

Molly Smith remarks at the Theatre Lab Cabaret Benefit

November 12, 2018

Thank you so much for this beautiful honor Buzz and Deb and the Board of Theatre Lab. I so appreciate your faith in me and Maggie—thank you for your wonderful introduction. Welcome to all of you and a special thanks to some of the artists, staff and Board members from Arena Stage and my partner Suzanne Blue Star Boy, who have joined us here tonight.

How strange and how amazing—in the middle of this topsy turvy world we are living in: but this is the best time in my life to be making theater, and to be making theater in Washington DC. Why? Because it is so clearly important and relevant. Our audiences are smart and politically astute. You understand nuance more than any audience in the country. Theater makers are always looking for meaning in our work — and boy, is this ever a moment when our work speaks to an audience that's ready to gather in community and hear the truth. Over my 20 years at the helm of Arena Stage, it has been exciting to see the growth in artists and audiences moving to DC to make this their home.

Storytelling is our focus at Arena — and since the beginning of mankind has been the way human beings communicate and understand who we are as human beings. In the theater, the actor stands in for each of us and we put ourselves in their place with their backs against the wall and ask ourselves, “what would I do in that situation?”

We have an opportunity to ask audiences to look at themselves, to deeply consider their actions and beliefs. We do not just put on plays that speak to what we want to hear. As with *Turn Me Loose*, based on comedian and activist Dick Gregory's life and career — audiences came out challenged. Or *The Originalist* which caused audiences to rethink their positions.

In London recently, audience members were on heart monitors during a musical and the tests showed what we've believed anecdotally for years — that audiences hearts moved to the same beat while experiencing the production. I believe the same happens with straight plays. For a few hours, we transport audiences out of their everyday life into a fantasy or a truth telling session and our audiences hearts beat as one. Ah, empathy!

We need the theater more now than ever before in my lifetime.

Our production of *Indecent*, Paula Vogel's play about Jewish people at the turn of the century, takes on new meaning after the massacre at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh. This brilliant play is unabashedly political and speaks to the effects xenophobia has on culture. This is an opportunity to express and experience the humanity of other people. When we allow hate and fear, we risk losing a piece of history. We risk losing the storytellers — we risk forgetting and losing our compassion. We risk repeating the past.

My production of *Anything Goes* at Arena is now in previews. This gold standard musical with its beautiful songs, incredible dance numbers, clever and perceptive writing, and years of production history reflects the world of its original writers and the times in which it was written. To reinvent the musical, one needs to see the story from today's point of view — the “good old days” in many people's memories. However, in this contemporary moment the darker side of those times is apparent in some of the lyrics, situations, and book scenes: for these Gold Standard musicals also frequently reflect the misogyny and racism of the times in which they were written. Times that were not the “good old days” for everyone. What do we do then? We subvert. We empower characters through costume, choreography, behavior. It's been a creative joy to work with the company and authors to navigate our way around these issues and bring the musical into our century. If we don't, we risk losing the gold standard musicals because they no longer fit the times.

Molly Smith Artistic Director Edgar Dobie Executive Producer Zelda Fichandler Founding Director

So why produce this musical NOW? We're in an "anything goes" moment in America. The topsy-turvy nature of the world in 1934 is mirrored by America right now. Crooks and thieves like John Dillinger and Bonnie and Clyde were sensational celebrities. The obsession with celebrity at any cost is the same today. The rise and fall of people who duped the system on Wall Street was as prevalent then as it is now. The rise of the 1% as the nation was just pulling out of the Great Depression apes our own time —much like America coming out of our Great Recession just a decade ago.

It's a moment where anybody can be whatever you want to be by just saying it. I'm a gangster — all right you are. I'm a debutant — if you can fake it, we will believe it. Mobsters walk amongst us and are celebrated like Kings. *Anything Goes* is about our American obsession with celebrity and religion and how con men can fool most of the people most of the time. And need I say Cole Porter? We need to laugh right now — and remind ourselves of our shared humanity.

Arena's mission — in particular the fostering of new voices, celebrating the diversity of our theater community and its potential to create change in our country, and a commitment to young people through programs like Voices of Now and Moving Stories — has synergy with the Theatre Lab. We exist to produce provocative, exhilarating theater and ground-breaking educational programs for all ages. I am proud of your accomplishments and that you recognize Arena's contributions to our artistic community through this award for me.

The work of the Theatre Lab and Arena is critical at a moment in time like this. After watching the nominating process for Supreme Court justices, one can see clearly how essential it is to be able to see through a façade, to understand challenges from different sides, and to recognize the strength necessary to take a stand for an ideal. What we witnessed playing out on the public stage may not have been written in advance, but boy was it theatrical.

Most importantly, organizations like Arena and Theatre Lab teach. We instigate the opening of young minds, so they can question, listen, and speak out to the world. We need young minds working more than ever now. To older minds, our programs challenge long-held prejudices and force people out of their comfort zone. From pre-school literacy to professional development for mid-career actors, we strive to support learning as a life-long experience. These programs teach self-awareness and confidence — an ability to speak up and speak out. The right to free speech is core to what we teach at Arena through our productions, our audience engagement programs and our education programs. It's a joy to feel the impact we have on audiences, artists and students alike.

Thank you to the Theatre Lab for recognizing our synergy and bestowing this honor on me tonight. Our job now is to continue the work we have begun.

Thank you!