

Seven Thousand Feet Above Broadway

By Lisa Beth Allen

Something promising is happening far away from neon lights and hundred dollar ticket prices. One thousand, nine hundred twenty six, point thirty-three miles away, and seven thousand feet above Broadway, theatre is thriving, and it's changing lives.

Taos, NM, a rural southwestern mountain town with just over five thousand residents, is seated in Taos County, which averages fourteen people per square mile. In comparison New York City averages fifty-two thousand people per square mile. There are more hooved animals here than people. In 2011 throughout the county there have been seven readings, four workshops, and six full productions of new work. Already on the boards for 2012 are three productions of new work, a workshop of a new musical, and several readings. It's not uncommon for full productions to pop up with no more than a months notice so the schedule is sure to expand. That might not sound impressive, but remember, we have more hooves than hands.

Is all of this new work highly compelling, fantastically entertaining, and/or searingly provocative? No. But some of it falls within those realms and much of it is affecting for its local audience.

I came to Taos a little over six years ago looking for a quiet place to recover from a head injury. No longer being able to remember what I'd eaten five minutes

prior, I assumed my career in the theatre was over. I had written several plays while working at various theatres in other capacities but never intended to become a full time playwright. In acting *intention* is everything, in life it's only a footnote. In the summer of 2007 I was accepted into the University of New Orleans Low-Residency MFA program for playwriting. A year into the program I needed to hear some of my work read out loud. Venturing out for the first time I discovered Taos was filled with professional theatre artists. Mostly hiding out, some retired from careers that were no longer working for them, and a few others who make Taos their second home; it was like landing on the Island of misfit Thespians.

The Spanish word for tomorrow is *mañana*. In Taos *mañana* actually means, *not today*. The pace here is individualized anywhere between slow, slowish, and less than fast. Taos Pueblo is thought to have been built in 1000 A.D. Spanish explorers arrived here in 1540. Anglos (any person of non native or Hispanic descent) began to infiltrate in 1898. When you've lived here for a while, you begin to see the impact of the different cultures on the overall fabric of the community. Taos is less melting pot, and more Shish Kabob. Each ingredient retains its own identity; depending on the marinade, the whole may be greater than the sum of its parts, or not. This complex diversity offers constant creative inspiration.

My life moves at a pace that allows me to really experience the people in front of me, rather than dropping them into a category in my *type* file based on some instantaneous perception, most likely fueled by projection. I have time to be kind.

There is no need to invest energy in *nice*. I can be real. Happy, crappy, thrilled, cranky, frustrated, pissed off, quiet, blissed out... it's all good here. I find there's very little, if any at all, disconnect between my public and private Self. That makes getting *real* on paper a lot easier.

The landscape of Taos, with its wide open sage covered plateaus, the stoic mountains, cloud stroked teal blue sky, and haunting star-filled nights, comforts me. The constancy of this ancient place allows me to run wild in the chaos of my inner landscape. Nature is equally unimpressed with cruelty and beauty. When I lived in large urban areas, I found myself less willing to tap into my whole Self, for fear the dark places within would somehow trigger an uninvited partnership with the underbelly of life outside my door. There is most certainly a dark underbelly in Taos. But, the natural environment makes the ebb and flow of *antisocial* behavior seem, organic. It feels like something less to be feared or combated, and more to be explored as part of the cosmic (and at times, comic) balance of things. Stark contrasts are so completely evidenced in nature, that my own contradictions, and those of the world in which we live no longer surprise me.

A year ago, I did a weeklong workshop on a new play. Short on directors with experience in new play development, I brought in James Winters, a gifted theatre artist and teacher, from New Orleans. A great cast and supporting crew were assembled. They were being paid, but not a lot. I felt trepidation. How would Jim respond to our *mañana* idiosyncrasies?

I asked Jim about his experience here in relation to working in more urban surroundings.

Jim: The work remains quite similar regardless of the location. One thing I was impressed by was the high quality of talent. It was a pleasure to work with so many seasoned and gifted performers. If there was one noticeable difference, it was the interest from the community regarding what we were doing. Nobody bats an eye at a play being workshopped in New York or even in New Orleans, but in Taos we seemed to have the support and interest of a large number of people who weren't even connected with the project. I can sometimes be snotty about keeping a rehearsal process "closed" but I really liked having people come in to see what we were doing, and asking questions. It seemed to boost our energy and bring out the best in us.

