I am fascinated by epiphanies, those ephemeral flashes of insight that can radically shift our perceptions of what we have always assumed to be true. In particular, I am interested in epiphanies in the theatre—ahah! moments—when something happens on stage that sends a palpable frisson through the entire audience. Theatre director Anne Bogart, with a nod to James Joyce, describes these as moments of “aesthetic arrest,” because it is something about the aesthetics of the staging that stops an audience in their tracks. These kinds of epiphanies, brought on by a very personal response to something in a performance, can have the power to alter the way we experience the world. I believe as D.H. Lawrence did, that having experienced something new it becomes very difficult to continue to act as we have in the past. Epiphanies change our lives. As a theatre director myself, I was compelled to look into these astonishing moments of performance to better understand how they worked. In the words of the Zen Buddhist philosopher Alan Watts, I wanted to “eff the ineffable and to unscrew the inscrutable.” I took a break from my professional practice to enter a PhD program in applied theatre so that I could research this question and, I hoped, to come up with some answers.

I began by contacting hundreds of theatre professionals—directors and producers, critics, playwrights, teachers, scholars—as well as students and anyone else I could find who expressed a love of theatre. I explained that I was conducting a study to come to grips with the experience of aha! moments in performance and to see if I could develop a theory and conceptual language to explain them. I asked whether, in all their years of seeing theatre, they had ever witnessed a single brief moment onstage that had stopped them in their tracks and perhaps produced a sudden and unexpected insight, or a re-assessment of some long-held assumption. I emphasized that I was particularly interested in moments of staging that appeared to make the whole audience gasp at once or seemed in some
other way to have affected not just them, but also everyone around them. Over ninety people sent me anecdotes of their most memorable moments at the theatre.

As one might imagine, asking experienced theatregoers for stories like this yielded some breathtaking results. Reading each one was like receiving a gift. I then went searching through newspaper reviews, journal articles, books, and other sources to see if I could identify anyone else who had seen those same productions and also written about them. In all, I located about two hundred additional accounts of various productions in my collection and nearly always the other writers commented on the same astonishing moments that my initial respondents had described. When I looked closely at what was happening on stage in all of the stories, I discovered that even though the plays were very different, there was an unmistakable pattern. They had something in common.

The impact of all these moments on stage hinged on the human habit of pigeonholing our experiences. Once we are no longer babies or toddlers, we develop a tendency to make sense of the world by classifying anything we encounter according to what we already know about it. This lets us quickly gauge how we should respond to it based on our prior experiences. Educational theorist Jack Mezirow, writing on the challenges of learning new ideas as adults, describes how we create shortcuts to perception as we grow older. Admittedly, without the capacity to assess our surroundings, we would be overwhelmed as adults, looking with fresh eyes at every little detail in the world around us. So rather than being openly receptive to what actually lies before us, our expectations “diminish our awareness of how things really are in order to avoid anxiety, creating a zone of blocked attention and self-deception.” While efficient, this lightning-fast internal sorting system does dampen the possibilities for appreciating the uniqueness and subtle peculiarities in anything we come across. This is as true for the people, relationships, and situations in our daily lives as it is for the people, relationships, and situations we see in a play.

What I found when I analyzed all of these stories is that, in every case, there was something about the particular way the moment on stage was orchestrated that managed quite ingeniously to derail the audiences’
instincts to pigeonhole what they were seeing. It got in the way or, perhaps more accurately, it temporarily pushed the mind’s filter out of the way. Spectators found themselves unexpectedly engaging with what they saw onstage as if it were the first time they had ever encountered it. That’s what led to the epiphany. Surveying the whole collection of stories, I was able to identify five distinct categories of staging strategies, each of which relied on a different route to dislodging the audience’s impulse to assign their quick preconceptions. Within each category there were variations on how it was achieved. I gave them all names—the categories and the variations in each—and organized them into a five-part catalogue. I then illustrated all of the staging strategies with examples drawn from the stories I had received.

