think of a name for her child. We had a long discussion about names and naming, which went for about 30 minutes, before getting back to the content of the play itself. In that moment, it felt more important to the audience member to have space to talk about names than it did to force the script back in the direction I thought it was going to go.

6. Listen to what the audience wants.

- a. I try to track what experience it seems the audience wants to have, and find ways to deliver it to them. With *Bar and Bathtub*, some people really want to have a casual and friendly chat. Some people really want to lean into the fear of the world ending. Some people want to lean out and talk more philosophically about the meaning of life from a slightly more theoretical standpoint. This isn't about changing the play in some drastic way, so much as leaning into the elements that seem the most exciting to the audience. Trust what they seem to respond to most.
- b. That said, I don't actively think through this during performances. I'm not in my head going, "okay, they seem to like X more than Y." This is really just about being in conversation with one another and responding to the ways they respond. Trust your intuition!

7. If you can believe you'll find a natural way to get back to where you were going, you can take whatever detours you want.

- a. With *Bar and Bathtub*, no matter how long a conversation may go, I always have faith that I'll find my way back into the script without having to manufacture the moment. Largely this comes with the comfort of having performed the script many, many times. I also am the playwright, so I never have to worry about stepping on my own toes. That said, I encourage you to have faith that your moment back into the script will come! Allow yourself to enjoy the discussion - you don't have to feel stressed about the text!

8. It's 50% about knowing it and 50% about owning it.

- a. There are two reasons I am able to be free and flexible in *Bar and Bathtub* performances. The first is that I know the text really well from having done it so many times, and the second is that I wrote the text so I don't feel bad about changing it.
- a. Look, I can't make anyone learn the script to *Baby Jessica's Well-Made Play* any more than they are going to, but I will say that it helps. Also, the audience member can't see you, so you can literally have the text in front of you if that helps!
- b. As for owning the text, all I can say is that I formally absolve you of any changes you make to the words I have written down on the page, in perpetuity. I trust you to do what will be in the best interests of the goal you share with the audience of completing the script.

Parting Thoughts

“Hope exists only in the imagination. We cannot exist without hope, therefore we cannot exist without the imagination.” - Judith Malina

This is a play about co-pretending a make believe circumstance into existence in order to learn about ourselves, and then share what we've learned with one another. Hopefully it's fun. Everything else is just finding the best way to do it.