

GoodWork® in Theater

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I. GoodWork in Theater

This report is based on interviews with 35 exemplary theater professionals and their conceptualizations of what is entailed in carrying out “good work” in theater. As we show in this report, GoodWork in theater rests with the artists’ willingness to share their imagination, courage, and talent in order to entertain us as they invite us to travel inside the characters portrayed on stage. Regardless of the genre, theater holds a mirror to humanity, reflecting the dynamics of our culture. Sometimes theater offends by the dispositions and biases it suggests to us, not to mention those we bring to it. In its most sublime state a play can reflect the personal and social conditions that conspire and inspire us to understand ourselves in more meaningful ways.

GoodWork in theater can be examined on various levels: the reciprocal interactions between an individual’s commitment and an ensemble’s shared goals, the successful interchange between audience and performer, or the unique theatrical styles that support the intentions of a particular production. As researchers we were not critics of good plays or good acting. We allowed our subjects to speak to us and were guided, instead, by asking the following types of questions of them: What might GoodWork in theater look like? What does GoodWork in theater aim to do? How (and by whom) does GoodWork get accomplished?

Theater supports a tension of wills between the self and other—a dialectic that gets played out in many ways: between actor and director, among the actors on stage, between the playwright and the members of a production, and between the actors and audience. Each participant must put forth an effort to move towards an understanding of the other; each must take responsibility for oneself, one’s colleagues, and the audience. The ethos of good theater requires that the delicate balance of these interactions be sustained. What follows is a distillation of the interviews that reveals the experiences and convictions of 35 exemplary theater artists.

We interviewed 35 women and men between the ages of 35-80: 17 artistic directors, 3 producers, 8 actors and 7 playwrights (see Appendix A for more detailed breakdown). From this small but extraordinary group of artists we sought to examine the heartbeat of artists in motion, those who have survived the bruises and hard knocks, and who continue to do what they love most.

We examine the various personal goals suggested by the subjects and how these goals relate to the purpose and goals of theater. Also, we focus on the values that inform these goals, the general strategies employed to achieve such goals, and the personal qualities that, to some degree, buffer the individual against the inevitable failures and obstacles of this profession. We touch lightly on the role of the critic in the artist’s assessment of his/her success and suggest the role of audience as a component to the amalgam supporting good theater.

A. Goals

1. *Search for truth*

Each artist was asked explicitly to describe his or her professional or life goals, the desired outcome, and purpose that was most essential. A common thread and the overriding goal that emerges from our interviews is the search for truth, knowledge, and understanding. Many spoke about the importance of truth to theater, to themselves, and to others. The search appears to be a lifelong process that is as much an attempt to understand oneself better, as it is a path to understand others better. While there are countless interpretations of the word “truth” and the notion of “truth to self,” for the purposes of this report, we employ “truth” as it relates to one’s perspective/point of view or one’s unique understanding of his or her own reality.

When asked questions about the goal of theater and personal goals, subjects indicated a confluence between individual aims and those of the profession. The shared common goal and inextricability of the self from the collective enterprise sets a strong foundation for the accomplishment of GoodWork in theater.

Thirty of 35 (86%) subjects expressed as a *personal* goal the desire to understand self and others, and to provoke the audience with insights about the human condition. Twenty-six subjects (74%) also reported this as a *theater* goal—to ask questions, to provoke the audience, and to search for truth. An artistic director states her philosophy of the work as such:

I also think sometimes what I do is like, or what I want to do, the unconscious becoming conscious, is: we’re developing more and more of ourselves, like in a photographic tray. We’re in this tray, we’re this piece of paper, there’s a piece of film or something, or the print is in there and it hasn’t been developed yet. But, as we land in the developing tray here, in our world, more and more of it becomes visible. So as we live in the world, if we can consciously make more of ourselves visible, learn that we have certain abilities, or learn that our opinions are useful, and then express them to people; more and more of us in that developing tray becomes visible. Our feelings, our thoughts.

We heard this from many other subjects, including this artistic director who makes explicit the melding of his personal and professional goals:

As an artist, have I penetrated or is the work penetrating some intimate truth? Have I directly penetrated some intimate truth inside of myself in relationship to the world so that they are speaking and communicating to the audience? Until that happens, I feel as though I haven’t done what I’m supposed to do.

2. Connect to the audience

The importance of the role of the audience in any theater production is undeniable. Of the 35 artists we interviewed, 30 (86%) spoke about the importance of theater as a live event—a dynamic, real-time interplay between actors and audience. People may seek entertainment at the movies or in front of the television, but only in a live performance is each and every performance unique. There is an excitement in the air when the house lights go down, a sense that anything can happen. A Tony Award-winning actor explains:

It's the experience of seeing something that will never, ever exist again in time...It's different every single night because people are different, and audiences are different. And people feel different and the weather is different and all these other things that affect that. You're viewing a work of art that is transitory and only exists for the moment that you are seeing it, and never in this universe again in time will ever exist again quite like that. And I think that's what the fun of that is.

While every audience member may experience the performance differently, each witnesses the event not only as an individual but also as a part of a group. The power of theater is its ability to bring people together in a common space for a shared experience. A Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright reflects on her many opening nights:

I think the essence of good theater is something that brings 200 or 500 people together as disparate individuals and at the end of an evening they feel themselves a part of a collective or community because they've taken some... journey...I think great theater causes a communal emotion, but continues a collective disagreement.

