
Like everyone in theatre, I love stories. Theatre is rooted in oral tradition. Our ancestors sat around campfires trading stories about The Hunt. Homer performed his epics in song and speech. The narratives in the Bible and Koran were first passed along by storytellers and performed as liturgical playlets. Many of us believe that Shakespeare's folio was transcribed long after the work was first performed.

I begin my proposal for promotion to the rank of professor with a story.

This July I directed Diana Son's contemporary drama *Stop Kiss* at Orlando's Mad Cow Theatre. The playwright tells a love story nonlinearly, alternating between

the touching and the harrowing, intercalating scenes about the nascent relationship between two women with scenes about the aftermath of a violent hate crime against one of the women. The assault occurs because the women are perceived as gay. The unknown assailant wants to stop their kiss.

Working on *Stop Kiss* prompted me to think about my own experiences with homophobia in Central Florida. I divide my professional time between academic and theatrical circles, two exceptionally gay-friendly worlds. Homophobia mightn't seem to intrude on my day-to-day life. I live very openly; I don't feel oppressed. I've been with my husband for over 21 years. We got married in front of 150 family and friends in 1992 at an Episcopal church, fully a decade before gay marriage became a social, political, and ecclesiastical talking point. So what could I know about homophobia?

In countless ways I have learned to adapt to (and avoid) subjugation. I have worked to place myself in environments and to surround myself with people who accept me. But of course I confront society's and my own homophobia every day. I work hard to fit in, to disappear. In fact, I have hidden so well and for so long that doing so is second nature to me, a part of how I operate in the world.

To share with my *Stop Kiss* company of straight albeit open-minded actors something of the experience of homophobia, I turned to storytelling. A good story reveals something about



Orlando Sentinel Calendar section cover, 14 July 2006

“Honey, every time

**I bat my eyelashes,
it’s political.”**

RuPaul

the teller. This story is about my own internalized homophobia. It’s about a man who has worked so hard at fitting in that he has learned to curtail the simplest expression of love.



My husband Richard and I love movies. We lean into one another and hold hands the entire time. It is one of my favorite things to do. We’ve never had a bad experience in a movie theatre (“Faggots!”), in Orlando or anywhere.

But I always wait for the previews to end and the lights to dim before I take his hand, and I pull away as the final credits roll. We’ve never discussed this, or planned it.

I do this because of the homophobia around and within me.

I hate myself for succumbing to this fear of others’ disapproval. What do I care? Why don’t I hold Richard’s hand, for heaven’s sake—no, why don’t I kiss him square on the mouth and risk sending fellow movie enthusiasts running for the exits? We would hardly be the first couple to make out at the movies; doing so is practically an American ritual.

Hiding my otherness is something I do instinctively, like all oppressed people. This is “passing,”—in my case, performing as a heterosexual might, whatever that means, and hoping no one notices I’m acting. In effect I’m doing what light-skinned people of color have

done as they passed as white and what Jews have done as they passed as Christian (and, indeed, what early Christians did as they passed as Jewish). I intuited the rules about and the advantages of passing long before I knew I was gay or even knew what gay meant. I do it, still, to fit in, to avoid a scene, to make it less likely that I’ll be singled out, hassled, or assaulted. I do it because it’s easier, and safer.

When asked if s/he was political, the drag queen RuPaul responded, “Honey, every time I bat my eyelashes, it’s political.” I love that. In 2006, living openly as a gay person is still political and still, unfortunately, dangerous in some contexts.

Things have improved a lot in my lifetime, but there’s a long way to go. I’m eager for the time when I don’t feel the need to think twice before I clutch my husband’s hand in public. That’d be nice.



The processes of directing and acting—and teaching—are all about storytelling. I regularly find myself in the classroom and in the rehearsal hall turning to stories as teaching tools. I do this to help students and actors make connections between their own lives and their characters’ theatrical counterparts. The best actors weave together threads from their own lives with the playwright’s material. The most convincing and compelling characters are amalgams of real and imagined memories and emotions.



