

Collaborations in Conversation: The Directors

Wendy: This is interesting because directors rarely have the chance to talk to each other or to talk about process. So that's where I would like to start, how do you start? I want to know what's your process?

Summer: Sure. I get so awkward talking about these things.

Wendy: I know, right?

Summer: So super awkward. Mostly because, I always feel like “where *do* I start?” I'm always thinking about what's my way into the play? What do I love? Trying to understand what am I looking to feel? And then what do I want someone else to love? What do I want someone else to understand and what do I want to make someone else feel? Those are the questions I'm asking when I'm sitting down and reading and rereading and rereading. And I now feel 100 percent confident embracing the “I don't know.” “I don't know” but I'm totally about figuring it out, investigating and not feeling like there's a single thing that needs to be exactly as I see. Which is really liberating. And also probably drives everyone around me crazy.

Wendy: I love that you say you're embracing the "I don't know," because that's something I have learned as well over time, to shake my head free of what I think I know about the play. One of my mentors a long time ago said the worst thing that can happen to a director is a good idea. You get an idea in your head about the play, how it should be, how you *think* it should be and over time I'm learning I need to shake my head free of everything that I think I know about the play and let the play figure out what the play wants. I'm always trying to ask myself: what drove this playwright up out of bed at 3 in the morning to their computer to go "I have write this play." What was the bee in their bonnet? And I feel the only way to figure that out is to keep listening and take myself a little bit further away.

Summer: Yeah. Plays are so deeply, to me, simply about service. The director works in service to the play and service to the playwright and service to the actors.

Wendy:I totally agree.

Summer: In service to the world of the play. Then ultimately hopefully if you do all of that work well, it's going to be in service to a greater understanding, deeper meaning, creating an opportunity for the audience to all of a sudden see themselves in someone else's situation they may not have ever been capable of imagining before. And all of that feels really important to you. And this is where it gets all lofty and artsy "la, la, la." I'm never going to cure cancer or

figure out climate change or do all of those big things. That's just not what I will ever do. But what I will do is make theater that will open up the ways in which people can find themselves, can make their world better, hopefully.

Wendy: I'm hoping theater will either hold up a mirror for people to see themselves or a window into a life or experience they would never experience otherwise. My process really starts, with reading... reading and reading and reading, over and over and over. I try to give myself things to look for on each read. For the first couple of times it's just letting the play wash over me and writing down my gut responses to the play because that's the closest I'll ever get to the audience's experience of the play. After that I start looking for things like, where are they using imagery really strongly, where are they using poetry or song or metaphor, where are the moments where the playwright is stepping out almost of the text to say "this is what I care about." And I try to let those images work really hard on me. So any time there's a very strong poetic image or an object or a symbol, or even a song, for example, it's like why that song, why that rhyme, why that picture? Is that a clue? It feels like treasure hunting in a way, where I'm trying to analyze the play for these clues, I guess. So I start there. Sort of boring script analysis, but I find it pretty helpful.

Summer: I love thinking about, when reading a show multiple times, reading it through one character's lens and then reading it through another person's lens. Thinking about what does it mean for me to view the world strictly through this perspective. It helps me to consider all things a little bit more equally.

Wendy: I try to do that too - consider what each character wants. I often look for the overlap. Is there something that every character is working towards but they're doing it in different ways? What does each character have in common that they're fighting for? Even though they go about it very different ways.

Bevin: How do you both approach working with actors?

Summer: Typically, with actors in rehearsal I have to start universally and then I can figure out each person or character through the process. I often have a one on one meeting with each of the actors to let them know a little bit about me and what the process typically feels like.

Wendy: Wow that's great.

Summer: It's really nice when it's able to happen or even if I'm able to steal a couple of minutes at the end of the first table read and just say like who are you? This is who I am. And then making sure they understand that I think what they have to do is the hardest thing. I am the leader coward in the room, I think. I mean, you lead and you orchestrate and you put together all

of these things. But ultimately when our work is done, if it's done well, it's almost as if no one knows you were there. Which is what I strive for. I don't want anyone to know I was there. And the people who are out in front, the actors, they take the brunt of it all, positive, negative, anything in between. They are the ones who receive it. They have to understand what the playwright is saying to them via the character and what the character's impulses are. They have to do all of that, ball it up inside of themselves and then figure out how to deliver it in a way that feels like as easy as honey and as natural as any conversation. That's crazy.

Wendy: That's really good. One on one conversations. I do that a little bit, but I'm much more casual. But I agree that if I do my job really well I'm invisible at the end. Those moments where audience members say "well what do you do? I don't see what you do. I mean, the actors.." And I liked your phrase, what did you say? I'm a leader...

Summer: Coward.

Wendy: A leader coward. I always say I'm a leader among equals. Like the captain of a team. The captain of an athletic team is not necessarily the best player. They're just calling the play. I think that the best thing I can do is surround myself with actors and other artists who are almost overwhelming with how talented they are and all I have to do is look around and go "Oh yeah, you run faster. You're really good at throwing the ball so you throw the ball." You're figuring out what each person needs in their process and that changes as the process moves forward.

Bevin: I love how you're both talking about being the invisible hands. But at the same time you, as directors, we want the audience to leave with a specific experience. How do you both be invisible but also craft a strong story that leaves an audience thinking, feeling, and questioning the things that you want them to?

Wendy: That's the question isn't it. I often tell my students, if you have to come in after your play is over to say, "This is what it was about," you haven't done your job. If you have to write a program note to communicate the main ideas or the main questions, you're not putting it in the space. Somehow it has to be in the bodies and in the space. We as directors use theatrical space in a three dimensional way--along with text--to deliver themes for us.

Summer: I hope that everything about the theatrical experience is setting the audience up to have a personal "aha" moment. Whenever it happens. It can actually happen when they're in the shower the next morning, or in a car, or commuting on the train, and they realize they are seeing the same thing through a different lens. I think that's the great trick of it all. If it's working, those moments of understanding happen in a deeply personal and individual manner. It's almost like

you're able to plant a seed in someone and depending on their soil, their sunshine, their water, for it to grow.

Bevin: What attracts you guys to a piece initially?

Summer: How difficult it is. I'm always intrigued by things that feel impossible in some way or feel like that just can't be done. Or the idea is too huge, too incendiary, too something.

Wendy: I'm attracted to things that seem highly theatrical. And by that I don't mean spectacle. My work has been, I don't know why, but it's become all about what I can do with very little. It's like an actor, a chair, and a glass of water. So it's not really that it's about spectacle as much as it's about what's theatrical in the work and that's what attracted me to *Every Brilliant Thing*. There's no way that this is a TV show or a movie. This is a piece which is essentially about being with other human beings in the theatre. It's going to be different every single night, as every play is, but with this play specifically. It's so improvisatory. I imagine that part of the experience is the audience thinking "how is this happening?" It probably feels sort of magical. And I think that's something about the theater as well, that very often I think there's something in our brain that makes it feel almost magical or dreamlike that we're all experiencing this story together in a dark room.

Bevin: Summer, is the "spectacle" of *Smart People* the ideas?

Summer: It feels impossible to sit in a room and hear that you are implicitly bias. You have these tendencies despite what you think, despite who you feel you are, and then have to wrestle with all of them and wrestle with them hopefully sitting next to both people who look like you and don't look like you. And that feels like the room is charged, right? And moments where someone might chuckle at something that you don't find funny at all. ■