

woman

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**WHY
THEATER
IS GOOD
FOR
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Susan V. Booth
The Alliance Theatre

the Gospel according to Booth

The Alliance Theatre's Susan Booth discusses why the arts in Atlanta are not only good for the community, but good for your soul as well.

By Mary Welch

Photography by Phillip Vullo

Civilization, according to the gospel of Susan V. Booth, is not only defined by theater, but saved by it. "If you look at the plays of the ancient Greeks, they were great plays about understanding humanity and your relationship to fate, these very important themes – and they were the creators of democracy. If you look at the Romans, they wrote plays that weren't so good with themes that really didn't matter. And their civilization went down in violent flames. I don't think it's coincidental."

Susan Booth, artistic director of the Alliance Theatre, is just warming up to the subject of why the arts matter.

"If you look at the play currently in production, 'The Women of Brewster Place,' and you said to someone, 'We'd like you to come out and listen to African-American women of a low economic status talk about and sing about living in poverty in a housing project – and we want you to pay for it – you'd think we were crazy. But when you come to that play – or any play – you are forced to imagine that you are someone else for a couple of hours. It puts you into someone else's head. It teaches you empathy."

While she understands the current way of thinking – to "sell" the value of the arts is to emphasize the economic benefits of a vibrant arts scene – she harkens back to the importance of having a soul. "It is because we have a vibrant arts scene that we have people capable of understanding the need for public education or understanding what it feels like to be two women in a relationship – even if that is not how you are feeling or part of your experience. I would say that the arts are the greatest means to an end in producing a great civilization and community."

Booth is now in her fifth year at Alliance Theatre. The theatre, which has an annual budget of \$10.5 million, produces plays that are seen by about 200,000 patrons a year. During this tenure, the Alliance has produced the world premiers of "The Color Purple," "The Heart is a

Lonely Hunter" and "SISTER ACT the Musical," and has launched the national tours of "Bring in 'Da Noise, Bring in 'Da Funk" and "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee."

"She is a fabulous addition to the Atlanta arts community, not just for her stellar work at the Alliance, and the diversity and quality of the art, but she has also become a valued member, a leader of the community for the arts in general," says Virginia Hepner, chairman of the board of the Metropolitan Atlanta Arts and Culture Coalition. "She is very engaged and her concern and commitment to strengthen the arts across the entire arts community is absolutely genuine. She's smart and an authentic person and we're very fortunate to have her."

Perhaps the theater's biggest achievement of late was winning the 2007 Tony Award for Outstanding Regional Theatre. "We have always taken a great pride in our place among national colleague theatres, but there's a world of difference between claiming that place yourself and having the American Theatre Wing and the American Theatre Critics Association lend you their imprimatur," Booth says. "But there's a great sense of responsibility as well. We walk into our theatre every day and get reminded that we've been named the best in the country. You don't get comfy when that happens. You work harder to make sure you deserve the recognition."

Booth got caught up in the theater – or at least the theatrical aspects of life – early on when she went to the Ice Capades. "I was so dazzled by the show. How powerfully beautiful it was. It really affected me."

The allure of such theatrics continued every time her great-uncle, a well-known painter, would visit. "When he would come, it was like a celebrity coming to town," she says. "So it seeped into me that the arts was an honest and necessary pursuit."

Plus there was a more practical matter. "Well, I was the youngest of four children and my siblings had taken all the other options for careers. The arts were left and I took it," she says with a laugh. "But it was al-



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ways a given my that my sisters and I would work – not have a job but a profession. I am highly grateful for whatever voodoo my mother did to instill that.”

She started out wanting to be an actor but quickly changed to directing. “I had the good fortune pretty early on to work with a generous artistic director who allowed me to direct and I fell in love with the role.”

Booth directs at least one play a year at the Alliance and also serves as a visiting director elsewhere.

“Susan came to the Alliance following a very successful artistic director [Kenny Leon], but she has risen to the challenge,” says her friend and former colleague Marc Masterson, artistic director of the Actors Theatre in Louisville, Ky. “Susan has a passion for the work. She’s smart and has strong analytical skills, which is a key thing in directing. Before you can interpret a play, it helps if you understand it.”

To her, there are several important elements in directing. “You have to learn the language of everyone in the room,” she says. “And you have to become fluent in all of them. Steven Covey [author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*] talks about the need to listen for true understanding, rather than listening for the opening in the dialogue that’s going to allow you to speak. Good direction is a process of guided alchemy. You take all of the given ingredients of a text, a company of actors, a creative team of designers, and a very specific audience for whom you are making the production, and you allow the play to reveal itself. If you go in with a predetermined outcome as your goal, you’ll still come out the other end with a play. It just won’t be the one that many people other than you can find themselves in.”