Then, I asked what about the experience might have been unique to the rural setting.

Jim: I'd have to go back to the support of the surrounding community. It felt like more of an "event," which was fantastic. Developing a new play should be an event. I felt like Taos was hungry to learn about the process, and eager to encourage those of us working on it. It lent a special energy to it. It also made me feel like what we were doing was more universal...we weren't just some group of actor types hiding away in a black box conducting a mysterious experiment. I'd be curious to see if we were just in a special place or if that

same attitude and energy is waiting to be tapped in rural settings throughout America and maybe even the world."

June 2009, three of my one-act plays were included in the summer reading series. The cast included two young Hispanic women, *Taoseñas*. One played a character not dissimilar to herself, a young Hispanic Taos woman. The evening of the public reading, three generations of family members, none of whom had ever been to a theatre, came to see her. I don't think I even noticed how the reading went because I couldn't stop watching the audience. Completely engaged, their pride and appreciation was overwhelming.

Today, Taos' ethnic composition is 57.9 percent Hispanic (those whose ancestry can be traced back to Spain), 33.8 percent white/non Hispanic and 7.6 percent American Indian. Both the Hispanic and Native American communities have traditions in oral storytelling. Going to a theatre to see a play, however, is not a cultural consideration. That means the better part of 65 percent of the population wouldn't consider going to see a play, because it wouldn't enter their minds to do so.

There's a remarkable opportunity here to grow an audience, explore new techniques from other story traditions, and create drama (new and revisited) that reflects the lives of people who, for the most part, have been overlooked. If creating theatre should be an event as Professor Winters suggests, I can think of no better way to do so than to subsume those for whom story telling is innately ritualistic and celebratory.

In one of my cyberspace MFA classes, the topic of *getting* produced came up, around concerns about increasing festival submission fees and disappearing theatre companies. I suggested the alternative of self-producing. Where, and for whom my classmates wondered. Your living room. Your garage, the basement of a church, a park. Most everyone responded with “that doesn’t count!”

Why? Why doesn’t that count? If we write because we believe that we have something essential to say, what difference does it make where the act of seeing and/or hearing takes place?

A few years back a couple relocated in Taos from New York City. They bought the Taos Plaza Theatre, an intimate ninety to a hundred and twenty seat performance space. It needed a make over, so they began by gutting it. The economy turned and they were unable to secure financing to continue the project. The theatre is inoperable. The couple lives, with their young son, in an apartment above the theatre. For the last two years they have held *salons* in their living room. The evenings include, on a rotating basis, play and poetry readings, solo performance pieces, and singer/songwriters. They hang flyers around town, list in the weekly paper and send emails. Ticket price, five dollars. Popcorn and non-alcoholic beverages are free. It has become one of the great hotspots in town for live performance. It’s always packed with forty to sixty people. The events are consistently central themes in next-day shopping cart chats (our version of the water cooler conversation). Why doesn’t that count?

I'm not saying building a career and generating income aren't important. It's a remarkable thing to see the world you invented come to fruition on a descent budget, with top-notch talent. And winning awards, being honored by people you respect can be deeply affirming. But the likelihood of touching lives is far greater producing your own work in your living room, than waiting around to *get* produced. There are small communities all over the country, hungry for a reason to gather together and share inspired open dialogue, to have the universal experience of *connectivity* that only live, compelling drama can provide. If we want to see theatre thrive in the 21st century, it is in these enclaves that we need to focus energy on encouraging playwriting. In return, these communities can offer environments conducive to unexpected inspiration. Every writer's dream.

In times of great uncertainty we seek out experiences that remind us, we are not alone. At the same time we crave affirmation of our individual worth. When a Dramatist's work fills the collective unconscious with possibility, we are reminded of our own potentiality. By clinging to the entrenched belief that ultimate artistic validation for dramatists comes only from Broadway, or Broadway scale productions of our work, we deny the art form the regard it deserves.