

FOREWORD

WE READ FOR MANY DIFFERENT REASONS: among them, to gain information and understanding; to experience in our minds what may be unavailable to our bodies due to time, distance, or circumstance; to stimulate imagination; or to feel connected. It is rare to find a book that actualizes so many of these reasons as *The Alchemy of Astonishment: Engaging the Power of Theatre*.

I'm impressed with Will Weigler's ability to discern and describe precisely how and why theatrical choices produce epiphanies. Reading along, I experienced something of the feeling of being let in on a magician's secret knowledge, and also the pleasure of engaging with a vivid storyteller who enables the reader to see and feel as well as hear what is being told. I can imagine so many uses for this book as a teaching aid, an inspirational instruction manual for artists, even a creative spur for sermons, speeches, and conversations having nothing much to do with theatre.

My own work is in a field of practice that lacks a common name. Some of my books call it "community cultural development." Others speak of "community-based art," "participatory art," or "art for social change." The essence of this work is to cultivate awareness and express truths that disrupt dominant narratives, bringing new beauty, meaning, and action into the world.

Much of it is inspired, as *The Alchemy of Astonishment* was, by the ideas and analysis of Paulo Freire, whose work serves the transformation of history's objects—those acted upon—to subjects in history, the makers of culture. The moral grandeur of that aim also infuses this book.

A key aspiration in all such work is to demolish the imposed barriers that divide us. In the sphere of art and culture, that includes the red-velvet barricade fencing off establishment arts work from the liberatory, collaborative creations of artists working in community.

Amidst the multiple types of value *The Alchemy of Astonishment* adds to theatrical knowledge and practice, I greatly admire the way it erases that barrier by drawing equally on examples from National Theatres and traveling theatres, site-specific community-based plays and mainstage opera productions. When it comes to artistic epiphany, the means of production are remarkable in their democratic accessibility. The strategies described in this volume (and offered in the accompanying cards) can be deployed by anyone willing to invest time in the type of deep exploration and resourceful innovation that artists crave wherever they may be located in the cultural landscape.

Writing that sustains my interest braids pleasure and purpose so that reading is repaid in both currencies. In this challenging aim, *The Alchemy of Astonishment: Engaging the Power of Theatre* succeeds. This book will be a unique and useful guide for all who likewise aspire to join pleasure and purpose toward a goal best described by a term Weigler has coined: enlisting creators, participants, and audience members in their own *co-liberation*.

Arlene Goldbard

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arlenegoldbard.com