

Lynn Nottage – Laura Pels Keynote Address  
A.R.T./New York Curtain Call  
May 2, 2011

Thank you dear dear Laura Pels for this invitation and being such an incredible supporter and nurturer of theatre. Thank you Ginny Louloudes and A.R.T./New York for inviting me to speak. I am not a terribly public person, but this is a rare opportunity to speak to a large gathering of theatre professionals.

I wanted to share thoughts from a letter that I have slowly been writing to Congress. It is culled from thoughts I've assembled over the last year. In the tradition of theatre making, it's a work in progress – constantly evolving and shifting depending on my mood. It is my personal reaction to feeling under siege by conservative representatives, who somehow believe that the arts are expendable. They fail to recognize that nothing kills a city, a community, a culture faster than the loss of its artistic center. And more obviously they fail to recognize that in difficult times not just the stomach, but the soul needs soothing. And thank goodness, the church isn't the only place that we can go to make sense of our mad stupid world. And as such, I

Lynn Nottage – Laura Pels Keynote Address  
A.R.T./New York Curtain Call  
May 2, 2011

take the conservative indictment of the arts as a personal affront.

I've always viewed myself as an outsider: I wore a big afro through the eighties, five years after it went out of style and ten years before it came back into style. I write plays about dangerous things, such as love and optimism, bucking the trend toward darker misanthropic themes. I also write plays about women whose voices have been squelched by war, racism and sexism. My artistic journey has been defined by the struggle to be heard, to give voice to those marginalized by circumstance. And despite my success I remain very much an outsider, and as such I want to create a theatre that explores the cultural tensions inherent in being an African American woman living in a multicultural society that is still struggling with the painful legacy of racism and sexism. Sustain the complexity of what it means to be a female artist from the African diaspora interested in non-traditional narratives. As a playwright I dwell someplace between grandiosity and despair. From the moment I cast my line into this

Lynn Nottage – Laura Pels Keynote Address  
A.R.T./New York Curtain Call  
May 2, 2011

business, I was told that I would never make a living. I was told that playwriting is a dying art form, and that it was going to be a hard, unforgiving life. And honestly, those warnings proved true for many, many difficult years – what I like to call my “Ramen noodle years,” when I was thirty pounds thinner and felt as if I was standing on a soapbox talking to handful of indifferent passersby.

But, thankfully there is that irrational grandiose part of self that drew me to this insane impossible business, that turned me into a compulsive, passionate creature compelled to craft stories that seek to challenge and amuse audiences. It’s the part of me driven to make sense of the chaos that has become our world, and that’s liberated by my characters who speak more lyrically, emphatically and boldly on the stage than I’d ever dare to in my day to day life. Their voices embolden me to wield language like curative acupuncture needles carefully placed to keep the nerve endings sensitive and alive.

Lynn Nottage – Laura Pels Keynote Address  
A.R.T./New York Curtain Call  
May 2, 2011

In 1989, I had my first play produced in New York. It was called *Rhinestones and Paste*. It was a non-linear offering about a transvestite junkie prostitute dying of AIDS, who falls madly in love with a radical orthodox Muslim man. To hide their relationship and her illness, the transvestite dresses in purdah hoping that the cloak of religion will keep her protected from society's condemnation and judgmental eyes. And in my youthful fervor, I sent the play around to every theatre in New York City confident that I had created a play that offered a fresh singular look at lofty themes, like religion, AIDS and human sexuality. I was working taboos from all angles. And of course, it was summarily rejected by everyone. I received some very, very nasty rejection letters to say the least. Nevertheless, a brave friend produced the play for two performances in a nightclub called Forty Worth. The play was packed each night, but got little notice, and my characters drifted forever into obscurity on closing night. And I decided that everything everyone said about playwriting was true; it was a fruitless, impossible and thankless journey. So, I sold my computer, took a

Lynn Nottage – Laura Pels Keynote Address  
A.R.T./New York Curtain Call  
May 2, 2011

serious full time job in human rights and committed myself to a life around the water cooler.

Early in my career, I abandoned theatre, because I'd allowed myself to believe the propaganda that the stories about African American women weren't welcome on the American stage, it was the domain of angry righteous white men. I believed the propaganda that theatre wasn't a vital part of the American dialogue. But distance made me recognize how important it is for women and people of color to be part of shaping the cultural narrative. I came to value our role as storytellers; I came to understand the need for a forum where we can collectively distill ideas and wrestle with the complexities of our world. And I selfishly wanted the big hipped, brown skinned demigods of my childhood to be part of American mythology, I wanted them placed right smack center stage where everyone could see them. And so after four years of sitting behind a desk, I returned to writing plays, which I've now done for quite some time with varying degrees of success. And there is not a day that goes by that I'm not plagued

Lynn Nottage – Laura Pels Keynote Address  
A.R.T./New York Curtain Call  
May 2, 2011

by self-doubt, and I find myself questioning why I'm writing plays, rather rebuilding homes in Alabama.

But...Several years ago I was reminded why I still have the urgent need to write plays, and why I believe theatre and the arts are not only important, but necessary. You see, I had the good fortune to spend an afternoon at the rare books library at Emory University in Atlanta. The school has taken on the awesome task of building and maintaining the extensive Billops/Hatch collection of Twentieth Century African American playwrights. It's an archive of theatre memorabilia, letters and yellowed scripts littered with handwritten notes. Many of the pages reveal the writer's private process, a road map of their artistic journey.

