

A Matrix Articulating the Principles of Grassroots Theater

What makes a grassroots theater a grassroots theater? What ideals and principles distinguish it from other kinds of theater activity in the country? What elements and goals do the various grassroots theater efforts in the U.S. have in common?

Discussions at the symposium made clear that many of us feel a need to answer just such questions. Few involved with grassroots theater have had the time over the years to reflect upon what they have in common with others doing similar work; just getting their own work done has been all-consuming. But the need to identify common purposes and qualities has become important, as has the need to articulate in our own terms what makes our work unique. An understanding of the principles and purposes we share can help us overcome isolation, allow us to learn from one another and work more effectively, both on our own and in collaboration. Hence the following matrix.

Why a matrix? In trying to arrive at what characterizes grassroots theater, we wanted to move away from a pat definition. Instead, we wanted to emphasize the relationships among the various features we had identified, which, though meaningful individually, only gain their full meaning when taken as a whole. The principles stated below are not intended to be read hierarchically, nor as some kind of checklist. Rather, they are offered as a set of ideals towards which grassroots theater is striving.

(Matrix follows on page 2)

MATRIX

Grassroots theater is given its voice by the community from which it arises. The makers of grassroots theater are part of the culture from which the work is drawn. The people who are the subjects of the work are part of its development from inception through presentation. Their stories and histories inform the work, their feedback during the creation process shapes it. The audience is not consumer of, but participant in the performance.

Grassroots theater grows out of a commitment to place. It is grounded in the local and specific, which when rendered faithfully and creatively can affect people anywhere.

The traditional and indigenous are integral to grassroots theater and valued for their ability to help us maintain continuity with the past, respond to the present, and prepare for the future. Thus, the relationship to the traditional and indigenous is dynamic, not fixed.

Grassroots theater strives to be inclusive in its producing practices. Presentation of the work is made in partnership with community organizations. Performances are held in meeting places where the entire community feels welcome. Ticket prices are kept affordable.

Grassroots theaters recognize that management structures and business practices are value-laden; they affect the mission, goals, and creative processes of organizations. Through their structures and practices, grassroots theaters endeavor to support broad participation, self-reliance, and collective responsibility.

Grassroots theater is linked to the struggles for cultural, social, economic, and political equity for all people. It is fundamentally a theater of hope and often of joy. It recognizes that to advocate for equity is to meet resistance and to meet with no resistance indicates a failure to enter the fight.