

I met Claire Wittman in 2020 through a mutual friend with whom she graduated from the Shakespeare & Performance MFA at Mary Baldwin University. (That MFA being one of Claire's two terminal degrees in the field of theater.) My first impression of Claire, who was then in the early days of educating families and children about life in 18th and early 19th century America at Colonial Williamsburg, was that she was utterly and fascinatingly unique...which is ironic, because that is not at all a unique experience for someone encountering Claire Wittman for the first time.

Later that year, heartbroken, like countless others, by the sudden loss of live theater, I spent the first ten days of quarantine writing a two-play adaptation of *War and Peace*. Among my driving motivations for the project was a desire to uplift the oft-sidelined female characters of the novel. One of the women I wished to rescue from Tolstoy's sexism was Princess Marya Bolkonskaya, a shy and pious girl who transcends her lonely, traumatizing childhood to become a self-possessed leader and arbiter of wisdom in her community. It should come as no surprise that the woman after whom I ended up modeling my version of the character was none other than the shimmering Claire Wittman herself. Claire graciously appeared on the screen of my first-ever Zoom meeting to play Marya in a full-cast developmental reading and workshop of *W&P*. Over the next several months of lockdown, she worked with me (for free!) as a new play dramaturg, helping me shape that unwieldy, double-headed Gorgon of a play into a complete and cohesive piece of theater.

And so began the Claire-Squared dramaturgical odyssey.

Since 2020, Claire has shepherded all seventeen of my adaptations through the writing process and into completion. I, in turn, have provided dramaturgy for seven of her plays. It would be a fool's errand to attempt to rack the hours Claire and I have spent on Zoom, gleefully exchanging feedback on each other's works-in-progress, but sufficed to say we would not be the playwrights we are today without the consistent cross-pollination of our ideas, insights, questions. It is this latter practice of question-asking upon which I want to expound, as I consider it the finest tool of Claire's dramaturgy and her greatest asset as an educator.

Twenty-five years ago, theater practitioner Liz Lerman devised a system for communicating constructive feedback to artists called the Critical Response Process. Perhaps the most productive (and elusive) quadrant of the CRP is what Lerman termed "Neutral Questions." Essentially, this step invites the "responder" to the piece of art to ask questions of the person who created the piece of art about the piece of art that are, crucially, devoid of personal opinion. According to Lerman, a Neutral Question can be granular or philosophical, precise or broad; the only requirement is a lack of subjectivity in the framing of it. (E.g. "Why did you change Elizabeth Bennet's age from 21 to 81?" versus "Why did you make the age difference between Elizabeth and Darcy so creepy?")

Despite the simplicity of this setup, Neutral Questions invariably prove the trickiest step in the CRP because it is difficult for humans to respond to art without letting their opinions slip in. I'm sure you can see where I'm going with this: Claire Wittman has not only perfected the art of asking Neutral Questions, but uses it **exclusively** in her dramaturgical feedback.

In the four years we have worked together, I can count on one hand the number of times Claire has offered an overt opinion of one of my playwriting choices (and in each of those instances, she prefaced her opinion by asking for my consent to hear it). Judgment-laced language—"weird," "good," "bad," "okay"—has no place in Claire's dramaturgy. She channels all of her feedback through clear, exacting questions that interrogate specific choices in the text, and only offers

statements of fact when providing primary-source-based historical context. (E.g. When I was writing *Arabella*, my four-hander adaptation of Charlotte Lennox's 1752 novel, *The Female Quixote*, Claire would occasionally let me know that certain words, phrases, or clothing items did not yet exist in England in the mid-18th century.)

I cannot overstate how intricate, time-consuming, and self-effacing the practice of asking Neutral Questions is. It calls for a complete separation of observation from ego, as well as phenomenal patience and interdisciplinary knowledge; even the best dramaturgs often avoid it. But the **impact** of Claire's scrupulous adherence to this practice is the secret sauce of her pedagogy; it ensures that playwrights, directors, and actors will critically reconsider and evaluate their creative choices without feeling robbed of their creative agency. From experience, I can attest that a playwright will feel far more compelled to change a line of dialogue when asked "Did you intend Character X to contradict what he said in Scene 3? If so, when and why did he change his mind?" as opposed to the commonly-accepted alternative: "This line doesn't make sense."

Time alone will tell if the Herculean effort Claire has devoted to helping me improve my little adaptations is "worth it." But I do know that whatever elements of my plays succeed onstage do so only because Claire Wittman was my dramaturg. In 2022, my adaptation of Jane Austen's *Emma* received its world premiere in Raleigh, NC. My most vivid memory from the experience of sitting in that audience was the constant gratification I felt because each of my questions as a viewer was answered thoroughly and efficiently by the script. The cohesion of *Emma* as a play is, of course, a byproduct of Claire's hundreds of hyper-specific questions about each and every artistic choice I made in reimagining the novel.

Along a similar vein, I recently directed and played the eponymous character in *Arabella* at the Shakespeare Tavern Playhouse in Atlanta. Full houses packed with people I had never met—people who had never heard of Charlotte Lennox, people who knew nothing about eighteenth century social mores—spent the entire 1h45m runtime of the play laughing, gasping, cheering, murmuring, crying, and leaning forward in their seats. While I wish I could take the credit for the rousing commercial and critical success of *Arabella*, the truth is that our audiences' wholehearted investment in the unknown story of an often-insufferable heroine owes itself to one person only: the dramaturg who charily and compassionately asked me every single question that needed answering in order to welcome twenty-first century audiences inside the snow-globe of an 18th century, bodice-ripping fairytale.

At this point, I rather imagine that what is extraordinary about Claire's personality can be inferred from everything I have described. Nevertheless, it feels important to reify the reason why all her professionalism is worth more than the sum of its parts. There is a large pool of excellent theater instructors in America. There is a much smaller pool of excellent theater instructors who can effectively channel their feedback through Neutral Questions. But there are a choice few theater educators within that second pool who are consummately, authentically kind, patient, and humble. Claire Wittman is one of those few.

Her carbonated passion for the work of scholastically and practically introducing young people to theater bubbles through her voice and eyes when she teaches; it is an infectious enthusiasm that could no more easily be feigned than suppressed. Claire relishes in delivering sincere, heartfelt, laser-specific compliments to artists and young people alike, a steady stream of which have been buoying my self-esteem since first day I met her. Her temperament is tirelessly

gentle, her curiosity genuine, her optimism unparalleled, and her approach to conflict both sensitive and mature. In short, she is exactly the kind of person you want sitting opposite a frustrated playwright who's spent the past three days trying to write a scene that's just. Not. Working.

So many of Claire's interpersonal qualities and personal values make her an exceptional dramaturg; her unforced, unselfish joy in the artistic endeavors of others; her precise, intentional, and encouraging approach to artistic feedback; her naturally warm and enthusiastic personality that seeks to find common ground with people she has never met; her discerning and informed practitioner's eye that seeks to connect artistic choices to their greater narrative implications; her exceptional knowledge of historically located and classical plays; and finally, her profound, heartfelt humility.

Sincerely,

Claire F. Martin

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