

Arena Stage’s Power Play Summit, or “A playwright, a climate scientist, and a former national security advisor walk into a conference...”

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“Is Democracy worth saving?”

Although this deliberately provocative question was not explicitly the topic of conversation at Arena Stage’s December 9th Power Play Summit, it was the seed that led to the gathering – named for and inspired by our Power Play commissioning program, which focuses on the figures, stories and issues that have defined America over the last 250 years. It was also how Artistic Director Molly Smith began her opening remarks to the invited group of Power Play-commissioned writers and D.C.-based thought leaders in the arts, sciences, policy, faith and other sectors, gathered at the Mead Center for American Theater to discuss the challenges and issues confronting us as a nation. It’s exactly the kind of question we wanted to bring this brain trust together to discuss, and it’s also the kind of question we find theatrically exciting and hope to evoke in our audiences through the work on our stages.

When Arena Stage’s Artistic team started discussing how best to celebrate the institution’s 70th Anniversary, a conference or gathering of some kind quickly emerged as one of the ways to mark the occasion. Through conversations inspired by Priya Parker’s *The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why It Matters* (as well as consideration of Arena’s own mission and location here in Washington, D.C.), we conceived a “Power Play Summit” as something that was both rooted in the work that we do and could be of interest and value to the larger community. Over the course of several months of planning, discussion topics were honed, invitations were sent out, and (perhaps most important to any large gathering of people) catering menus were selected.

Finally, on the morning of December 9, 50 people gathered at Arena Stage, eager and ready to spend the day with us. After brief welcoming remarks by Molly Smith – including the aforementioned provocative question – participants were broken into groups of 10, with each group having a question to discuss, including topics such as “What role do faith and religious institutions play in public discourse and politics?” or “Have we ever lived up to the ideals captured in the Statue of Liberty’s ‘Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free...?’ Why is immigration so threatening to a large part of the population in the United States?” Participants then paired up, with half the group actively discussing the topic while their partners observed them and offered feedback part-way through; partners then switched places, so that everybody had an opportunity to discuss and to observe. In the afternoon session, people were divided into 5 new groups, with a new set of questions to discuss, following the same format as the morning session. Each group conversation was supported by a facilitator and a note-taker.

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This format allowed for deeper and more focused conversation among the smaller group. More interestingly, the knowledge that everyone was being observed provided just the right pressure for everybody to both participate themselves and make room for each other to participate. Each mini-group spoke for two 20-minute sessions, separated by a short feedback period; often, somebody who had been a little quieter in the first block benefited from an inspirational half-time speech from their partner and was more talkative in the second block. In most of the sessions, the first mini-group's conversation served to establish the real foundation and parameters for the discussion, and when they switched, their partners were able to build on that to have a far meatier conversation than they otherwise might have.

Both in the initial invite list and in the discussions, expertise was valued and respected. However, it was important that these were discussions and not simply lectures; as such, the questions and groups were designed with a recognition that any concrete solution to the problem of, for instance, climate change or gun control must be designed with the input of experts in the field, but we all have a stake in the outcome and a right to be heard. As such, participants were respectful and fascinated by the insight shared by the topical experts, and that insight provided a shared foundation for the discussion, but everybody was involved in the higher-level conversation of goals and ideals.

There was a strong spirit of inquiry and exploration to many of the conversations; one participant in a group wrestling with the limits of free speech (i.e., hate speech, misinformation, and the role of corporations in policing/protecting these limit cases) started by sharing that he was not sure where he stood on the issue and had chosen that group in hopes of grappling with it and gaining some sense of clarity through the discussion.

Another common trait of the groups was the range of perspectives and approaches represented. Different priorities, different discursive styles, different ways of approaching the question... For instance, a former National Security Advisor in attendance started the free speech conversation by establishing the legal answer and legalistic framework for the conversation, but without, it must be noted, locking any other approaches out of the discussion. That was, throughout the day, one of the beautiful things to see: everybody assembled was respectful of and even eager to hear other approaches. Even those questions which had been crafted specifically to elicit strong feelings and passionate debate resulted in calm, respectful, and productive discussions. Everyone in the room genuinely wanted to solve these problems and recognized the value of the breadth of knowledge in the room.

