

JIM EPSTEIN

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Jim Epstein is the Founder/Convener of EMPATHeatre, a non-partisan platform employing the arts as a catalyst for conversation and change. He has been involved in the D.C. theatre community since the '80's as an actor and producer and has been seen in productions with Arena Stage, Folger Theatre, Shakespeare Theatre, Studio Theatre, WSC/Avant Bard, Keegan Theater, Metro Stage among others. TV and commercial credits include HBO's *Game Change*, *VEEP*, *America's Most Wanted*, Netflix's *House of Cards* and national commercials for GEICO and Consumer Cellular.

We spoke on the grounds of the Okoboji Summer Theatre in Okoboji, Iowa where Jim was a guest professional actor during the summer of 2016.

STEVE TAFT: Theatrically speaking, where did it all begin with you?

JIM EPSTEIN: I didn't follow the traditional path of most people in the theatre world, you know, going to study, get their MFA, go into academic work and all that. I've been in theatre my whole life in a variety of different settings. Of course, everyone starts off in summer camp or a school experience and as I think I mentioned to you earlier one of my best awards was best supporting actor in junior high school, but I've been doing theatre and performing for quite a long time especially since I just turned sixty which adds some length to it and I find for me that theatre is therapy. When I've had transitions in my life it's been an opportunity to . . . I won't say escape, but an opportunity to refocus, to try and forget about the particular issues that were going on in my life at that moment and an opportunity to get out of my own box, my own head, meet other people and socialize and really dig into some meat.

In terms of what I've done in my life I'm one of the guys like Fritz the Cat that has nine lives and more and luckily still going (*knocks on wood*) and have a relatively extensive background working in a wide variety of fields.

ST: How have you used your theatre skills in your other occupations?

JE:: How does theatre help me in the business world? Certainly how to give presentations and how to capture an audience, how to express thoughts in a way in which other people are open to hearing them, how to allow other people to perceive new perspectives as opposed to what they may have entered into the room thinking. The other side is that in some of my other experiences, such as in sales and marketing, have been extremely helpful in the acting world because it has allowed me not to take rejection personally because the majority of this business

is not what everybody thinks about being on camera and screen or on stage. It's mainly about auditioning and being rejected and learning that although you might think you're right for the role, you're not . . . or you might be but you're not in regards to what someone else's perception may be or maybe your personality is not one they want to work with which is often nine times more important than what your talents are, things along that line. Also, you're spending more time getting rejected even if you're a wonderful performer and the reality is it isn't always about talent. It's about networking, it's about a look, how you match up with other members of a cast and things along that line. So, for me, auditioning is more like a rehearsal time, that's my opportunity to stretch my boundaries because the only thing I can control is what I'm putting out there.

TAFT: What do you think is one of the keys for the young performer, coming out of college and moving to a large metropolitan area in terms of auditioning and preparation?

EPSTEIN: Well, first and foremost if we're talking about stage, you have to read the work. What I find is a lot of people think they have a lot natural talent and abilities, they know their monologue of 90 seconds or two contrasting monologues or you might get three minutes at an Equity audition or something like that, but if you don't know the work you're auditioning for, if you haven't tailored your resume and headshot to that project and your cover letter . . . you know, working in the theatre is just like working anywhere else in the real world, it's about not just your talent and skills but how you correlate with other people, how you relate, what they perceive . . . not what you think you're putting out, but what do they see, what do they want, what's in it for them? So, to me I would say don't just work on your talent and skills and your monologue but know what it is you're going for. The one other thing I will say is that, especially as a young actor starting out or whenever someone is starting out is that most people are hungry, and you feel like, "I need this job so I can pay my bills" or whatever your particular situation is. Well, I liken that to a horse. A horse may not be the brightest animal in the world, but they know when they are in control and they can sense fear. And when you're auditioning and you may think you're doing a wonderful job, you know in the back of your head, "I need this job so I can pay . . .", well, that reads. And so any technique you can use, whether it be Tai Chi or yoga or whatever that is to relax yourself and get into the moment and focus in on what you are accomplishing because you have no control on whether you'll get the job, the better your odds are at being successful. The other thing I would say again, is learn to have a thick skin, because it's not all about you - even though as an only child I always think it is. (*Laughter*)

TAFT: Many theatre majors aspiring to work professionally in the theatre often limit their options to NYC, Chicago or Los Angeles. Tell me about Washington D.C. and the opportunities aspiring artists might have there.