I spent hours in the library pouring over the original drafts of plays written by writers such as Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston, August Wilson and Ed Bullins. It was like stripping away layers of paint on a wall to reveal the raw wood with all of its beauty and imperfection; it was a reminder that our great writers

Lynn Nottage – Laura Pels Keynote Address  
A.R.T./New York Curtain Call  
May 2, 2011

also struggled and questioned their voices before boldly sharing their words with the world. It was a very humbling experience to be in the company of so many insurgent and defining voices.

And, as I was preparing to leave the library, the librarian carried over a cardboard box to my table. “I thought you might want to see this,” she said, and placed a fragile book from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century in front of me, then carefully peeled back the pages with gloved hands to reveal an original copy of a poem written by Phillis Wheatley. The crooked typeset was adorned with Wheatley’s delicate script notations, the markings...the beginning of my own literary journey and our struggle as female writers in America. The sight of her nascent words overwhelmed me. There in front of me was the original copy of the first book of poetry published in America by an African and the third book of poetry in America published by a woman. I cry very easily, and this was one of those moments. I wept unabashedly.

Lynn Nottage – Laura Pels Keynote Address  
A.R.T./New York Curtain Call  
May 2, 2011

You see, over two hundred years ago, an African born slave woman named Phillis Wheatley felt compelled to put pen to paper and craft poems; and from the very moment she conceived of herself as a poet, she had to defend her right to exist; defend her right to free expression, in a country that believed that a woman, an African woman didn't have the intellect nor the creative independence to give birth to an original idea. Yet, in this climate, over two hundred years ago, Phillis did something radical, she dared to commit her thoughts to the page, and give a poetic voice to women in America. It was a bold act, a defiant act, a political act, an act of self-definition and invention. A ritual that women writers throughout the world continue to struggle with every single day.

And it makes me angry that just over two hundred years after Phillis Wheatley literally fought a legal battle to prove the authenticity of her voice, we are still in a battle to protect our voices as artists. We are told that we are a luxury indulged during times of abundance. But it's in these moments that I think of



Lynn Nottage – Laura Pels Keynote Address  
A.R.T./New York Curtain Call  
May 2, 2011

Wheatley, and the insurmountable obstacles that she overcame to sing herself into existence on the page. I think of what we would have lost without her insurgent voice.

So why do I tell you this, why theatre? Why is it necessary? Why is it so personal? Theatre explores life through metaphor, using poetry and action to help us decipher our existence. Why theatre? It helps us explore questions like how do we love? Why do we go to war? How do we move through pain? How do we find happiness? How do we mourn? How do we heal? Theatre is a place where catharsis can occur, and demons be exorcised.

Why theatre? Theatre is ultimately a conversation between audience and artist. Artist and culture. It is a collaborative and communal art form, a dynamic animal completed in the moment, and as a result allows for the possibility of uncensored dialogue between audience and artist at any given performance. It is that very dialogue that I believe makes the medium unique. It has

Lynn Nottage – Laura Pels Keynote Address  
A.R.T./New York Curtain Call  
May 2, 2011

the element of surprise that forces the audience to engage and be alert...they must be observer, witness, participant, spectator and respondent all in one. The theatre allows the audience to be a dynamic part of the experience.

So forgive my hubris, I do feel that what we do is important and necessary, particularly during times like these, where we as a nation are desperately struggling to find a new cultural narrative. Reason is being hijacked by irrational loud narrow-minded voices. And now is when we particularly need our artists to be active participants in the public discourse.

Why theatre? Theatre is a place of the unexpected; it is movement, dramatic action, which by definition is human change. Good theatre allows a shift in perspective, a new understanding of a situation. It isn't static or still. It is not frozen in time, it is in constant motion, movement, action, something changing, something shifting, a story unfolding. Good theatre is never a boring recapitulation of what you already know.

Lynn Nottage – Laura Pels Keynote Address  
A.R.T./New York Curtain Call  
May 2, 2011

It is invention. America thrives because of its ingenuity and incredible ability to resurrect itself in the face of adversity. It also thrives because of its creative arts, fuel invention.

Why theatre? In many societies you'll find that theatre is at the vanguard of change, because it can peel back layers of emotion to reveal human truths. In many countries citizens literally put their lives on line to tell stories that challenge the culture to think more expansively.

I'll stop there because I could be here all night defending theatre. And I share these thoughts, because I see the ongoing attempts to kill the arts through legislation that limits funding, it is way to drain our cultural blood.

Now is the time when we should be bolstering our artistic institutions, reinforcing and exploring our cultural narrative. It is my hope that the work that you produce reflects the diversity of this country, and that it doesn't pander and cater to the status quo. It is my hope that in the face of adversity that we continue to

Lynn Nottage – Laura Pels Keynote Address  
A.R.T./New York Curtain Call  
May 2, 2011

create adventurous, poetic, political, dirty, quirky,  
dangerous work, it is my hope that we continue to hunt  
for fresh perspectives and move out of middle class  
living rooms into other unexpected places. It is my hope  
that we will not allow financial considerations and  
political pressures dictate what appears on the stage.

I thank you for allowing me to share my thoughts.

Lynn Nottage