Chapter one presents the first category in the lexicon: Partnering with the Audience. These staging strategies disrupt the implied expectation in most Western theatre that the spectators’ role is to receive the performance from the actors who deliver it to them. This cozy and familiar relationship between the stage and the stalls establishes relatively predictable parameters for the theatre experience. I call this category Partnering with the Audience to reflect strategies that reconfigure this unspoken contract into a different kind of relationship—a relationship based more in partnership—that has the potential to lead to more vital encounters.

Chapter two, Making it Compelling, presents the second category in the lexicon, a range of staging choices each of which work like special ingredients that are inherently captivating to an audience. When integrated into a performance they can elevate the spectators’ interest in—and concern for—the events and characters in a play. The audience’s ramped up emotional investment temporarily obliterates their preconceptions about what they are witnessing.

Chapter three is called Gest. It is an English translation of the German term *gestus*, one of the many innovations that Bertolt Brecht introduced to contemporary theatre. A surprising number of the stories I examined validated the effectiveness of Brecht’s claim that when actors are able to distill the complexity and contradictions of a relationship or social circumstance into a single precise physical gesture, the sheer clarity and
aptness is so startling that it forces aside the spectators’ preconceptions. This third category of staging strategies includes a variety of applications, from an individual actor’s single physical action, to gestic use of props, scenery, and even entire production concepts grounded in a gest.

Chapter four is called Over to You because these staging strategies effectively divert the spectators’ vicarious observations of the characters’ revelations by setting up circumstances that figuratively lob the experience onstage right over the footlights and into their laps. Over to You leads the spectators to have their own very personal responses to what’s happening on stage even as they remain in their seats. This first-hand experience eclipses their preconceived conceptions.

Chapter five presents the fifth and final category, Touching the Live Wire. These staging strategies short-circuit the fictional frame of the play, jolting audiences into reacting to events in a theatre performance in the same way they react to events in their real lives. During these astonishing moments, the theatre encounter briefly becomes galvanized with a vital connection to reality and demands a different kind of response. As a result, the spectators are drawn into a more active relationship with the world of the play and the people in it.

To make it easier to teach all of the different concepts, I have configured the entire vocabulary into a set of cards, somewhat resembling tarot cards, with a suit for each category and a series of individual cards within each suit. The face of each card has the name I’ve assigned to that staging strategy and an iconic image to help remember it. On the reverse is a brief description of the theory and suggestions for how to implement it into a scene or show.

In choosing to call this book The Alchemy of Astonishment, I am light-heartedly acknowledging the audacity of presuming to write a how-to manual for generating epiphanies at the theatre. Casting my lot among the alchemists of old and their chimerical belief in a formula for producing gold, I understand that to some readers, this will seem delusional. And yet, as my many respondents were eager to report, epiphanies at the
The 4 x 6.5 inch (10.2 x 16.5 cm) cards are designed as a deck with five suits corresponding to the categories in the book. The deck also features 18 cards with story prompts to assist in generating scene material for practice in applying the vocabulary. For information on ordering the cards, see page 222.
theatre do happen. I remain steadfast in my belief that they can be catalogued and theorized. What makes this particular quest distinctive is the way the theory was generated. To begin with, I limited the scope of the research to an analysis of what happened on stage, not the more far-reaching questions about the impact it had on spectators. In other words, I was less concerned with how people were personally affected than with examining what it was that had affected them. Something on stage at that moment caused a gasp and remained indelibly etched in their memories. What was it, I wanted to know, and how does it compare to other people’s experiences of aesthetic arrest at other plays? This, I felt, was quantifiable. Ultimately, I required a methodology for analysis that would do more than identify relationships and patterns; I wanted the research to lead to the creation of an explanatory theory that could be verified and taught. The perfect methodology for this was Grounded Theory.

