

If I think about all of the things I've learned and gleaned from Will, even over a very short time knowing each other, it seems to come back again and again to this common thread: Will taught me about the intersection of ambition and priority. And while this pertains to artistic ambition, I'm also particularly thinking about institutional ambition.

The "American Theatre" talks a lot. We like to hear ourselves talk. We talk about progressive ideals. We talk about our hopes for a more inclusive and equitable future. We talk about the side programs and initiatives aimed at cultivating "new" (define as you will) audiences. And yet, we can still look at the landscape of our industry and see how slow change comes to the mainstage and primary programming, to our institutional leadership (and I say this with full self-awareness of my own identity as a cis-white-hetero-male Artistic Director), to our creative processes, to the DNA of the company. But, we still maintain AMBITION for that future - that tomorrow of greater gender parity in administrations, of greater inclusivity in the onstage representation, of when audience's might be better equipped to "get it."

But isn't it on us, as artists and producers, to encourage audiences toward getting it? If we believe in advancing values that we want to shape our future, then what is our responsibility to then actually advance those values in how we create our own work? That's how change happens. We have to manifest that ambition into reality if audiences are ever going to truly "get it." And to do that, you have to actually *do* the thing you are ambitious for. You have to make it a priority, rather than a dream or ambition.

That's what I saw Will doing at ATC.  
He took the things we talk about. And then he actually did them.  
He made them a priority.

Will didn't wait for permission to start building an institution based on ideals and values rooted in a better future for this country, which is what that place felt like each time I walked in - an in-my-opinion-pitch-perfect interpretation of the American Theater Company name and legacy. He partnered with The Chicago Inclusion Project and built a casting process on a foundation of inclusion and stellar professionalism. He created residency programs that nurtured artists at so many various stages of their artistic careers, really making it about investing in the artist and their passion. He further invested in the youth ensemble, and brought the brilliant Abhi Shrestha on board to curate next-level programming aimed at truly nurturing the next generation. He produced new, challenging, developing, forward-thinking (and AMBITIOUS) works of art that asked its audience for trust and repaid that trust with experiences built on a bedrock of humanity and empathy and craft and innovation and insight and technique and heart and guts and honesty.

Will's production of PICNIC is currently on my list of top 5 most formative theatre experiences, because it was a clear-eyed and heartfelt demonstration of the magic that can be created from a process built on such priorities. A piece fed and watered as a passion project for years. Built on a deeply researched and deeply felt understanding of Inge as an artist and as a human being. Brought to life in a brilliantly inclusive way. Where the inclusivity was intentional and brought insight into Inge's words that resonated so loudly today. Envisioned with a sense of poetry anchored in the deeply felt emotions of the story being told. Brought to form by a visionary team of designers. Shared by a true Chicago ensemble. At an institution with the history of American Theater Company.

It was amazing. And Will just did it.

By making certain things priorities in his process, administratively and artistically.

Things that so many of us still treat as ambitions. As "if only we could"s.

This is what Will and ATC meant to me - they showed me what it means to live your values, as an artist, as a company leader and as a citizen. Create the better future. Make it a priority.

- Josh Sobel, Artistic Director of Haven Theatre