One of the primary purposes of theater is, of course, to entertain. Entertaining, however, does not only imply passive participation. The audience itself brings a palpable energy into the theater and contributes this to the event. An actor, director, artistic director of an experimental theater company states:

I want to make the kind of work where the audience has to work also. They have to come towards the performance, as the performance is coming towards them. The performance can't just sit on the stage and present itself. It has to go towards the audience, and the audience has to come towards the performance, so that these two elements meet kind of in mid-air between the audience and the stage. ...[T]he work starts, and it starts when the performance begins and the audience exerts its energy and the performance exerts its energy and where they meet, those are fabulous—whether they meet in anger or even in apathy sometimes can be significant.

Good theater tries to reach the members of an audience in many ways: by shaking them up, encouraging them to ask questions of themselves and others, and stimulating a re-evaluation of the status quo. Two thirds of the subjects who spoke at length about the goals of theater (22 of 33) mentioned that one of the

primary functions of theater is to provoke and stimulate the audience (using nearly the identical words as when they responded about their *personal* goals). A playwright reflects on the power of theater:

I mean I think it spawns endless discussion that should happen by the time they reach the lobby, should continue in the car on the way home, or on the subway. It should be continued through email dialogues and telephone calls the week after... There is no one conclusion, there is no closure actually, although there may be a sense of emotional catharsis, but there's really not closure. It almost wounds the subconscious; it almost wounds the memory and continues to be a part of your memory and a way to process other emotional experience until the day that you die. That's what really great theater does.

B. Values: *Being true to oneself/integrity*

When we asked subjects about their values, we defined them as the ideals that guide the subjects in their personal lives, their methods of self-regulation. We wanted to know what they considered to be their moral compass, the framework that gave meaning to their lives. The theater artists we interviewed consistently spoke of honoring and being true to themselves and the importance of working with integrity, naming these as core values that informed their most important goal, the search for truth and understanding. Just as personal and professional goals were regularly spoken about, and interchangeably, so personal goals and personal values were similarly enmeshed. Overall, 34 of 35 (97%) of our veteran theater professionals spoke at length about the importance of truth, exploration, and understanding as a value or goal. In the words an artistic director:

But, I do think at the end of the day, you are what you believe. And the more you can jostle those beliefs and have people question themselves, and have a real dialogue with each other and themselves about core spiritual and other things; political and emotional issues, the further one grows as a human being. I guess that's why I do what I do, there's that confrontation.

Another director commented:

Well, I think — I mean, obviously I keep on saying: “What's the truth?” But there are so many levels of the truth. I think what I'm really trying to talk about is truth in relationship. In other words, it has to be an extremely nuanced picture for me to be able to say what I think and feel, and you to receive it. I can't do it out of relationship to you; I have to do it in relationship to you... So how do you tell the truth if what you're looking for in the theater — you're not just looking for the words being true; you're looking for the place from which they're coming. And you're also looking at the level at which the voice can impact the other person. How is it going to vibrate on the other person's body? How is it going to be picked up on? All this myriad of intuitive levels that you can't actually name.

Twenty-eight subjects (80%) cited truth to self/integrity as a personal value that guides them in their lives. This finding is supported by Q-sort data¹, in which honesty/integrity was reported as the second-highest ranking value in both professional and personal lives. Theater artists cannot expect to attain their goals of reaching and affecting audiences if they are not first true to themselves. Without this commitment, there is nothing authentic with which the audience can connect. Finding one's own sense of identity, learning to enlarge this sense of self, and learning to use that knowledge for the characters being portrayed on stage is the journey an actor must take.²

In theater, there seems to be an intimate connection between risk-taking, courage, and being true to oneself. Expressing one's inner self can be challenging. It requires openness and making oneself vulnerable, accessible, and susceptible to the reactions of others. Courage/risk taking was the value with the highest mean rank in the professional life Q-sort. An artistic director captures this mentality:

I don't think that anything happens without risk. I don't think that anything valuable happens unless you are willing to risk something. That's the thrill, that's the thrum of excitement that happens in business or in commerce or in anything else. There is a certain risk factor that goes back to your individual belief in your worth, in the worth of the product, in the worth of that writer and the worth of that particular actor... It's no different from any other decision. It isn't scary unless you are not true to yourself, unless you do not know why you are doing it. But if that is the case, you are in trouble anyway.

Our subjects valued the courage to be bold and original. Expressing one's artistic vision, remaining open to others during collaborative efforts, and sustaining one's confidence in the face of actual and potential failures and setbacks are challenges that stretch the artists' beliefs in themselves.

C. Strategy: *Struggle and sacrifice brings rewards*

Not surprisingly, our subjects saw sacrifices as part and parcel of the pursuit of their goals. While theater is often spoken of in terms of a passion or calling, like any such summoning the road is not smooth and the calling may feel like a burden—the source of harsh conditions and travails. (See “Passion and Calling” section). It is difficult to make ends meet if straight theater work is the sole source of income; not surprisingly 19 of 35 (54%) subjects spoke to us about work they had done in TV and/or film to support their stage theater work. In fact, Oscar Eustis, artistic director of the Trinity Repertory Company stated that

¹ Q-sort: a value-sorting activity that asks subjects to arrange thirty values in a normative distribution range with regard to the extent to which each value serves as a guide in their 1) professional lives; and 2) the top 4 values that guide them in their personal lives.

² Uta Hagen, *Respect for Acting* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1973) p.22.

Every actor I know goes out and gets their TV series or tries to get their TV series and tells me that they're going to make the money and come back to the stage and how many of them come back? Like one half of one percent of them do it once.

