

World Theatre Day Message 2015 – Mieko Ouchi

“I can see myself in all things and all people around me.”

— *Sanskrit Phrase*

The world we are living in today, is a place in deep flux. One that feels increasingly uncertain and precarious. Power is shifting. Economies are rupturing. We are confronted by unthinkable acts of inhumanity. And while on some fronts concepts of equality are moving forward, in other ways we are increasingly being pushed backward into separate and potentially more extreme corners by forces on many sides. Into perilous ideas of Us and Them. Right and Wrong. Black and White.

Faced with this stark reality, we can find ourselves wondering at the purpose of art. The purpose of theatre. And yet, isn't this a time when theatre might be needed more than ever?

For we in the theatre understand deeply that no human is one thing alone. Drama shows us again and again that we are made up of many selves and wear many different identities. That we can be, and indeed already are, simultaneously part of multiple groups and communities. This recognition of the complex intersection of who we are is a powerful idea, and one that allows us the empathy and compassion to see ourselves in others.

That is something worth sharing.

In professional theatre spaces, community halls, meeting rooms, school gyms and drama rooms, daycares and seniors centres, outdoor parks, streets and found spaces... indeed any place that even a single performer and a single audience member can gather, theatre can offer a potent and powerful moment of communion and connection for the performers and viewers watching the same human experience acted out before them. That is what theatre does best.

And that is something worth pursuing.

In a time when some are fighting to erect boundaries or guard the ones already in place, we have the opportunity, if we take up the cause, to use art, empowerment and solidarity, as our answer to those who would see the rest of the world live only as they do. To anyone who would stand in the way of a fellow human claiming an equal and respected place at the table. To people who would deny any one of us the opportunity to be who we were born as or who we wish to be. Who we truly are. Freedom of speech and self expression are not things we can ever take for granted.

They are worth standing up for.

But to do these things, to be needed and relevant, it will require us to look inward and confront our own biases and assumptions. To look outward and challenge ourselves to give voice to the width and breadth of all perspectives we need to move forward. The confronting viewpoints we need to push ourselves to ask the most difficult of questions. It will take conscious effort to dissolve old walls and glass ceilings. To welcome everyone in.

But we are not alone in this struggle. Each and every one of us who counts themselves a member of the Theatre family, is also a member of a universal and ancient clan of tricksters and clowns. Of singers and

dancers. Of storytellers and artists. Of provocateurs and historians. Traced in a continuous line back to the very beginnings of human existence. Who have always used their voices and bodies, their ideas and stories, to entertain, divert, energize, enlighten, expose, educate, ignite, prod, criticize, provoke and challenge. A group who have used their collective power to bring people together. To change people's minds. To transform the world.

That is something to be proud of.