There were two themes that surfaced and resurfaced throughout the day and in every group. One, presumably influenced by the theatrical surroundings, was a consideration of the power of storytelling. The other, presumably influenced by Molly's inciting question at the beginning of the day, was a goal of good citizenship and civic duty. Together, these themes – one focused on means, and the other on ends – provide a strong sense of the key takeaways and next steps for this summit.

In the climate change group, for instance, (a surprisingly hopeful and optimistic discussion, by the way) there was a lengthy discussion of how stories and fiction often drive reality. Participants identified how past technological advances had been foreseen and inspired by science fiction stories, and how this idea can continue as we search for ways to address the catastrophe we now face. With so many dystopian fictions around us, there seems to be a resignation to disaster that we must address if we wish to inspire change and action. Everybody in the circle agreed that stories of hope could help us imagine and (most importantly) implement correctives for our collective future. The immigration group referenced the importance of combating the "narrative of scarcity" that drives so much of anti-immigrant sentiment. Multiple groups talked about the importance of "creating beauty" in all of these discussions.

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One participant in the gun control group identified storytelling as how we communicate the costs and human loss of our current culture of firearms. Groups discussing marginalized groups and equity discussed the importance of representation – both for the marginalized groups seeking greater participation in our shared culture and for the culture as a whole in understanding those marginalized groups – as well as conscious storytelling as a way to reframe the way we discuss and think of equity.

It's important to recognize that that power of storytelling is not always a positive. One participant in the free speech group described our current environment as "the age of storytelling," in the way that policy and political debates are so structured by media narratives, rather than by facts. There is a power to storytelling, separate from the way in which it is deployed.

In a morning discussion of educational reform, as we talked about the purpose and goal of public education, time and time again, the discussion turned to the responsibility of our educational system to produce informed and responsible citizens. Multiple groups referenced the recent findings that less than 14% of American 15-year-olds couldn't consistently identify fact from opinion.

The discussion format itself was singled out by several people as itself a fundamentally democratic approach, and a possible balm to the divisions of our modern society. Arena Stage has developed a "Culture of the Rehearsal Hall," that we try to infuse into everything we do; part of it is an assumption of good faith and common purpose. Participants spoke of how rarely they were able to have open discussions in that spirit and how critically important that collaborative intent is to solving any of the issues facing us today.

At the end of the day, the full cohort reconvened to report out and briefly share the meat of each discussion. It was a moment for the entire room to see what I had seen all day as I floated through each session: the recurrent themes, the clear sense of mutual respect and passionate inquiry that informed all the discussions, the diversity of perspective and approach. And perhaps most inspiring, the shared sense of mission. It struck me during the morning session, when one participant closed his introduction to his group with a self-effacing "...and I don't know why I was invited to be here." That speaker – the executive director of an organization supporting the academic development and social/emotional well-being of low-income and underserved Asian and Pacific American students – like all the attendees had a mission, in the non-profit organizational sense of the word. Everybody in that room was committed to changing the world, whether through their art, diplomacy, policy, advocacy or some other mechanism; each of them is working to do something, to leave the world a little better for their presence. And in that final sharing of the conversations, I think everybody in the room came to see that, about themselves and those around them.

There were many thoughtful comments and quotes over the course of the day that will stick with me. The one that stands out most came from the climate change discussion, but I think it serves as a broader call to action that cuts across all issues and perhaps gets at why this Summit was convened in the first place: "the cost of doing nothing is greater than the cost of doing something." In six months, Arena Stage will be following up with each Summit participant, and we hope that each attendee – including those here at Arena – will have found a way to incorporate this day of sharing and thoughtful discussion into their personal mission, will have transformed the 8 hours they spent at the Summit into "doing something."