Many film and television stars got their start on stage. Henry Fonda, José Ferrer, Jessica Tandy, Ethel Merman, Jason Robards, and Laurence Olivier, are only a few whose careers have followed such a trajectory.³ These individuals successfully balanced stage work in tandem with their film careers, and were recognized with both Tonys and Oscars for their efforts.

Interestingly, from background research on the subjects in our study, we know that at least a few were involved in such work but did not speak about it with us in our interviews, making the 54% figure a conservative estimate. Nearly all stated that if they had an opportunity to do a movie or television program of their choice, they would try it. Typically, however, many thought that working in celluloid or TV was selling-out, a betrayal of the ideals of art in the interest of money. One actress/artistic director was even too embarrassed to share with us the title of a film in which she'd taken a small part to bring in some extra money. In fact, our research indicated that she was in at least eleven films:

I once took a film job just for money. Just once...I had never done anything in the art forums that was just for money. Did I feel it was a compromise? I thought it was the devil! I thought I was really being evil. Did I enjoy it? Yes. I enjoyed it a lot; it was a lot of fun. But that was an unforeseen benefit; I did it for the money.

In another instance, a playwright describes her uncomfortable experience with film:

I got commissioned to write a screenplay and I tried to do it and I was miserable. I hated it...[T]he medium was just foreign to me and it was also not my idea, and I have a feeling that's what happens with movies. You're given somebody else's script or somebody else's idea and I just had no attachment to it at all, so it was—To me, the bad thing about that is it takes the work that I really love and it turns it into—you know, it's like digging a ditch for me...even worse than digging a ditch, because it's the thing that I love and it's just been made into this task that I'm not enjoying at all.

Although many subjects are no longer struggling to make ends meet, those who have chosen to work in less traditional theater companies are still vulnerable to economic downturns and often endure frequent episodes of financial instability. Reacting to a suggestion that her internationally renowned theater ensemble had become successful, the subject countered with:

Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. Don't say, "as my success grew," 'cause it never grew. For 40 years we've swam with a straw in our nose. We

³ Source: http://www.theatermania.com/news/tmnews/index.cfm?story=650&int_pg=44&cid=1

never know, from one season to the other, if we can open the next season. We never know if we can get through the existing season. Every year, everybody, including me—we have to draw our salary in June or we don't get paid again until October or November; there's simply no money...[this] is a total sacrifice for everybody in it.

If this kind of commentary comes from people who have been doing the work for decades, imagine the state of those who have yet to make a name for themselves in the domain. The prospects for success are daunting and the challenges are relentless. An ancillary GoodWork project, in which we interviewed young actors who are just starting out in their careers, supports this claim. Clearly, there is no get-rich-quick scheme for theater practitioners; one's motivations need to run deep, although a select few may get a helping hand if they know someone in the business. This notion is further supported by the Q-sort data, in which wealth and material well-being received one of the lowest rankings. An accomplished artistic director reports:

As soon as you have the biggest hit ever in this theater at this particular time, then you say, "Okay, so now what does that really mean?" It doesn't mean anything...No theater person is a rich person...If you're in the theater for money, you're crazy...I don't have a job; I have a life.

It is true that without passion for the work, one is at a great disadvantage, yet we note a casual aside made by one artistic director who acknowledged that he, Peter Brook, Julian Beck, Constantin Stanislavsky, Bertolt Brecht and Jerzy Grotowski all came from affluent families. How this information maps onto the domain we are not sure, but clearly, money in the bank is a great asset or crutch for those who might not otherwise have the means to do what they wish to do. For example, one artistic director has the luxury of doing shows with people who already have healthy bank accounts; they can afford to work on fun projects without pay. Such opportunities are not realistic options for other artists who continue to live paycheck to paycheck. Since rewards are not forthcoming, an internal driving force—be it passion for the work, a sense of calling—must serve as one's primary motivator.

D. Passion and Calling: *Commitment to oneself*

Of the 35 theater professionals with whom we spoke, 32 (91%) expressed either a passion or calling for "the work" or gave advice to others to work in theater only if there is *nothing* else they could or would want to do. Staying in theater requires a heavy dose of dedication. It is a domain in which many fail—financially or otherwise—and those who succeed are never assured a smooth road nor a comfortable future. A Broadway actor advises others to

listen to their inner voice because that's what ultimately tells you. [Someone] said, "anybody who absolutely has to do it are the people that should do it because the challenges are so great and nearly insurmountable." If you absolutely have to do it, nobody is going to discourage you no matter what they say...[I]f you can discourage all

those other people that don't have that, you're basically doing them a favor...Because you've got to be tenacious, and you really have to want it because if you don't, it's not going to happen, just because [the job] is going to go to one of the other two thousand people that have everything that you have and they're tenacious and they want to do it and they're willing to sacrifice for it and they're still full of enthusiasm and excitement for the job. That's whom the job's going to go to. Not the person who is burned out and tired.

Many spoke about theater as a spiritual home, a place that lends a sense of familial belonging, while others spoke more specifically about theater as a calling, akin to a religious summoning. Several feel that they did not choose theater, but rather that theater chose them. In the words of an artistic director:

You hear about these things. You hear about, in a religious sense, you hear about callings; people are "called". I think that art beckons in just such a way, and that can't be explained...I don't know what does this for artists. I don't know what calls you, but sometimes something does.

