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Snyder-Young's Book Examines Social Change Through Theatre

Sept. 27, 2013

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— Much has been written about theatre's capacity to create social change, but a new book by an Illinois Wesleyan University theatre faculty member examines what theatre can and cannot do in that regard.

Theatre of Good Intentions: Challenges and Hopes for Theatre and Social Change (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) focuses on Applied Theatre and was written by Dani Snyder-Young, assistant professor of theatre arts and head of the Bachelor of Arts in Theatre Arts program.

Snyder-Young said she uses the term 'Applied Theatre' to refer to a wide range of practices which can include classroom drama, community-based performance, prison theatre, educational theatre and social theatre, to name a few. Applied Theatre orients the collaborative storytelling process of theatre toward a goal or set of goals, said Snyder-Young.

Through her examination of a wide range of contemporary applied and political theatre case studies, Snyder-Young said that applied theatre practitioners often work within marginalized groups to give a voice to the voiceless. She and other scholars note that few theatre projects actively attempt to intervene in discussions of policy within those with power to change that policy. To continue to focus projects exclusively within marginalized groups is absurd, she said.

Snyder-Young devotes a small section of the book to identifying her own biases as a privileged, educated faculty member "who can afford the luxury of time to write a monograph" about theatre's possibilities and limitations. She wrote the book, she said, because she believed artists and intellectuals are likewise privileged and should use their social and cultural capital strategically in order to maximize the impact.

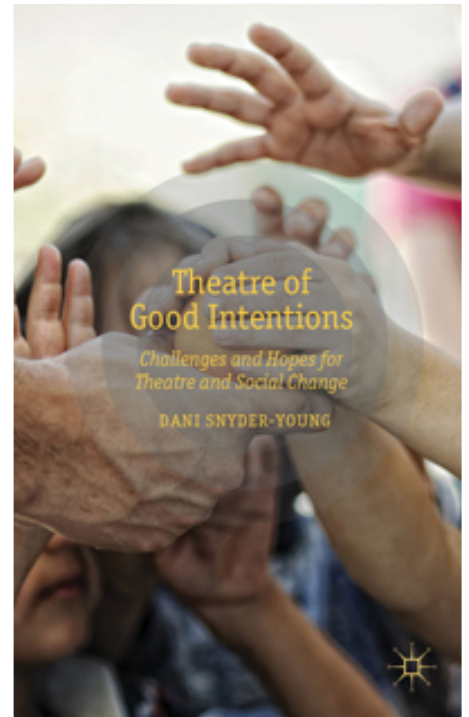
Dani Snyder-Young



"I am troubled when I see an unjust world in which access to opportunity is not distributed evenly, politically polarizing sound bites frame public discourse and leave little room for civic dialogue, and a global corporate elite consolidates more and more power," she writes. "I began facilitating applied theatre out of a desire to intervene in this broken world."

Snyder-Young said she hopes fellow artists continue to attempt to make change in a broken world, but that they should acknowledge alternative methods such as voter registration drives or transporting voters to polling places might produce more effective results.

"Artists and activists must identify whether *theatre* is the intervention their circumstances and goals required," she writes. "Sometimes, its liveness, its balance between intimacy and distance, its poeticism, and its playful collaboration are *just* the things a project needs. And sometimes they are not."



Snyder-Young joined the faculty at Illinois Wesleyan in 2008 after earning master's and doctoral degrees from New York University. As a director, critic and dramaturg (a professional position within a theatre or opera company that deals mainly with research and development of plays or operas), her work focuses primarily on political theatre, community-based performance, new play development and adaptations of classical texts for diverse audiences. She is the founder and artistic director of TangleKnot Theatre, a nonprofit theatre company formed to create plays centered on social and political issues.

An artist-in-residence with Chicago's Halcyon Theatre, Snyder-Young also serves as Chicago NewCrit Critic for *HowlRound*, an online theatre journal.

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