In the late 1960s an unlikely research alliance was forged between two American sociologists: Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss. Glaser had earned his PhD at Columbia University, the very heart of academia’s positivist school of quantitative research. He teamed with Strauss, who had received his PhD from the other end of the scholarly research spectrum: The University of Chicago with its celebrated field-based ethnographic school of qualitative research. Together they posed the question, how could one apply a systematic analysis to qualitative observations that would be grounded from the start in analysis of the data, in contrast to starting with a researcher’s hypothesis and then deduction. Their groundbreaking 1967 work, The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research, revolutionized sociological methodology. They demonstrated how rigorous research could indeed be applied to ethnographically-based data such as oral or written accounts of interpersonal relationships, social interactions, and personal interpretations or responses to events. This approach enabled researchers to produce more than ethnographic descriptions from qualitative data; they could now also generate formal and substantive theory. Strauss continued to develop his ideas on Grounded Theory independently and in partnership with Juliet Corbin. Glaser parted ways with Strauss, publishing his own independent works. Corbin and scholars such as
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Adele E. Clarke, Jan Morse, Kathy Charmaz, Phyllis Stern and Caroline Porr among others have carried the work forward.

Grounded Theory methodology initially prescribed a research protocol involving a very specific progression of steps. More contemporary interpretations are less singular than the original authors’ expectations, but fundamentally the approach cannot be sampled piecemeal; it is an academically rigorous package deal. The first step involves becoming intimately familiar with the phenomenon being studied either by interviewing people who have a common experience of it or by reviewing existing accounts of it. The researcher or research team codes the data, characterizing the gist of what was said or written in each interview or anecdote, sometimes a paragraph at a time or sometimes sentence by sentence. Researchers take into account the respondents’ observations of what was happening while also adding their own insights to the mix. During the process, researchers write memos to themselves—an ongoing diary of insights, curious details that crop up, and speculations. When the coding is complete, the narratives are set aside and the codes are analyzed on their own, compared and contrasted with each other with a close eye to finding themes and patterns among them. Memo writing continues and picks up momentum. By constantly testing provisional concepts and categories against the original data, researchers assess the strength of an emerging theory as it develops. Provisional concepts that fail to explain or account for the meaning of the phenomenon sufficiently are revisited, and either abandoned or modified until all the data are accounted for and a new explanatory theory is discovered.7

Along the way, researchers will occasionally discover a social process or category in the data that has already been theorized by others. If the pre-existing theory fits, it can be considered a legitimate element of the new theory, but it must earn its way in by clearly reflecting what is found in the data.8 Validity in grounded theory is tested with the idea of “work” which means that a theory can successfully “explain what happened, predict what will happen, and interpret what is happening.”9

The assumption built into every Grounded Theory analysis is that the theory will not only contribute to scholarly advancement, but will also be of practical use and relevant to society.10
aim of Grounded Theory is to “make a big difference in contributing to the solutions of real problems.”11 With this in mind, it is my hope that along with appealing to a broad readership of theatre scholars, teachers, students, and enthusiasts, The Alchemy of Astonishment will be a particularly useful resource for my colleagues in the field of applied theatre.

Creative partnerships between professional artists and communities in applied theatre

Applied theatre, sometimes called community-based theatre, leverages the power of performing arts to engage people in communities in participatory research, learning, civic engagement, and creative expression or celebration of their cultural identities. Communities in these projects are considered to be any group of people bound by a common link, whether based in identity (ethnic, racial, gender, sexual orientation, etc.), religious faith or kinship, common circumstances (economic status, age, health status, etc.), professional or political association, or shared geography. Some projects bring together communities in conflict or across perceived difference to engage with each other through the arts.