Passion is a motivator, but hard work, perseverance and dedication need to be part of the equation if one's dream is to be realized. Looking at the Q-sort data, "Hard work/commitment" received the 3rd highest ranking in the professional life sort. Theater is not a low-maintenance domain; it requires a great deal of emotional and physical work from every participant. An artistic director in her 60s states the hard truth:

Stamina is a big issue in live performance, you've got to really keep it up. It's sort of like being an athlete, and you know, athletes retire young. They retire early...You have to be willing, [in] this kind of work anyway, to sacrifice a lot: your health, your retirement plan, you'll probably never own a house, or even an apartment for that matter, those kinds of things. So you sacrifice ownership and stability, and the stability that ownership [brings with it]...So you have to be willing to let go of a bunch of things, and at the same time to be ruthless about hanging on to those things which you won't let go of, those things that you demand that you have. Otherwise, your work isn't good work.

Twenty-six (74%) of the exemplars with whom we spoke made it clear that they made it this far in large part because of their sheer determination, outright stubbornness, and many years of committed effort. Several actors stated that tenacity is truly the key; if an actor stays with theater long enough, everyone else will either quit or die, and they'll be left standing. Cherry Jones, renowned actor rhapsodizes:

no matter how difficult it is, if you stick with it and once you are working, I mean, if you can stick through your twenties one morning you wake up in your mid thirties and you are the theater. You know? If you just are able to stay with it through those difficult years there comes a day when you and your friends are the theater.

With all due credit to hard work, a number of subjects also noted that they owed their success, in part, to the fickle hand of fortune and good timing.

We expected to hear about the importance of independence and autonomy among the theater artists we interviewed just as we did from the geneticists we interviewed from another branch of our study. We rarely heard this requisite from the theater artists. Instead, the actors and directors spoke effusively about self-knowledge, and the quality and necessity of their connections with others (friends, family, colleagues, and audience). Camaraderie was the norm in this domain. Even the monologist we interviewed emphasized the importance of the audience in the development of his monologue. While good work in both professions requires sharing of ideas, theater requires a group effort to accomplish a goal, whereas a group effort in science requires less coordination and is less the norm.

E. Responsibility

1. Responsibility to self and others

We were also interested in the idea of responsibility—towards whom or what one focuses one’s professional obligations. Given that integrity is intended to guide one’s search for truth, we were not surprised that fifteen subjects reported that their primary responsibility was to themselves. We heard the importance of this sort of responsibility from several actors, one who described it accordingly:

You feel responsible to yourself, for one thing; I mean almost primitively...the opportunity you give yourself to degrade yourself is so enormous that some huge self-protective thing helps you, which is a good thing on the one hand, and a bad thing on the other because you can’t really do the work you need to do if you’re worried about protecting yourself, so that’s a two-edged sword.

A director noted:

I think everybody has their own inner compass, and I think that you violate it at your peril...I think if you go over the line, you start destroying yourself. I don’t know quite why it is, but you do. I think you can destroy both your art form and I think you can destroy your relationships with other people. It’s very, very difficult.

And finally, a playwright said:

[W]hat is ethically true about what I am writing? Do I stand behind this? Is it hard enough, am I being too soft, am I backing away in the writing...It’s not anything I’m even conscious about--it’s whether or not it feels true and hard to me, as I’m writing. It’s probably the greatest sense of responsibility.

A responsibility to oneself would seem to lay the foundation for good work in theater—both for the artist to pursue his/her goals and to ensure that he/she gives

the best of her or himself to his or her work and colleagues. As we have suggested, however, there is another side to this coin.

2. Responsibility to others

Theater provides us with a communal experience and, as such, the artist must satisfy, to some degree or another, not only herself but the ensemble and audience. While not all subjects noted a *primary* responsibility, most did discuss various obligations throughout their interviews, both spontaneously and when prompted. Twenty-eight (80%) reported a responsibility to others—most important, to their colleagues and the audience.

The tensions between self and other continue to be joined. As much as theater is a personal, internally-driven pursuit, neither theater artists nor theater itself can exist in a vacuum. As we distilled from their commentary on collaboration, artists need to work well together and respect each others' interests and perspectives. Once one has committed to a production, every participant is expected to work at 110%, from rehearsals to the final performance. Lack of professionalism, laziness, and irresponsibility are antithetical to the goals of the individual and the domain, and unacceptable when the aspirations, hard work, and reputation of others in the ensemble are at stake. The artistic director of a world renowned theater comments:

One of the most important things is the work that I do with my colleagues. Theater is a big family and sometimes it seems like my priorities are that rather than my own family...I want a highly professional place. I want a humane place. I don't want any bullshit. I won't tolerate that, or lying or any of that. We're all in this together. I don't preach it, I just try to do it, and teach by example. I want the artists to feel supported and given a lot of room to move in and, at the same time, that we're not here just simply to have someone roll over because of a dynamic that has to be created each time. I'm loyal. I'm not good at firing people, but I've done it.

The essence of theater is in the relationships of those who work on stage and off; it is marked by their ability to share their knowledge, to communicate effectively with each other, and to pursue their common goals with originality and boldness. Creating a strong ensemble is demanding work. It requires that those involved take risks, have the courage to fail, trust their colleagues, and defend and mediate their artistic visions with one another, as each production competes with the best of what has been done in the past. Writer and artistic director George Wolf wisely comments,

A good collaboration is one in which there are very big egos in the room, very talented people, gifted people, people with vision. People who are possessive of their vision and insistent on seeing it materialize in the performance. People who are tenacious, and people who have a

great deal of stamina. Those are, I would say, the major requirements. Then you put all those people in a room and let them mix it up and fight and make decisions and enjoy one another and respect each other. But without the first you'll end up with sort of a low common denominator, where everyone can agree—that isn't a good collaboration.

