

Fears of the Artist

By Jamil Khoury, Founding Artistic Director, Silk Road Rising
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Some people thought me heroic, even thanked me for being so brave. I had said what others thought but were afraid to speak. Afraid of retribution, afraid of never working again. And it was that expression of fear that I heard over and over again, usually couched within anecdotes, one more disturbing than the next. Had I been whisked away to another sector, I wondered? Was I singlehandedly battling Monsanto? For what I did was neither courageous nor controversial. I'm an artistic director. I was doing my job. If theatre makers are in the business of representation, but are not allowed to challenge representation, something is terribly wrong. If storytellers can't call out a storyteller, then how in God's name will we ever change the world? Yet in speaking out I came to realize that the very structure of our sector is built upon the fears of the artist.

For me, the summer of 2013 will forever be remembered as my summer of protest. Or more accurately, my summer of seizing the narrative, first from director Mary Zimmerman and then from theatre critic Hedy Weiss. It was an "up close and personal" with the the harm that's inflicted when cultural elites leverage power and privilege to either define other people's experiences or malign entire communities. And it was a vivid reminder of the capacity of said elites (even if well-intentioned) to cow and silence potential challengers, particularly within minority communities. Perhaps it was the summer I refused to be cowed and silenced.

With Mary Zimmerman, it began with an interview, followed by a response, followed by a meeting, followed by an interview. I had an exchange with an acclaimed director with whom I have some fundamental disagreements. In the end, the obvious rose to the top. The reasons Mary Zimmerman creates theatre and the reasons Silk Road Rising, my theatre company, produces theatre do not align. Period. If the market is the arbiter of correctness, then Brand Zimmerman trumps Brand Silk Road a thousand fold. But the market is no such arbiter.

Let it be known that neither Zimmerman nor I experienced any sort of "conversion." It was less a transformative moment than a teachable moment. What did occur, and this is very much to Zimmerman's credit, was that we ended up modeling what a respectful and fruitful dialogue can look like. A model many have described as "classy." In requesting to meet with us, and in genuinely engaging our concerns, Zimmerman demonstrated the utmost of class. Do I wish to re-litigate the "feud" with Mary Zimmerman? No. I want her to direct a play for us, a play that explores and debunks Orientalism and the colonial gaze. I'm not trying to be witty or ironic. I very much mean it. Between her star power and our anti-colonial, anti-racist politics, we could be on to something. Per Silk Road's mission, the playwright and protagonist would be of an Asian or Middle Eastern background. Not Rudyard Kipling.

What I was not prepared for last summer was the onslaught of emails I received. Emails numbering in the hundreds. I heard from colleagues, friends, and perfect strangers expressing unqualified support, some doing so publicly, others privately. I heard from other colleagues, friends, and perfect strangers who wanted to support me publicly but were afraid of being targeted and blacklisted. I heard from academics extolling my Zimmerman essay as one they'd be assigning to their classes, and editors requesting that I turn it into something larger. I was even approached by someone at a train station who shouted "Hey, aren't you the Mary Zimmerman guy?" Turns out, he loved the piece.

I also heard from colleagues, friends, and perfect strangers who shared horror stories; stories about theatre companies, directors, and producers with whom they had worked. Tales of threats and intimidation, bullying and humiliation, cultural insensitivity gone wild, and what I like to call "appropriation fever." Tales of stereotypes being circulated as "facts" and "enlightened," "all-knowing"

white folk “explaining” people’s cultures back to them; the inscribed powerlessness of not being able to challenge, let alone own, one’s own representation. So the floodgates were open and people were sharing their pain with me and I was deeply affected. Did it take an emotional toll? Absolutely.

Not surprisingly, there was also backlash. Once again, mostly emails, and mostly from people I didn’t know. Some of the emails were condescending and self-righteous, and some were from people who were “genuinely offended,” enraged even, by my “audacity,” my “anger,” my “hypocrisy,” my “race baiting.” Apparently, I was “speaking out of line.” I didn’t “know my place.” I had “no right to criticize Mary Zimmerman” because, after all, “she’s a celebrity” and I’m “a nobody”. The overriding message was “shut up!” We do not want to hear what you have to say. Everything is perfectly fine as it is. Not surprisingly, the actual substance of my criticisms were either dismissed outright, entirely misconstrued, or summarily “disproved.” The angrier the email, the clearer it became that I was acting outside an “approved consensus.”

There is an undeniable subtext to all of this. The vast majority of theatre artists in this country are freelancers. Inherent to freelance work is a great deal of insecurity and uncertainty. Absent commercial success, America assigns absolute powerlessness to being an artist. Poverty and vulnerability have been deemed “noble.” It’s a lousy state of affairs. Ironically, in the American theatre, standing up for one’s self and voicing dissent is mitigated by risk: the risk of losing artistic lifeline and economic livelihood. In many respects, a small, underfunded, politically progressive, polycultural arts organization like Silk Road Rising is in a position of dependency not unlike that of the freelance artist. We do not exist without those who fund us. In other respects, as a company founder and artistic director, I wield greater power than many freelancers. So I would never ask any artist to risk opportunity or pay. Paying rent is paying rent, but speaking out against racism, and calling out representation that is dehumanizing, should never be grounds for artistic exile or financial ruin! Since when are “good liberals” so threatened by progressive politics? Rhetorical question.