Before moving to Atlanta, Booth worked at the Goodman Theatre

in Chicago as its co-artistic director. “Well, the first draw in coming to Atlanta was the job,” she says. “I didn’t know much about the city or its theater community. It wasn’t until I was here and saw what a unique community Atlanta is and how it intersects with the arts community did I realize that I had a big fat challenge.”

The purpose of the arts

Atlanta, like most business-oriented cities, views culture as a means toward an end – attracting new business, defining itself against other cities, she says. “I see it as an enjoyable end unto itself.”

Booth sees her job – and the theatre’s job – to reach out into the community and bring it along. One way is to simply “produce theater that is of a national caliber.” But, beyond that, she feels it is vital to create productions that are specific for Atlanta audiences. “There’s a kind of pride that kicks in when we produced *The Color Purple* or some of our other shows. Atlantans love innovative, provocative theater. Being the best matters here. I’d like to think that doesn’t just manifest itself in college football.”

An important part of her job is to create a season that will appeal to a wide variety of audiences. “We consistently want to offer the best productions we can,” she says. “We take inordinate pride in that we have created shared theater for such a diverse audience. We don’t just run plays with African-American themes in February. We do it throughout the season. We want it to belong to everyone.”

To Booth, it’s important not only for the plays to attract a wide audience but for the play to matter as well. “I want to produce plays where the subject matters to Atlantans, yes, but also do it in a way that welcomes them into the conversation. We find plays that allow us to



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have a provocative conversation but to do so in a style that is welcoming and engaging. We did that with the ‘Women of Brewster Place.’ The theme is the challenges of living in public housing but we did it in a way that you want to have that conversation.”

Part of her desire to reach out to more audiences, of course, is economic. The Alliance subscriber base tends to be middle age and white, which excludes a large part of Atlanta. After 9/11, the subscriber base declined. It has since climbed up to about 13,000.

Booth admits to living her job 24-7. Of course, it helps that the theatre’s general manager is her husband, Max Leventhal. The two came to Atlanta from Chicago, where they both worked at the Goodman Theatre. “I was interviewing for my job first but it worked out that we both came,” she says with a smile. “Our marriage works because we’re both massively Type A, work-obsessed personalities. We would drive each other crazy if we didn’t share this vocation.”

In fact, her marriage proposal was staged as a play. “It was the end of the season in Chicago, and we were all reading out loud scripts from

awful plays, sort of for fun. And my script had my character going up to the balcony level. So I did. And there was Max, with champagne and roses. He got down on one knee and proposed, just like it said in the script.”

Not only did she accept, but the script is framed in her office.

She is one of a handful of women artistic directors of a major theater in this country. “I would tell women to make the arts a career, and do it in your own way,” Booth says. “There’s no monolithic model for success, and all of those realities of your life that may seem counter-intuitive to success – the need to juggle family and work, the desire to create collaborative communities, emotional intelligence – those are, in fact, your best tools.”

Then she issues a challenge. “If you’re looking around the field and not seeing women filling the position you want to fill – that that as the ultimate invitation to change things.”

The two have a young daughter who may be developing into the bane of any artistic director – a critic. “We took her to one of our



children's shows and after that we were in the lobby and I saw her across the room. She comes running over and says, 'That was a bad play. Bad play.'

Booth quickly adds that what her daughter meant was that the villain in the play was bad. "But it certainly put everything in perspective."

Goals for the theatre

Booth has small and large goals for the theater. "Our space is an acoustic challenge and that is something we will be working on in the upcoming years. I also think that we want to reach out into the community more, work with schools as well as with the other theater groups in town. Atlanta really does have a lot of wonderful theaters and it bothers me when it comes to funding. I think it's not a matter of how do you slice up the financial pie, so to speak, among all the arts groups. Rather, it is expanding the pie."

But her overarching goal is to have the theater be "owned" by the community. "That means that we're a place where not only are the

country's leading professionals making the country's best theatre, but we're also a place where the community is making theatre," she says. "Where students are learning their craft in a hands-on fashion, and people are coming here because it's the one place where they can rub up against the big noisy diversity of ideas and opinions and beliefs that makes Atlanta such a fiercely dynamic community."

To her, it all comes back to the community and the dialogue. "I don't remember who said it, but the line was that once the human mind is expanded, it doesn't contract back," she says. "And, that's true of the human heart as well. It doesn't snap back once it's been exposed to empathy. If you can take someone – especially a young person – and expose them, not only to the feelings of others, but to have them feel like that person does – to inhabit their skin for two hours – it changes them. And, it changes them forever."

And that, to Booth, is why theater is so important to a community and civilization. "I want my kid to worry about what other people are feeling," she says. "And the best tool for that is the theater." ♀