The veteran theater artists unanimously recognize that the collaborative effort is the scaffolding of any production and the counterpoint of any one person's success. Sir Laurence Olivier speaks for this collaborative art in his autobiography: "Out of divine collaboration...comes the reality that audience and actor can share."⁴

Theater artists also need to consider their unspoken contract with the audience, a vital part of any production. Our subjects expressed an acute sense of obligation to reach the audience members and affect them in some way. A Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright comments:

In the mass culture, there's so much that is careless and thoughtless and false that I think because of theater and because of our certain expectations of theater, there's a responsibility to be as unflinchingly close to the bone as you can be. And that often takes the form of involving elements of your own experience that touch on other people...I just think that that's the nature of the beast.

Again, the overarching goal of reaching the audience and sharing truths is addressed, not only in the context of guiding values, but when subjects discuss responsibilities as well.

The subjects we interviewed agreed about the benefits of theater for practitioners and audiences alike. In the GoodWork genetics study, many individuals acknowledged that there might be hazards related to their research. Some scientists expressed a responsibility for this potential harm, while many more concluded that the burden of being a watchdog for these discoveries was for the public or the government to bear. In contrast, the theater artists recognized that plays may have troubling and confusing content, but this was seen as provocative rather than harmful. It was more important to not let the fear of the audience response diminish the power of the message. A renowned playwright admits:

[D]ealing with an audience when you start to get produced, it's really interesting. It's actually scary and exciting to sit in an audience full of people watching your own play. You feel culpable in a way that you don't when you write...I can see somebody with one of my books on the subway and just sort of sit there and watch them read it...It's really painful actually; even if the play is very successful, if the audience is having an emotional response, you feel responsible for that in a way that you might not with the novel because the novel is such a personal experience...the social, political act of going to the theater and witnessing something, it's a much more visceral responsibility in some way,

⁴ Laurence Olivier, *Confessions of an Actor* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982) 273.

I think. And that's something I'm learning how to deal with more, is like disconnecting from that so I don't feel so terrible if the audience is crying, or if they're angry, or if they're pissed off, I have to let them have their own experience.

F. Obstacles as Opportunities

Whether by conscious choice or resolute optimism, the theater artists with whom we spoke shared the ability to overcome a constant stream of obstacles and challenges. The compendium ranges from incapacitating stage fright, alcoholism, personal tragedies, loneliness, and imbalance in one's life, to failed auditions, bad notices, inadequate preparation time and unprofessional or mediocre colleagues, to personal and institutional finances. This list represents internal struggles and the external obstacles one might experience anywhere, but we spoke with survivors of these hardships; one can only imagine the thousands who have dropped out. Many artists did not see difficulties as daunting hurdles, but rather as opportunities for growth and change. For example, an associate producer notes:

I don't look at anything as a negative; I only look at things as a positive, because you always can use something out of them. From any situation, you can always take something out of it and put a different bent on it and incorporate it into whatever the next thing you're moving into is.

And an artistic director employs a similar optimism:

I think that there is some sort of death of [Subject's name] and New York theater, but I think that's a good thing. In that, there is grieving, but every single time you die, or something around you dies, you go feel the loss of that but you also feel the possibility to therefore redefine yourself in a much more interesting and expansive way.

A positive outlook and an ability to reframe one's circumstances seems essential for longevity in this domain.

G. Judging Success

An important litmus test for success is how the individual gauged his/her performance, not how others judged the work. Six subjects asserted that they are their own best source of knowing whether their goals have been met, while fifteen believed that their own opinions were a significant part of the equation. About a third of the sample (ten subjects) expressed that they take the opinions of their peers into account when assessing achievement.

We heard from some that if one responds positively to rave reviews, then equal weight must be given to harsh commentary. It is better to rely on one's own evaluation or that of one's colleagues as a barometer for success rather than to

lend credence to the whims of the critics. Tina Packer, artistic director of Shakespeare and Company, echoes this sentiment:

I judge success by what I feel that we've achieved and how the audience reacts to it. That's not necessarily how the critics react to it.

The audience is a critical component in how our subjects determine their success from production to production, and across a career. Nineteen subjects (54%) commented on their reliance upon audience reaction to gauge success. Of all of the components that contributed to our subjects' sense of professional satisfaction, the audience was the most oft-cited. This sentiment was captured by the artistic director of a well known off-Broadway theater:

When a play is in previews, when people come up and talk about how much they love my work, that's what gauges me. When people talk about how much they've enjoyed the play, that's what gauges me. When people come up and start talking about how the play affected them, then that's when I feel I've done a good job. It's when I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing. When people start saying how they felt experiencing the play, that's when I feel as though I've done it. I [know I've] done what I'm supposed to do...when I'm watching [and] I can tell that there's another dynamic happening between the artist and the audience.

H. Critics

No discussion of theater is complete without mention of the critics. Critics hold great sway with the public; they can ring the death knell for a production, slam a performance, humiliate an individual, or encourage an audience to pay extravagant ticket prices to see a performance. While critics have a place in this domain, there are mixed "reviews" about their effectiveness. Of the 35 artists interviewed, 22 (62%) commented on the role of the critic in theater. Only seven of these mentioned the critics as a means of gauging their accomplishment. The subjects who did note the extreme power of reviews, such as receiving the imprimatur of the *New York Times*, also acknowledged that although a good review gets people to buy tickets or makes the production or play a contender for awards, such an accolade does not necessarily correlate with the quality of the production or their own satisfaction with the piece.