EPSTEIN: It's a vibrant, vibrant community. I was involved recently with an organization and part of their mission is to not only reward actors for their performances, but also to spread the message as a marketing organization that D.C. is a destination for the arts whether it be theatre, dance, film and other arts disciplines. The reality is that in the theatre world itself we

are extremely vibrant in the Washington area and I would say there are a lot of opportunities that a new actor would benefit from mainly because they would be a new face. For instance, the organization for which I was just involved provides awards to professional theatre companies throughout the Washington D.C. area has over ninety-five different theatre companies identified and represented in that organization. That's ninety-five theatre companies that pay people (not necessarily a living wage), but hopefully sometimes it is, but pay people to perform. So, there's a lot of opportunity, a lot of new faces and there's a wide variety of theatre. There are certainly organizations that do classical work, there's a lot of new work, a lot of new script development and a lot of opportunities for performers at all different levels regardless of age group.

ST: How about opportunities in television, film or industrial films?

JE: In the camera side of the world, which really is where the money is, we've had some excellent opportunity in the D.C. area because we are the seat of the government and because we're not a sleepy little southern town anymore, but we are the home to some major organizations or at least to some lobbying arms and associations and training organizations, etc.. For the working actors there's work for what we call "industrials". They may be training films, they could be PSA (Public Service Announcements), they could be a wide variety of messages, but that's where a lot of actors work, if you're pursuing camera work.

We've also happen to be lucky that in the State of Maryland we have given tax credits for producing organizations. For instance, we have a major political television show (which shall go unnamed) that is currently one of the better known shows showing on Netflix and they have established a base for five years and have done each of their seasons in the D.C. and Maryland area. We've had another HBO TV show and a couple of HBO movies there. The Virginia Office of Film and TV, the D.C. Office of Film and TV and the Maryland office each are now realizing the economic impact of having these kind of productions in the area and so there are more and more opportunities, let alone government films and industrials, so there are lot of opportunities for the actor.

ST: For the young actor that may read or see this interview and perhaps think that D.C. may be a possible location for them, how long might it take for the theatre community to get to know them and ultimately give the new actor an opportunity?

JE: That's a great question and I hate to generalize, because the reality is, is that no matter where you are acting is a tough profession, not in terms of skill but in terms of making a living wage. So, anyone who comes in and thinks they're going come in and be the big star is probably living in a delusional world, not to say it doesn't happen, because again it's a large community, but it's a small enough so that people know each other, it's a networked community. So, as you've mentioned you have to be a person people are willing to work with, not just because you have talent, but because you're a nice person, you know how to communicate with people and how to take direction.

There are numerous opportunities whether it's children's theatre, non-equity theatre, whether it be Equity theatre, there are opportunities. Time frame? You could be a new face and get an Equity contract right away. We have probably 18-20 Equity houses in the Washington D. C. area which includes Maryland and Virginia, which is pretty large compared to anywhere else, except possibly New York. Now, there are a lot of smaller professional theatre companies in which you can earn a living wage, but the reality is you probably need another set of skills outside of acting whether it's being a waiter or whether it be in computers, whether it be in a variety of different areas, that allow you the flexibility because a lot of the smaller theatre will have nighttime rehearsals, but if you're really pursuing it and working Equity houses, you're working daytimes. You're doing "straight-eights" and things along that line. If you're going to have a second job, which I wholeheartedly recommend, not because you want to but because you may have to in order to eat, make sure it's one that allows you flexibility. If you're a waiter makes sure you're working where they don't mind you switching shifts with people, things along that line.

ST: The biggest shock for many students raised in the mid-west is the cost of living of a major metropolitan city. They can be overwhelmed as often their expenses force them to work and work and work and perhaps not audition as much as they should. So how much of a culture shock or sticker shock might it be for a student from Iowa and how does the cost of living in D.C. compare to that of NYC?

JE: That's a great question and since you asked about in correlation to New York, I'll say we're probably cheaper (in Washington D.C.). If you ask about it in correlation to Iowa, it's probably outrageous. So, it all depends. Yes, it's an expensive city, but it's balanced by places that pay much better than they do elsewhere. I know a lot of people that have government type jobs that are also actors because they are able to somehow find that flexibility or they have spouses or other friends that can help support them as artists. It is an expensive city, but you can also make a living wage better than you might in the rest of America. Also, if you're working Equity houses, they provide housing.

EMPATHeatre

ST: Theatre has the power to not only entertain, but to educate, inspire people to take action, to make us as a society think, in hopes of making the world a better place. You've created a new organization which embraces elements of such a philosophy. Tell us about it.

