

On creating the things you want to see in the world



Theater artist Kaneza Schaal on making work that provides a platform for dialogue, expanding the historical lineage of what theater can be, and considering collaborators as your medium.

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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2101 words.

Tags: [Theater](#), [Process](#), [Collaboration](#), [Politics](#), [Inspiration](#).

When people ask you what you do or what your work is, what do you usually tell them?

I tell them I make theater. For me, it means that I am interested in creating work that provides platforms for public dialogue. I'm interested in thinking about how theaters can function as public spaces, and I call the work "theater" in order to place it in the lineage of theater making that has traditionally excluded many. I could just as easily call lots of the work dance or sculpture or experimental performance, but I choose theater because it feels important to place my ways of working within that historical lineage. To provide new propositions for what theater can be.

Did you always have a sense that this is the kind of work you would do?

I've always been drawn to collaborative process, and theater is inherently a collaborative process. I came up performing, and so that has always been central in my life and professional practice.

I believe that the strongest tool of an ensemble is the culture of the group. So, when I begin working on an idea, or a question, or a project, it starts from that gathering of a team to care for this question or idea with me, and it often comes from a process already underway with other artists. The culture of a group is comprised of the individuals gathered to create the piece, and the creative histories, and cultural histories, and personal histories, and aesthetic and formal histories that they bring into the room with them. I always think of that as the primary material that I work in.

I know every piece is different and every work has its own journey associated with it, but what does the collaborative process usually look like for you? How does a new piece grow?

Each piece has a different genesis. A piece like [CARTOGRAPHY](#) grew out of work that I did in 2016 in Munich with artist and writer Christopher Myers. That was the period in 2016 where the headlines were, "30 thousand people arriving a day in Munich." We went to work with a lot of people who had come to the city on their own from around the world—Syria, Mali, Afghanistan, Iraq, Nigeria. What came out of that work with these young people who had traveled across oceans in inflatable rafts, who had walked across countries and forests, who had hidden in the holds of cargo trucks to make their way to seek asylum was largely what it meant for young people to have a context to think about migration *together*, and their own stories *together*.

For example, there was a young woman from Syria and a young woman from Nigeria who had been living in the same

housing for four months, and they realized for the first time that they were both on inflatable rafts in the Mediterranean. The girl from Nigeria turns to the girl from Syria and says, "We have to go home and tell our sisters not to get on these boats." When we asked the kids after our time together, "What should we do with all these ideas, with all of this work around the story and movement? What should we do?" They said, "What's been most valuable is being seen by each other and by others. We've spent so much time hiding. We want places to be seen. We want to make more places for other kids like us to be seen."

So, *CARTOGRAPHY* is a theater piece that centralizes young audiences, and that provides a platform for young people to think about their own histories of movement—whether those are immediate, or whether those are many, many, many generations past. It's about looking for ways for all of us to understand ourselves on the continuum that has led to this historical moment of the largest mass migration in human history.

It was important that the theater piece we've made is not reportage drama. It's not a telling of these children's lives. It's creating the platform for *other* children to think about these same ideas, children who may be in very different contexts. So, one of the ways that I addressed that was by gathering a team of artists, a group of actors who all have very intimate, personal connections to their own family's histories of movement. So, we have a young actor from Syria who ended up growing up in Ohio, but is very connected to Damascus. A young actress from El Salvador who thinks a lot about the border and her own family's history of escaping violence is deeply embedded in her artistic practice. We have a Lebanese actress, and a Rwandan actress, and of course Rwanda is already this intricate place of comings and goings from various political upheavals, and genocides.

So, part of *CARTOGRAPHY* is the telling of a group of young people seeking asylum and dealing with the absurdity, and the paperwork, and having to go through these questionnaires. The real emotional arc of that piece lives on in the actors themselves, and the actors step forward and talk to the audience as themselves. I wanted to find a way to really let the emotional life of the piece live in the actors with whom we are spending an evening.

How did you come to be involved with *Triptych*?

I was invited into *Triptych*, and I joined the project with a group that had already been gathered. So in some ways, it's an inversion to how I usually build performance. Right off the bat, part of the work of making the piece was to understand the materials in the room, the exquisite score that [Bryce \[Dessner\]](#) has written, Korde's Libretto, and then, of course, the humans who are producing all of this magnificent sound. The soloists Alicia Hall Moran and Isaiah Robinson, and Roomful of Teeth. I needed to very quickly find and reestablish a working culture. The piece was fraught when I inherited it. So, the immediate task was to gather all of these materials and have them all find a way to hold together, and orient collectively in service of the daunting and magnificent task at hand.