Of the 22 artists who commented on the critics, six (27%) commented positively, 14 (64%) commented negatively, while 15 (68%) made neutral comments. Several of our subjects devised interesting strategies to deal with the essential but often callous critic who can affect the response of an audience and cause a production to close overnight. One artistic director/actor had an ingenious solution:

I read them [reviews] all and then I cut them out of the newspapers, and put them in an envelope and I point to a place on the map in the United

States, and I send them to a non-existent post office box in that town. I don't physically want them in my life, but I have to know what they say, because I have to know whether the audience is going to come open, or whether they are going to come prepared by the review. And if they are coming prepared, how have they been prepared?

Clearly, the desire for recognition and approval is difficult to accommodate when the ante is so high. Good critics can open people's minds, just as bad critics can close them. A critic who publishes his/her opinions should be knowledgeable, and predisposed to translate the power and meaning of a performance or play, to educate the theater-going audience about what is good and bad theater. What many of the theater artists reported is that good critics are rare; the bad critics, when they publish their comments, are a detriment to good work in theater. Ultimately, recognition for good work comes from the audience; they decide whether they are enjoying a performance or not. In a sense, the audience is the final critic.

I. Strategies for GoodWork: *A dialectic between self and other*

The theater-going public judges an actor, and to some extent a director, on the basis of how well she performs her duties, what roles she chooses and how daring and bold the interpretation is, among other factors. Good roles and opportunities for work are not always available, yet the need to work is constant. Actors must decide how to strike a balance between choosing high quality work and accepting any offer that comes their way. Most stage actors endure long periods of unemployment. According to the 2001 Actors' Equity Annual Report, Equity members worked an average of 16.4 weeks in the 2000-2001 season. At any given time, roughly 95% of actors are unemployed.⁵

Competition for even the smallest of roles can be intense, and yearly earnings are often unpredictable if income is not supplemented from another source. It is important to hold oneself to high standards, but not to the complete exclusion of any work opportunity. When asked what he would *not* compromise, one actor replied:

[I would not compromise my] artistic integrity. I wouldn't want to do something—And you know, hey, if I need to pay the rent, I'll do it. That's the thing. If I need to, that's what I do. Sometimes you don't have the freedom to make those choices, so I'm open to that. But I wouldn't want to do a show that I hated or didn't believe in...I probably wouldn't do a show that I thought they were saying something negative or had some negative impact on the evolution of the human species or consciousness, I think that would be damaging. I wouldn't want to do something that I think would be damaging to humanity or to people. That I don't think I would do; I won't say under any circumstances because, again, if it means your survival and you

⁵ Source: 2000 NEA Report <http://www.nea.gov/pub/Notes/78.pdf>.

need to eat...people make compromises like that, but that would be the last thing that I would sell out.

It is not surprising that of the veteran theater artists we interviewed, 43% spontaneously commented that compromising one's artistic vision was tantamount to a personal betrayal. The recognition of a potential compromise is as telling as the compromising scenario itself. Professionals must decide how to prioritize competing factors for themselves.

Often the priorities are specific to one's role in the domain. For example, artistic directors must juggle their personal interests, the institution's interests, the actors' interests, and the expectations of the audience. Institutional needs are paramount—if the financial needs of the institution are not met, the doors close. Fulfilling the needs of one's institution means programming a season that will appeal to audiences. Nevertheless, artistic directors must also appeal to their own aesthetic and artistic vision. They need to keep the work interesting for themselves and also need to choose works that will excite and inspire the actors. One artistic director presents his perspective on the conundrum:

Universally, I think we all have the same problems: getting people in the seats, doing work that people want to see, doing work that attracts you, as the artist, to put that work on your stage, producing the best, highest quality work that you can possibly produce. And yet take [sic.] some risks, because you want to be artistically fulfilled but you want to get people in the seats.

There is a delicate balance between challenging the audience and losing it. In order for a production to have any impact, it is essential that spectators engage and react in some way.

Playwrights face a similar dilemma. Do they write about what is interesting and worthwhile to them, or do they take a commission for a play whose story line has already been scripted; do they accept the assurance of a paycheck in place of artistic satisfaction? One playwright who has recently received great acclaim for her work shared her experience with working on commission.

It's not the case that I can just whip out a play a year...And there's a part of me that's like, well I just need to take a few months off and not be writing a play right now. But I don't have that luxury unfortunately...And I didn't have to take the commission, and I've turned down...a lot of commissions because I don't want to go crazy and never write a play again and have all these people waiting for me to write plays. So I took one commission from the Goodman, because the Goodman is sort of my home theater and I want to keep working with them...But I haven't taken any other commissions for that reason...I don't know, the thing is, I make a living as a writer. I used to have to get up and go be a secretary and I don't have to do that anymore. So you know, it's a trade off.

J. Contemporary Climate

The death knell of theater has been sounded many times throughout history. While many of today's pressures are unique to our times, the domain of theater is no stranger to challenges. Today's market pressures and high priced tickets put a tremendous burden on large theaters to fill the seats and threaten to drive some theaters out of business. They also make theater-going accessible only to those with the financial wherewithal to afford tickets. Actress Jane Alexander told us of the Baumol Syndrome, a trend she used to explain this phenomenon. The cost of theater productions continues to rise while the seating capacity for any theater remains constant. The most clear-cut strategy for a producer to absorb the increase in costs is to raise ticket prices.

Baumol and Bowen...wrote a book in the '60s about how the performing arts could never be self-sustaining because the size of the theater didn't change. So...you're not changing it, you can't copy it, you can't franchise it...[that is why] performance art will never be self-sustaining, that it will almost always have a deficit that will need to be made up if not by the public sector, then by the private sector.