Applied theatre is grounded in the belief that there is inherent value in people collaboratively creating art about their lives as this work leads to greater understanding of their people’s roots, rights, and historic cultural contributions.12 Strengthening one’s cultural self-understanding leads in turn, either directly or indirectly, to greater agency: an increased capacity to assert one’s rights and express one’s perspectives.13 Cultural theorist Arlene Goldbard suggests art-making in projects like these offers opportunities for engaged political action and awakens one’s capacity for social critique.14 Creative cultural expression is also recognized as a catalyst to promote civic discourse in a democratic society.15 Theatre scholar Baz Kershaw raises the stakes further, claiming that in a postmodern age, fostering dialogue among those with different cultural perspectives becomes a radical act.16 17
Laurie McGauley’s survey of artists working in communities in Canada reveals a broad continuum of intentions on the part of the artists in these projects. At one end of the spectrum are artists whose own artwork is informed by—and intended to express—what they interpret as a community’s voices, visions, and concerns. At the other end are artists working in partnerships with schools, advocacy agencies, or other sponsors who employ theatre to teach youth and adults, raise awareness, and foster self-esteem. Moving from either side to the middle, one sees artists progressively inviting more active involvement from community participants in the co-creation of the work. According to McGauley, what is radically new in recent years is what she frames as an ethical space positioned at the very centre of this continuum. It is here that artists and community participants meet to forge their relationship as creative co-authors. McGauley describes this as a meeting space of “participation, transaction and negotiation” that represents “a fundamental shift towards a notion, and a practice, of an inter-subjective, shared creation of meaning that we are still struggling to find a language for.”

This negotiation to achieve a balance between the voices and visions of the community members and the voices and visions of the professional artists forms a central tension in collaborative community-based arts. I have certainly experienced it in my own practice. As an applied theatre director, producer, and playwright, much of my work involves co-creating original plays with people in communities that celebrate the unifying threads and the diversity of experience within a group and creatively express the issues that affect their lives. Partnerships in these kinds of projects are often understood as a relationship in which the community members contribute their knowledge of the play’s content, while the professional artists contribute their knowledge of the form of making theatre. It is recognized as a marriage of two parties, each bringing their separate fields of knowledge to a mutual enterprise. The work typically involves a delicate dance to find the right balance of give and take. The more the professional artists weigh in with their ideas of how to shape the play, the likelier it becomes that the community members will be denied the sense of agency to tell the story on their own terms. Conversely, the more the artists back off for the sake of greater equity in the collaboration,
the likelier the artistic quality of the show may suffer and lose appeal for audiences outside of the performers’ own community. I have found that individual community members collaboratively devising a play may be excellent storytellers, but to bring their stories to the stage in a compelling way, they generally rely on the professional artists’ aesthetic vision and theatrical expertise.

It is difficult to imagine applied theatre playwrights developing a script based on what they hear during the devising process would deliberately misrepresent the stories of the community members with whom they are collaborating. Despite their best intentions, however, artists may inadvertently misrepresent stories due to limitations inherent in their status as outsiders. Uma Narayan, writing about outsider/insider relationships, admits that while outsiders may possess a clearer vision of the broader theoretical picture than insiders, they cannot truly understand an insider’s perception on their own. If they rely on their own observations, it will likely be clouded by layers of their own experience. She offers the following illustration to clarify her perspective:

An outsider, when told about or present at an incident that is racist, sexist, etc., most often does feel anger at the perpetrator and sympathy with the victim. The victim, however, may feel a complex and jumbled array of emotions: anger at the perpetrator, a deep sense of humiliation, a sense of being ‘soiled’ by the incident, momentary hatred for the whole group of which the perpetrator is a part, rage at the sort of history that has produced and sustains such attitudes, anger and shame at one’s powerlessness to retaliate, a strong sense of solidarity with those who face the same problems, and maybe even pity for the stupidity of the perpetrator. The outsider, not having been at the receiving end of the oppression, may fail to wholly grasp its effects on its victims and his understanding may, therefore, fail to do justice to the costs of that experience.20
An outsider listening to a description of such an event may well believe he understands the teller’s core intent when he is actually registering only certain elements of the story, or unintentionally filtering what he hears through his personal perceptions and history. If that outsider were a playwright, his feelings of anger and sympathy would undoubtedly influence the shape and colour of his script. In an applied theatre context, where the aim is to honourably and accurately reflect the stories of a community, a script based on his personal perception of the story would run the risk of missing significant richness and complexity. Lost in the equation would be the storyteller’s opportunity to expand her personal agency, by not only telling her story but also by making decisions about what elements in it ought to be emphasized and, indeed, how to stage it in such a way that her experience is communicated according to her understanding of it. Only then will she be truly representing her own voice in the partnership.