Yes, there are situations in which a specific theatre company and a specific artist are not a good fit. But that is not the situation I’m talking about. I’m talking about how cultures and communities and individuals get represented on our stages, and the very real implications of that representation. I’m talking about the intrinsic relationship between racism and representation and the very real harm that false representation inflicts on very real people. We cannot disentangle the imperialism and white supremacy of our politics from the imperialism and white supremacy of our cultural production. With representation comes responsibility and none of us are absolved of that responsibility, no matter how great our box office numbers. If the American theatre’s conversation about racism is so “awkward” and “uncomfortable” and “divisive,” so “accusatory,” maybe it’s because the American theatre has a big fat racism problem that we need to address honestly and stop blaming the victim.

My husband, Malik Gillani, and I founded Silk Road Rising as a proactive, artistic response to the attacks of September 11, 2001. We set out to become 9/11 second responders to counter both the hatred and fanaticism that fueled the attacks and the anti-Arab, anti-Muslim, anti-Brown people backlash that quickly ensued. First Al Qaeda hijacked Islam, then public anger hijacked our citizenship. Over time, Malik and I came to refer to ourselves as immigrants to the theatre. We arrived with no experience, no training, no mentors, no role models, and no real relationships in the sector. The culture of theatre makers was entirely foreign to us and the “rules” of producing were of little interest to us. Our immigration was not an assimilationist one; rather, it was to contribute new ideas and new practices in hopes of making the sector more inclusive. What we had was a mission we felt passionate about, an aesthetic we needed to establish, and politics that gave it all meaning. Malik and I agreed at the onset that “institutionalizing” Silk Road Rising would NOT come at the cost of neutering its activist stance. Ever.

As per the “part two” of my summer of protest, it began with a review, followed by a response, followed by an Op Ed piece. In her review of Silk Road Rising’s Midwest premiere production of Jonas Hassen Khemiri’s *Invasion!*, a play that challenges and deconstructs the racial profiling of Arab and Muslim men, Chicago Sun-Times theatre critic Hedy Weiss effectively endorsed racial profiling! “What

practical alternative to profiling would you suggest?" Weiss asked. This question was later excised from the online version of the review replete with an "apology" from the Sun-Times reading "A previous version of this review contained language about racial profiling that may have been perceived as expressing a political opinion. This is an updated version of that review." The otherwise Islamophobic tone of the review was left fully intact. Interestingly, Weiss praised the production, finding fault only in the play's anti-racist message. Silk Road Rising opposed the Sun-Times online edit both on anti-censorship grounds and as a matter of political utility. Who better to make the argument about Weiss' review than Weiss herself? It's why on our website we are running the unedited review.

Once again, emails flooded my inbox. Overwhelmingly supportive and overwhelmingly from artists of color. Weiss' review hit a nerve. Artists were hurt, outraged, and humiliated, yet felt utterly powerless against a white theatre establishment they believed would retaliate against public dissent. The deafening silence of that establishment, with some laudable exceptions, only confirmed their worst fears. Several artists of color shared stories in which they themselves felt racially profiled by Weiss or had been involved in shows that incurred the wrath of what they described as her anti-Arab, anti-Muslim, and anti-Palestinian biases.

But Weiss certainly had her defenders in Chicago's theatre community. Our community's self-appointed First Amendment warriors fell silent on the cruelty and brutality of racial profiling, but were downright giddy in defending its advocates. Apparently, the racist exhortations of a prominent theatre critic are fine. Simply trot out America's tired old "free speech" canards and call it a day. Weiss has a right to be racist. Calling out her racism, on the other hand, constitutes an egregious act of censorship. Actually, as a journalist and a human being, Weiss has an ethical and moral responsibility to not be racist.

I think it important to note that since the founding of what was originally Silk Road Theatre Project, Weiss has been generally supportive of our work, which made her editorializing about racial profiling (that is, racial profiling people with names like Malik and Jamil) all the more disturbing. We've requested a meeting with Weiss, but she has yet to respond. Even more disturbing were the contours of a "debate" that focused on speech, rather than racism. In my experience, popular racisms and "polite company" racisms, like Islamophobia, are particularly susceptible to free speech crusades; crusades that typically reveal our dearth of free speech. America has never had free speech. Speech in this country is an expensive commodity. Its exercise is commensurate with organizational and personal wealth. What America does have, thank God, is protected speech, and although that protection by no means extends to all speech, it allows us to produce the plays we wish to produce. It also enables us as a community to articulate visions of anti-racist theatre and to strategize and theorize around those visions.

The systems that create and maintain a disempowered artist class have to be dismantled. That will take time. But for starters, theatre artists need to stop feeling so beholden to artistic directors and producers. Most of us are overwhelmed, and frankly, we're not all that. This cycle of dependency is unhealthy, it's destructive, and it's unsustainable. Empower yourselves. Self produce! All of my creative work is self-produced. I have to control the politics. And it's a key reason I feel empowered to speak out. The 21st Century artist needs to be an artist entrepreneur. Once the artist more firmly controls artistic production, the threat of economic retaliation and banishment greatly subsides. Only then will our conversations on race and representation reflect the realities of the world in which we live. Only then will my summer of protest look like business as usual, and not heroism. None of us need to do theatre that operates within a failed paradigm, one that tokenizes or pretends to hear our voices. The fears of the artist sustain a dysfunctional system. Time to cast off our fears.