Cultural forces are at work as well. The "theater mentality" in the United States is different than that in many European countries. Aside from the ticket price difference between movies and theater, Americans tend to prefer TV and movies for everyday entertainment. When they do attend a theater performance, their expectations are high; about a third of our subjects (11 spoke about it explicitly, 15 with a more lenient definition) feel that many Americans are unwilling to take chances on seeing an unusual production or a play by a new playwright. Of course there are exceptions, such as "Angels in America" by Tony Kushner, but the typical fare is safe and predictable. An internationally renowned playwright bemoans the fact that:

Serious theater is like serious music; there's always been a minority participation, just like poetry and like serious novels; you separate the serious from the gross...All of a sudden, you know, people are not rushing to Broadway theaters to see Beckett and Genet and Ionesco, they're not doing it, you know? But, the likelihood of even fewer recondite or apparently recondite, serious plays being done in the commercial theater grows all the time because audiences have been trained to want less than they should want. They want safe, easy plays that do not disturb or upset. And so, people who are going to make the money off of producing plays try to find the lowest common denominator.

However, our theater subjects who acknowledged the power of these forces did not have any serious fears that theater would ever cease to exist; some expressed concern that it would become available to fewer and fewer people, or become less interesting to the population at large, like opera. An artistic director of a local theater company states:

I think theater is so immediate and to be sitting in an audience and to be onstage, everybody's alive, it's happening right then and there...I don't think anything can replace that. I love going to the movies, and I love going to concerts and stuff. But, I don't think anything can replace that experience of the communication you have: an audience with an actor...You keep hearing how theater is going to die, [with] advances in technology and movies and TV, and everything. But, I don't think it will.

One successful playwright takes another encouraging perspective and sees theater being metamorphosed by the younger generation. Theater must be willing and able to change with the times.

I've seen astonishing things done by my Brown playwrights on a budget of a hundred dollars, that I will not forget for my life. And were they full of spectacle? Yes. And did I watch and say, "Oh my God, he actually created that with an umbrella!" It creates a different sensation...The theatrical practices of 25-year-olds that are now emerging. So, I don't feel that the field is disappearing. I feel that the field is transforming. I've had a lot of colleagues who have not been able to read playwrights like Suzan Lori Parks or Mac Wellman. They go, "Gobbeldy-gook, I don't understand it." I give it to a Brown undergraduate and they go, "Oh my God! This is great!"

Along with changes in generational tastes, several of our subjects see the growth of smaller theaters and regional theaters as the testing grounds for new talent. Many cities have small nonprofit professional companies such as "little theaters," repertory companies, and dinner theaters, which provide opportunities for professional entertainers. One playwright noted that, "Regional theater, from my point of view, is how American theater is defined now. It's not defined by Broadway for my generation of writer." An artistic director expounded on this notion:

When the regional theaters began and established themselves, they changed the whole theater landscape, and not only the landscape, they changed where more creative work is being done because then they became the places where things were developed that would end up on Broadway. Whereas, originally, before, it was Broadway that would send out touring companies of work that had originated in New York. The whole system changed...Plays that have ended up on Broadway really began out in the boondocks someplace.

A handful of the theater artists we interviewed have concerns that the regional theaters are increasingly bound by the interests and preferences of their subscribers, and that programming in such theaters has become less risky as a result. A playwright expresses concerns that there are fewer venues for his plays:

[W]hen you go to the regional theaters across the country, there's a tremendous amount of conservatism because they want to maintain their subscribers. And they want to maintain the budget, and if you do a new play that's really scary, and it's dangerous and weird, those subscribers might not sign up for the next season. And that's what

keeps the theater floating, so it's a really dangerous place to be in as a new playwright in America right now. There's just so little risk being taken...I have friends who can't even get readings, who are incredible writers, who can't even get readings or workshops of their plays because it's difficult material.

An actor-artistic director expresses her concerns for the economic instability of this period:

As far as regional theater goes, I think that regional theater was, when it began, kind of a good idea, actually, to get these pros out of New York and around the country...but I don't think it is anymore because the way that regional theaters exist is at the behest of the subscriber audience, and although the subscribers are encouraged to believe that the theater is theirs—it's like...ownership, you know, psychic ownership of the theater, but unfortunately they also have a tyrannical aspect. The audience can be tyrannous, and it often is in regional theater, so that if you do not program what it is that they want to see, you could lose your job, you could lose your theater, you could lose your subscriber base. You know, it's not so great, it makes it more difficult to do the work that's important to do. I prefer the smaller company where you may not reach as many people directly, but actually, reputation-wise you might reach even more.

A renown playwright shared a similar concern:

[M]ost regional theaters are money-losing operations. They're structured that way; they can't make any money for some reason. And some of your regional theaters, the people who make up the deficits, the board of directors, will lean on the theater people and say, "Well, if you want me to keep putting \$100,000 into this theater of yours, you're going to have to start doing some plays my wife doesn't hate." And so the captain of the regional theater says, "Yes, Sir!" and starts doing less interesting work. So, again, the economic pressure.

