

# Role Playing by Terence McFarland

## During this evening's performance the role of x will be played by ...

### Act I

Theatre artists often play many roles, and by that I mean wear many hats, or, really, have another job, making introductions occasionally awkward.

This is Terence. He is...

Pick one: Executive Director, administrator, artist, performer, director, board member, friend of the playwright, etc. The qualifier often tells more about what the one making the introduction thinks of the one being introduced than it does about the identity of the stranger. Context is crucial in our ever-shifting landscape of identity.

The other night I was cast in an altogether unexpected role.

In the Las Vegas airport, during a layover that involved changing airlines and the accompanying retrieval of luggage, I liked the way the fluorescent light was gleaming off the stainless steel in the baggage claim area, so I pulled out my digital camera and took a few shots.

After some time, still waiting for my bags and realizing my next flight was imminent, I pulled out my laptop utilizing the airport-wide free wi-fi access and pulled up the airport's website and a map of the terminals to figure how in the heck to get to Midwest Air.

Five minutes later a nice gentleman came up and began asking questions.

The nice gentleman was employed by the Las Vegas police department and someone had made a complaint and registered their concern about the man at the baggage carousel taking pictures and his subsequent access to maps of the airport.

Wow. Hadn't really considered myself in the role of terrorist.

That's a new one.

My favorite kind of theatrical storytelling is that which allows the audience to draw conclusions and make connections. Here I was, from my perspective, engaging in a little artistic activity while bored and tired trying to use my time efficiently. In my audience's eyes I was an extreme threat to their very security and safety.

Spontaneous performance art and I didn't even know I had an audience.

Vegas led me to Milwaukee for the Americans for the Arts convention and then to Atlanta for the Theatre Communications Group national conference, during which I was able to put my experience into a slightly more focused context.

In Atlanta, director Anne Bogart spoke of the role of the audience and how, in opening up her rehearsal process to spectators, she enables audience engagement similar to that seen demonstrated by sports fans. Through close and repeated proximity to the performers and the development of new work, the viewers know when a performer is having an off day or performing at the peak of ability. The audience is rooting for the performer with an understanding of the work process providing a basis to evaluate the performance. The rules of this "game" become apparent to the initiated after a few viewings and the subtleties and intricacies of directing and performance can be evaluated with educated eyes. We can ask for no more than such an engaged audience.

Immediately after my little conversation with a cop in Vegas, I looked around, curious to identify my original audience. This was now an impossible task. Talk about audience development, suddenly all eyes were on me, the guy the police talked to but then let go. "Step back, honey, let the gentleman with the beard get his bag."

My behavior was deemed so abnormal as to be scary for this unknown tourist. I wonder what the experience of attending a theatre for the first time as an adult must encompass. The shock of being cast in a new role, not knowing the rules of behavior, must be daunting. What can we as a community do to open up our process to breed a familiarity or context that might warrant more enthusiastic support and less fear for the uninitiated?

Generally, the performing arts don't use sports analogies, but we, too, have practice and scrimmages, teams, owners and players, pitch hitters and replacements, home team advantage, and all-stars. Arguably we have major and minor leagues, although I'd posit that they are perhaps not determined by venue or budget size. How could we determine our handicaps and batting averages, on what scale might performance, production or direction be measured? What would it take to open up our performing arts rule books for closer inspection? Numbers provoke watercooler and talkradio conversation and ultimately fuel fantasy leagues.

Who's in your fantasy league?

Vote for your Medea, Big Daddy, Puck or Godot by texting us at...

I can't wait for the playoffs.

### Act II

The role of Executive Director of LA Stage Alliance was originated by me, but the story of LA Stage Alliance is epic with a diverse cast of characters in leading and supporting roles. We've been Theatre LA, Theatre League Alliance, Los Angeles Theatre Alliance and each with their own Executive Directors, Presidents and CEOs.

The original title of this column was The New Guy.

Originally it worked for me because I was new to LA Stage Alliance and I would write about new work, new developments and new ideas from the LA performing arts community. According to most, I'm no longer new.

Debatable, but I've got other roles to play now. Namely, historian and futurist.

I subscribe to the notion that sometimes you need to look back to go forward.

To that end I've begun to get in touch with some of the players involved in the thirty-year history of the organization now called LA Stage Alliance.

Do you have a story, anecdote or connection to the development of this organization?

I'd love to hear it.

Drop me a line and I'll get in touch.

In the next months we'll be looking back to the future.

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