Searching for a way to reconstitute this relationship based on divided fields of expertise into more equitably shared creative co-authorship, while still maintaining a high degree of artistic excellence, I found inspiration in the work of radical educator Paulo Freire. Originally working with marginalized, economically impoverished labourers on the farms and in the barrios of Brazil, Freire proposed a reconstituted relationship between teachers and students based in co-learning. In his foundational book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire writes that it is achieving literacy—mastery of comprehension and construction of language—that allows students to meet teachers as equals, enabling their joint investigation and production of new knowledge. It occurred to me that if I could theorize and develop a *vocabulary* for the staging of evocative and unforgettable theatre then I could, like Freire, teach that language. If community members were to become fluent in a conceptual language of theatrical literacy, it would enable them to engage more equitably with professional artists in the co-creation of new work.
Paulo Freire and the teaching of literacy

In Freire’s view, co-relational status between teachers and students is achieved by “apprentic[ing] students into a new body of language.” Henry Giroux explains how achieving literacy is resolutely emancipatory. It is the path to developing one’s agency:

Literacy for Freire is inherently a political project in which men and women assert their right and responsibility not only to read, understand, and transform their own experiences, but also to reconstitute their relationship with the wider society. In this sense, literacy is fundamental to aggressively constructing one’s voice as part of a wider project of possibility and empowerment.

Operating within a pedagogical context, Freire frames the work of teachers as a relationship of reciprocity with students. For Freire, teachers and students “meet to name the world in order to transform it.” Freire emphasizes the word name in his text, but it is the word meet that reveals what is especially radical in his pedagogy. As an educator, Freire exhibits great faith and trust in the creativity and intelligence of students. He unabashedly expresses the need for teachers to approach this co-intentional relationship with humility, respect, and even love. In a Freirean pedagogical model, teachers are not working in service to students’ aspirations, nor are teachers imposing a plan or program upon them. Rather, they share equal status as co-investigators in a mutual endeavour.

This co-relational status with students is not intended to dilute a teacher’s high level of professional expertise, nor deny acknowledgment of a teacher’s position as a leader, but rather to forge authentic partnerships. In Pedagogy of the Oppressed, he points to the dangers of what he considers the “false radicality” of teachers who present students with the illusion of participation rather than making a full commitment to share the
transformational process of learning with them. This philosophical foundation is perhaps summed up most succintly in his declaration, “We cannot enter the struggle as objects in order later to become subjects.”

That is, if the aim of the work is for students to claim their own voices—their own authority as subjects in the world and not someone else’s objects—their status as subjects must be embodied in the learning process itself. The teachers must not treat students as objects who only achieve their subject-status at the conclusion of the work. In Freire’s model, the act of “giving voice” to students requires recasting the traditional view of teacher-as-helper into one based in an authentically mutual inquiry. In this way, students are considered as subjects from the outset, working in true collaboration with teachers.