Playwright Paula Vogel declares her optimism not only for the growing possibilities but how new media and technology may be changing the face of theater:

Well, I see actually that the theater in many ways has become exciting in that there are now dozens and dozens and dozens of tiny little 99 to 50 seat theaters, everyone in the building is probably under 30. They're not making money at it, but some very exciting stuff is coming out of that, and I think the next generation that comes out of that will be pretty exciting. I think that theater has had to re-examine its function due to different media, a population of different media. I actually think that it's been a friend to theater. Theater basically is going back to its essence, which is the fact that it's an actor on stage in front of a group of people. You don't get [that] through a video screen. You don't get that from movies, you don't get that from any other form of art. I think that there is a generation now of young artists in their 20s. One of the things that I know (unfortunately a lot of people don't know) is the names of theater companies that are producing under \$200,000 budget a year, but they are producing, and they're out there. So that's kind of a great thing.

Ben Cameron, executive director of the Theater Communications Group, and one of our informants for this study, peppered his organization's report, "The Field and its Challenges"⁶ with rays of hope about the future of professional theater. While the report addressed many challenges, Cameron noted in his introduction that:

It would be misleading to read this report as an indicator that theater is imperiled, enervated or intimidated. To the contrary, there are substantial indicators—both anecdotal and quantifiable—that would suggest the art form is thriving...[I]n every city, we heard stories about a veritable explosion of theatrical activity—from the emergence of new companies of distinction to increased "storefront" activity involving formal or informal collectives of artists, of emergence of new voices in playwriting, of heavy conservatory applications, and more...we have much to celebrate.

II. Conclusion

In our study of GoodWork we seek to understand work that is both exceptional in quality and socially responsible. From interviews with leaders in American theater, we gleaned an initial understanding of both the nature and intricacies of GoodWork in theater, and its practitioners. Although this report does not focus on a cross-domain analysis, our data will yield many such rich comparisons. We highlight a few examples here.

GoodWork in theater strives for an understanding of the human condition through presenting stories of human experiences. Since this process begins with an internal search for truth, it is not surprising that the theater subjects we interviewed were more concerned with self-expression and self-knowledge than professionals in any other domain we have studied. Performances are the embodiment of each artist's individual exploration and discovery; these components are integral to the collaborative process.

Collaboration is the lynchpin of GoodWork in theater. Although collaboration is a necessity in this domain, the ferocity and passion with which the theater artists collaborate was unexpected. We also heard about collaboration, or a sharing of knowledge, among geneticists we interviewed. While the practice of good science calls for sharing knowledge, we learned that market pressures, financial promise, and competition are straining the ethos of openness in this domain. As competitive as the domain of theater may be, the camaraderie and collaborative spirit seems to have remained undiminished.

The theater artists we interviewed informed us both explicitly and subtly about the qualities of good theater professionals. They themselves possessed an irrepressible passion for their work. In fact, their exuberance and commitment came through in their words and the tone of their voices, as well as their body

⁶ Stephanie Coen, Stephen Forman and Ben Cameron, "The Field and its Challenges," *American Theater* January 2000: 98-107.

language. Not only did they embody this passion, but they also advised of its importance for professional survival and success. This internalized drive is similar to that of the geneticists we interviewed. Theater artists are concerned with the affective, subjective realities of life; the geneticists are concerned with the objective and empirical facts of life. While these two professionals take different routes, they are both deeply involved in an exploration to find some aspect of “truth.”

In our research on GoodWork in journalism, medicine, genetics, and theater, we found that veteran professionals in these domains typically felt favored by luck in their careers. In recent years, however, there have been growing challenges infused by a variety of external forces. For example, veteran journalists cited technology and the Internet as creating new kinds of time pressures that put greater stress on “getting the story first” and not being scooped by other reporters; market pressures among the stakeholders of newspapers emphasized the pressures of business and profit at the expense of editorial integrity. Veteran geneticists talked about heightened competition for grants due to limited public resources. In spite of these challenges, however, many of the veterans we interviewed remained optimistic, which is not surprising, since it is a rare professional who has not had to confront obstacles on the road to achieving his/her goals. In this era of market forces and technological advances, however, optimism was far less prevalent among the young professionals in various domains as they encountered, on a daily basis, the challenges of this powerful era without the benefits of a stalwart career and robust reputation to buffer its more hostile effects.

III. Appendix A: Demographic Breakdown

Constituency	Male	Female	Total
Artistic Directors/Directors	9 interviewed	8 interviewed	17 interviewed
Producers/Exec Directors	2 interviewed	1 interviewed	3 interviewed
Playwrights	5 interviewed	2 interviewed	7 interviewed
Actors	4 interviewed	4 interviewed	8 interviewed
Total	20 interviewed	15 interviewed	35 interviewed

Ethnic background	Male	Female	Total
Caucasian	18 interviewed	13 interviewed	31 interviewed
Non-Caucasian	2 interviewed	2 interviewed	4 interviewed
Total	20 interviewed	15 interviewed	35 interviewed

Ages	Male	Female	Total
30-39	1 interviewed	1 interviewed	2 interviewed
40-49	7 interviewed	8 interviewed	15 interviewed
50-59	4 interviewed	3 interviewed	7 interviewed
60-69	6 interviewed	2 interviewed	8 interviewed
70-79	2 interviewed	0 interviewed	2 interviewed
80-89	0 interviewed	1 interviewed	1 interviewed
Total	20 interviewed	15 interviewed	35 interviewed

Ages	Caucasian	Non-Caucasian	Total
30-39	2 interviewed	0 interviewed	2 interviewed
40-49	13 interviewed	2 interviewed	15 interviewed
50-59	6 interviewed	1 interviewed	7 interviewed
60-69	8 interviewed	0 interviewed	8 interviewed
70-79	2 interviewed	0 interviewed	2 interviewed
80-89	0 interviewed	1 interviewed	1 interviewed
Total	31 interviewed	4 interviewed	35 interviewed