

## Arena Stage Power Play Summit

By Robert Raben, former Assistant Attorney General; founder, the Raben Group

Power and art form intertwined helices; the strength when strung together properly is tungsten strong. Whether that strength gets wielded for good — The Aids Quilt — or for bad — Leni Reifenstahl — art moves power, power informs art. Inextricable.

The leadership at Arena Stage has known this for some time. The soaring glass walls in walking distance from the Capitol beckon a transparency, not to mention sunlight, we all crave. The dark high wooden walls invite you in to see novel works with a hewed majesty. And what works we get. Increasingly sophisticated, marbled with the purely joyful, plays grace this place, in no small part because they understand the eternal, abundant complexity of power, how it is grabbed, withheld and executed.

Molly Smith recently convened many playwrights and — for lack of a better term — powerful people, in Washington, D.C., to hash through the existential questions that seem to vex Americans: Why are we violent? What do we want from immigrants? Who will preserve our earth against climate havoc? And what is the role of art—the storyteller, the provocateur, in all of this.

We were enmeshed, the artist and the practitioner, in small and large groups, in sidebars and in passionate exchanges, each bringing their perspective to the mix.

Why can't we have gun regulation that is meaningful? Because different groups in the Nation are told different stories about how we got here, and how we preserve our safety and power. Why can't we have a healthier relationship with our immigrants? Because different groups are told different stories about how we got here, and how we preserve our claim on resources and power.

The artist can see right away how crucial gripping storytelling is in moving public policy. The policy maker can see right away the abundance and power, of artist-driven storytelling that connects with people, makes them empathic and gives them an action item.

We disagreed about all kinds of things, as we should. Is the Right selfish? Is the Left naïve? Are we easily divided from our humanity by greedy interests? Is man innately interested in division or unity or both?

All the right questions. All the essence of the artistic inquiry, and the core of political engagement.

I do policy for a living and actively incorporate storytelling — film, narrative, poetry, etc. — to move public opinion and law. It's astounding to me how unsophisticated the Left remains in this area, the formal enmeshing of storytelling and the regulation of our lives, which is what government is.

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I walked away from the gathering chagrined at how far apart policy makers and storytellers are with respect to what we each see in the American public, and why the status quo is the way it is. Policy makers see indifference and superficiality in huge swaths of the electorate, story-makers see a crass and transactional group making laws. We are both wrong. The chasm between us is artificial, destructive and needs to be broached.

Arena Stage has this right: art informs power, power relies on art.

We are in the Arena together.