The lexicon of theatrical staging offered in this book is no magic formula that will transform novice community participants into artists operating at the same level of expertise as professional theatre practitioners. However, by gaining fluency with a practical knowledge of how they can express their cultural perspectives through artistically astonishing performance, they become more fully able to join in creative conversation with artists as they co-author plays. The Alchemy of Astonishment represents my contribution to ongoing efforts among applied theatre artists to identify strategies that will enable them to meet community members in that ethical space of full partnership.
Notes to Introduction

1 Sonja Kuftinec, Staging America: Cornerstone and Community-based Theater (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003), 17. In her book, Kuftinec reports that Bogart attributed the term aesthetic arrest to James Joyce. This is a common misconception. While Joyce wrote about aesthetic theory in his novel A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, and referred to Italian physiologist Luigi Galvani’s use of the word arrest to describe a heart being stopped by amazement, Joyce himself never used the two words together. It was Joseph Campbell who coined the term. In a 1940 essay, Campbell praises Joyce for what he considers to be a remarkable theory of aesthetics. Linking it to writing by the poet Dante, Campbell characterizes both Joyce’s and Dante’s sense of epiphany as the experience of “being held in esthetic arrest.” Campbell used Joyce’s early twentieth-century spelling of the word esthetic. In this writing, I use the contemporary spelling: aesthetic. See Mythic Worlds, Modern Words: On the Art of James Joyce, ed. Edmond L. Epstein (Novato, Calif.: New World Library, 2003), 23. The commentaries by Joyce, Campbell, Kuftinec, and Bogart call attention to the fact that the word arrest has more than one meaning. Arrest signifies a sense of being held in suspension, and also signifies something in motion being brought to sudden a stop.


9 Glaser, Theoretical Sensitivity, 4. Although Glaser confidently claims a good theory will predict what will happen, a more reasonable verb might be that the theory will anticipate what will happen.


10 Barney Glaser,

11 Anselm Strauss and Julie Corbin,

5 Anselm Strauss and Barney Glaser,

4 Jack Mezirow,

3 Alan Watts

2 D.H. Lawrence,

1 Sonja Kuftinec,

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what will happen.

will predict what will happen, a more reasonable verb might be that the theory will anticipate


Procedures and techniques

Handbook of Qualitative Research

Theory: Objectivist and Constructivist Methods.” In

Qualitative Research

1991), 4-5.

pigeon-hole any idea. But it can't pigeon-hole a real new experience.

experience displaces so many old experiences [ ...] The world doesn't fear a new idea. It can

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11 Strauss and Glaser, Discovery, 247.


13 Haedicke and Nellhaus, Performing Democracy, 18-19.


19 McGauley, Imagine, 7-8.


Chapter 1

W/e.sc/l.sc/c.sc/o.sc/m.sc/e.sc /t.sc/o.sc /t.sc/h.sc/e.sc /t.sc/h.sc/e.sc/a.sc/t.sc/r.sc/e.sc; please abide by the rules of the unspoken contract. It’s unlikely that these words would ever be seen posted at the entrance to a theatre, yet implied contracts dominate every theatre experience. As theatre scholar Ric Knowles has amply demonstrated, spectators receive messages that prescribe their expected relationships to the theatre encounter long before they even enter the building. At the first sign of a poster, newspaper listing, or even the first hearing of a play’s title and genre, clues delineate how the performance is related to other theatre performances the audience members have already seen.1

Accompanying these clues are implied expectations about the role of actors as deliverers of the performance, the show itself as a product being delivered to them, and the role of the spectators as the recipients in the transaction.

Through a variety of means, the staging choices in this chapter reconfigure these unspoken contracts by interfering with the clues that signal to the audience the event they are attending will be business as usual. Different clues are embedded that draw the spectators into thinking of themselves as partners with the performers.

The theatrical experience is essentially a buildup from within the audience in answer to the conditioning they have received about the play before they enter the theatre.

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Part 2

Partnering with the Audience


24 Freire, Pedagogy, 167.

25 Freire, Pedagogy, 126.

26 Quoted in bell hooks, Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black (New York: Routledge, 2014), 43. In Pedagogy of the Oppressed, the English translation of Freire’s words reads “They cannot enter the struggle as objects in order later to become human beings.” (68, emphasis in original). The sentiment was popularized by hooks and is often quoted the way she paraphrased it.