The Diary of Anne Frank, Annie Russell Theatre, 2002
Alan Cody-Rapport, scenic design
Kevin Griffin, lighting design



Notes after technical rehearsal, *The Diary of Anne Frank*

I am fortunate to have venues, on-campus and off, where I can tell stories. Though I know well that stories can help us deal with life's most complicated and difficult topics, I nonetheless was surprised that my work on *Stop Kiss* caused me to revisit my internalized homophobia as it plays out in the cinema with my husband. Nearing fifty, I thought I'd long ago quelled it. I am humbled that this text brought homophobia into focus for my actors, designers, technicians—and most of all for myself. I like to think the production made a difference for thousands who saw the show or read the articles about it in the local media.

I do have perspective about what theatre can accomplish and about its relative significance in the world. As I write this, a new war is breaking out in the Middle East. Lebanese bombs have hit Israel, and Israel has retaliated, in the bloodiest violence there in twenty-five years. I alas cannot produce a piece of theatre that will calm this escalation of hatred. That may be beyond the scope of art. Former U. S. Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill famously learned from his father that "All politics is local," that we must not take our own neighborhoods for granted. While I'm deeply concerned about the crisis in the Middle East, I know my work must be local. *Stop Kiss* raised the consciousness—and perhaps changed the minds—of those involved as actors and audience.

Not all theatre sets out to foment change. The actor's ability

to make people laugh is time-honored and vital. I never take for granted my comic gifts, nor do I dismiss or downplay them.

Up against natural and unnatural disasters, art indeed can seem trivial. On September 12, 2001, twenty-four hours after the worst terrorist attack in American history, I was onstage performing in a farce at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC. From the theatre's backstage windows I could see the still-smoldering Pentagon. The audience that night was sparse and somber. It was a surreal and very, very difficult experience, struggling with that creakiest of theatrical clichés, "the show must go on." I had been taught in graduate school and had come to believe that art is the grandest expression of the human spirit. That night, I remember thinking that the grandest expression of the human spirit must be whatever it takes for a person to rush back into a crumbling building to save a stranger.

I struggled then with the place of art in life and was reminded—even as I drew tentative laughter out of a shocked, terrified audience—that artists play an important role bearing witness to what happens in the world and expanding our wisdom and tolerance. At the very least, artists can put agony on hold, if only for a few, precious hours. I am happy to be sometimes the instrument of those moments of solace, too rare in this increasingly complex and deeply divided world.

I am concluding a one-year sabbatical from Rollins. I spent

much of this time re-immersed full-time in professional theatre, directing and acting. I split my energies between productions that aim to educate and provoke, like *Stop Kiss*, and those that aim primarily to entertain, like George Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man* and the contemporary farce *Shear Madness*.

When I left professional theatre in 1996 to teach full-time at Rollins, I struggled with the decision. Part of me bought into the cliché that has talented actors acting and untalented ones teaching. I worried that full-time teaching would not provide the recognition and fulfillment that I had attained as a full-time actor and director. I was terrified the first time I listed “teacher” as my profession on my tax forms.

My recent respite from the classroom has re-confirmed that

teaching is my first passion and my greatest gift. I appreciate the opportunities presented by this sabbatical: the chance to test myself, to re-immense myself in the day-to-day life of a performing artist, to work alongside gifted actors, directors, and designers.

This change of pace and scene brought with it the vital affirmation that while I love the life of the performing artist, in teaching I find greater fulfillment. I missed teaching. Though I am a talented actor and director, I'm a better teacher. Teaching challenges and gratifies me in ways that I don't find onstage or in the rehearsal hall.



This sabbatical also allowed me to assess the challenges and opportunities ahead—for me as a teacher and professional artist, and for the Rollins Department of Theatre and Dance. I not only am eager to return to the classroom but also am enthusiastic about meeting the challenges which face me as Department Chair and as Producing Director of the Annie Russell Theatre.



Technical rehearsal, *Noises Off*, Annie Russell Theatre, 2003
Lisa Cody-Rapport, scenic design