JE: Thank you for asking. This is really my focus, what I'm about at this point in time. I've had an opportunity over the years to be involved in a variety of different fields. I had a circumstance a couple of years ago that allowed me to step back and ask: What do I like to do? What am I

good at? What do I want to do? What's my passion? All of those typical kinds of questions. What is something that's bigger than me and what is of service to other people? So, from that process has come the development of my organization which is called Empath Theatre. The tag line currently which will become shorter is: "A non-partisan platform convening artists, issue experts and resources to reduce polarization and to find common ground." The concept being, as we all know, our country is very polarized right now and there is a lot of rhetoric and dogma out there and we need to find ways to find common ground and to treat each other more humanely. And to overcome all of this . . . partisanship, for lack of a better word, and not make "compromise" such a bad word anymore. People still need to hold on to their principles, but to do it in a way that doesn't impinge upon other people. So I've recently developed this new umbrella organization which is not reinventing the wheel, but is a way of repackaging it.

So, the concept of Empath Theatre is, as you well know and as you just said, the arts allow people to see other people's perspectives and not to be just entertained but to make them think and to challenge them and that is what is so exciting about the arts whether it be theatre, the visual arts, dance, movement, whatever it happens to be. So, what I have developed is an organization that produces events that utilizes different arts on the front end and that is creating a fund that will commission and challenge artists to create issue specific work and tie it together on the back end with issue experts and panelists in a way such that somebody can come in . . . maybe with a preconceived notion about an issue, but by the time they leave they may not have changed their opinion, but they're more open to hearing what somebody else may have to say about that same topic from a different perspective. The old saying of: "Walk a mile in other people's shoes."

So, this is an umbrella organization that will challenge and commission artists to create issue specific work in three different areas, specifically: the criminal justice system, the . . . what I call the mental health/slash weapons management system and finally interpersonal interactions and customer service. These are areas which we are either divided or lacking in skills nowadays in my perception. So, I'm creating this organization, as a non-partisan platform that is a resource for information, materials, resources, solutions, etc., on these three different topics and tying it together, whether it be a dance company, or a visual artist, or a filmmaker, or a one-person show and tie it together on the backend, not with rhetoric or dogma or MSNBC against FOX but the opportunity really to hear these different perspectives and to take them in interactively and challenge the artists and the audience to present those different perspectives in an interactive format. Let me give you an example of the kind of event I would produce.

Imagine an evening of writings and reflections of survivors of Newtown or Aurora or Charleston. Unfortunately, that list can go on and on and on, and then you also maybe have a short film from a Second Amendment rights group or a dance group that may do something about what they perceive are Second Amendment rights freedoms and then you tie that together with a panel that consists of Michael Bloomberg from "Everytown for Gun Safety/Moms Demand Action" with Wayne LaPierre from the NRA (National Rifle Association),

and you have an audience that may be polarized when they walk in, but hopefully the art will have touched their heart in a way so that by the time they walk out and they hear the other perspectives in a safe, non-partisan, non-political atmosphere, to calmly discuss the issues and maybe they won't change their mind, but maybe next time may think a little differently about an issue.

An example is a show we produced this last fall which came out of an article in the *NY Times* about accidental gun deaths. A young lady wrote a fictional play (*One in the Chamber* by Marja Lewis Ryan), that didn't really deal with the gun issue per say, but was about a young child who accidentally shot and killed his younger brother and now the social worker is coming to do a home visit to determine whether the now 16 year old boy can get off of parole. The family was a rural family, the father was in the reserves, they had guns, the mom would shoot snakes in the chicken coop, and so there was no judgment about that (guns) in the show. We followed it up with speakers from "Everytown for Gun Safety/Mom's Demand Action", and parents of children who were injured at Virginia Tech, and people that protest at the White House every week, the Chiefs of Police of major cities that had just had a seminar on the growing amount of gun violence in their city, and each of them were speakers. Naturally we invited the NRA and the National Sports Shooting Federation and lawyers that were supporting open carry laws around the country, although they chose not to participate in this particular event unfortunately. But one of the rewarding things to me was that in this play the mother had gone off the deep end because she had lost her child. And the family had kind of fallen apart and become extremely dysfunctional. And one of the fathers of a son who was injured in the Virginia Tech shooting was one of our speakers. His reflection afterwards was that prior to coming to the show he believed the parents should be responsible for the children's action so if a minor committed an act of violence with a gun, the parent might be the one to go to jail for instance. Well, in this play which was fictional but based on reality, the mother was completely dysfunctional. And his comment afterward was: "After seeing this play it opened me up to a different perspective and I now realize that throwing that dysfunctional mother into jail would have done nothing to solve the problem and would have made it even worse." We also had a woman who's son happened to have been a previous mayor in a major city and who is part of a group that has held rally's every week at the White House for the past three-and-a-half years who said, she would: "engage people in conversation differently based on seeing this show." To me, that's the reward of creating something like Empath Theatre. It's not about changing the world necessarily, but allowing people to see different perspectives and finding different ways to find common ground. That's the power of the art.
