

THE NEW FRONTIER

What drew me to The Readers' Theater of Ithaca (RTI) and The Writer's Cafe is Anne Marie Cummings' personal and professional journey to underscore the value of simple productions. The 'simplicity' paradoxically allows for a more complex and nuanced exploration of the playwright's dialogue, the actors' delivery, and their dynamics on stage. These can fuel the energy of the theatre experience. By de-emphasizing props and staging, RTI incidentally demonstrates how much mainstream theatre over-relies on these elements and leans on them as a handicap.

Again, paradoxically, RTI's spartan staging --- the absence of what one might expect in theatre --- leaves the audience with the presence of mind about how these elements are taken for granted and unnecessary to the core of the story.

Also, for someone like myself who's a fan of the 1920's, 30's, and 40's and can eagerly wax nostalgic -- owning four fedoras and some art deco furniture -- I embrace how 'voice' is a key focal point in RTI productions, especially with The Writer's Cafe, evoking the golden days of radio. However, not only 'the Shadow Knows' the value of Anne Marie's modern endeavor and this arrangement.

Accessibility is a philosophical, strategic, and logistical theme in RTI productions. It helps frame and answer several key questions:

- How do we make the theatre experience affordable?
- How do we encourage people to zero in on the storyline -- the plot and character development?
- How can we transmit theatre to overcome the geographic distance of the viewer?

The answer to the third question is particularly telling:

- The viewing of live and filmed theatre at Cinemapolis.
- The video clips of performances posted on The Readers' Theatre's website.
- The Writer's Cafe podcasts.

These are RTI's sure bets. Over the past four years, they are significant developments and serve as the ingredients for the new genre Anne Marie has created.

Finally, my public policy background inclines me to marvel at RTI's mission and focus on plays speaking to contemporary issues, and a talk-back format and Skype interviews with playwrights. These post-performance activities comprise a forum to discuss not only theatrical writing and expression, but the societal issues themselves. Sometimes they're on book, sometimes off-book, but, as Anne Marie told me recently, 'RTI is constantly evolving and like the selection of plays -- working within the times.'

Anne Marie reminds us to consider Neil LaBute's observation that 'good can come from showing what is bad.' I myself see how a pleasant ending complete with gift wrap and bow can leave an audience pleased, contented, and consequently numb and indifferent to action. In contrast, RTI provocatively showcases theatre that can inform, empower, and mobilize communities by presenting work and bringing it to Upstate New York at the physical location (Cinemapolis in Ithaca) and bringing it to the world online.

To sustain and grow this enterprising theatrical endeavor, I have been invited to join the RTI team with a single-minded purpose; that is, to identify and secure resources by:

- Developing and gathering themes and angles for 'telling the RTI story'
- Cultivating relationships with funding sources
- Applying for grants
- Fostering partnerships with companies who donate a portion of purchases to a 'cause,' like RTI, which is a NYS-registered charity and not-for-profit organization.

While I was extremely pleased to learn that RTI brought in me for fundraising and development, the timing defines the challenge poignantly. RTI was at a crossroads to make a decision about the next chapter of its history. RTI had gradually but steadily grown over four years. They had moved almost every year from one location to another until they found Cinemapolis -- which promises to be a long-term location and partner for RTI with a mutually beneficial relationship.

So four years later, RTI had achieved a level of growth that began to underscore the potential tradeoffs and tough decisions that defined questions about expanding the team:

- With limited time and money, how should these resources be allocated?
- Will leadership and staff become perpetually overextended?
- Will the duties become so demanding that instead of prioritizing, RTI is forced to triage?

RTI's decision to establish a General Manager position and to bring me in to fill that role proactively confronts and addresses these questions and the potential dilemma they articulate. The decision moves RTI to its next stage of innovation with its activities at Cinemopolis and its online Writer's Cafe.

While crossroads are common for people and organizations, taking 'the road less traveled' to create and usher in new genres of activity is, extremely rare. RTI is pushing the boundaries between plays on stage and plays on screen. Enda Walsh gave RTI permission to film his play 'Chatroom' – part of RTI's 2014-2015 season.

Such fascinatingly ground-breaking developments and their implications need to be made fully clear to donors and stakeholders who can 'give' or 'get' resources: RTI is a theatre company in a movie theatre resourcefully presenting plays in real time and on film, conveying a turning point towards even more added value in its brief history. RTI is effectively communicating this value to live audiences, on its website, and through social media.

Imagine what can materialize when funding sources recognize what RTI has to offer?

~ **Roberto Ragone**

General Manager

The Readers' Theatre of Ithaca