With *Triptych*, we have all these different artists who come to the piece with very different interests, and repulsions, and admirations, and questions around Robert Mapplethorpe's work. Sometimes they agree, and sometimes they disagree. Some of the curiosities and desires overlap. Some of them diverge. As a director, I am arranging this tapestry and seeing to it that it doesn't tear. I can't imagine any better materials from which to address a figure like Robert Mapplethorpe. Getting to know where people's desire and work overlaps, and producing sound, and being on stage, and making art—uncovering what is fueling that impulse in folks—is always exciting to me.

Doing this kind of work, particularly as a director, requires a specific set of skills. Not only must you understand the material and have this vision for how it can all work together, but it also requires the kind of skills that make people feel like they're being heard, to make big decisions quickly and not have anyone feel like their toes are being stepped on.

It's a really complex ecosystem. Also, I do believe that democracy does not produce theater very well. In my experience, a benevolent dictatorship is the essential form. There has to be a guiding force behind a project. I think benevolence is also key to that dictatorship, and in some essential way, a consent on behalf of a group to pursue a question, to pursue an idea, to pursue an inquiry. At the point at which I stepped into *Triptych*, a lot of what needed to happen was to understand where that consent could be found.

Of course, again, what better materials to address Mapplethorpe? He stood at the precipice of self-image and culture, and the work captured and ignited public imagination. I feel like lately when we're confronted with controversial or problematic works, our tendency as a society has been to try and erase them. My own feeling is that these are works that I want to address. I see Mapplethorpe's archive in all of its problematic glory, and I'm interested in how a new generation of artists can rethink the classical language of his photography. I want to see how musicians, visual artists, dancers, queer artists, and black artists can engage with this archive.

It's interesting to consider how his work would be received if it was being made now. Within his work, there are a lot of things to reckon with that aren't easy.

Yeah. All art is political, and we are all political beings. The stories we tell about ourselves and each other are the things that build the cultural architecture and policy and our social and material interaction. So, whether an artist's creative practice is to place spoons in a row, or whether you're doing war documentaries, everyone is working in political material. I think this imagining of an apolitical theater, or an apolitical avant-garde, or a formal practice that is somehow void of political content, is always dangerous. That is where imperialism and notions of supremacy hide.

I know there will be performances of *Triptych* happening in various places throughout the rest of this year. How do you juggle a project like this with the development of other projects? What does the landscape of your creative life look like right now?

A New York City premier of *Triptych* at BAM is the final stage of my work on that project, and then it will go on the road, and I will put it in the capable hands of our new associate director Jennifer Newman. We're so thrilled to have her on board. Then, of course, I have a few other things going on. I'm working on a piece called *Maze*, which opens at the Shed in NYC in July, which is with a group of dancers, and then *Cartography* will come to New York City in January to the New Victory Theater. We have some fall touring with that piece as well in Philly and Cleveland, Buffalo coming in January, and then heading on to international touring the following year. Then there's some new work development that I'm beginning to chew on. I've been thinking a lot about Mark Twain's *King Leopold's Soliloquy*, and how the residue of colonialism lives in our daily lives, and looking to perform an exorcism of King Leopold's ghost. That's real early though. That's in my heart at the moment and my research.

For people who are interested in pursuing the kind of work that is in some ways similar to what you do, or who are interested in wearing many hats and working in and around the notion of theater, what advice do you have for them?

Well, I think that the strict delineation of roles that seems to exist in Western art practice is very untrue. Understanding multiplicity within one's existence and one's creative practice is honest. I also feel that these delineations of rules that exist in Western ideology, particularly around theater, are often connected to notions of the singular genius, which is simply the erasure of other peoples' labor. We can actually do it all. I think that multiplicity is a valuable way to understand your creative work and your creative impulses.

And it's often about forging your own path, and not waiting for someone to give you permission.

Absolutely. There was theater that I wanted to see that I wasn't seeing, and I was tired of complaining about what I was seeing. So at some point I was like, "I guess I need to make some stuff."

Kaneza Schaal Recommends

I think taking care of your desire matters, because to make new work and to tackle big questions can be terrifying, and you have to have something that is bigger than your fear to invest in, and to get you through that.

When you travel, send yourself postcards. I like sending myself postcards from places with ideas I'm thinking about, or with a memory of how the materials of a place have affected me. It's always a gift to receive that reminder later on.

Also, have fun. Play. Have tea with your friends. Stop worrying about your schedule. That's how you get through. Step outside of yourself and your life occasionally. That is nourishment.

Name

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Vocation

Director, Performer, Maker of theater

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