

Minnesota Now (MPR) | Minnesota Now New theatre performance helps the audience create rituals to deal with loss 01GAPHSSSPARE8HQPXQJRCXQ1F

CATHY WURZER: It's *Minnesota Now* here on MPR News. I'm Cathy Wurzer. This weekend there is a one of a kind theater performance happening on an island in the Mississippi river, and this doesn't just involve actors, it involves the audience in a big way. In fact, the line between actor and audience is totally gone. Here to tell us more is Leah Cooper. She's the co-artistic director of Wonderlust Productions. Leah, welcome to *Minnesota Now*.

LEAH COOPER: Thank you. It's really great to be here.

CATHY WURZER: I'm glad you had time to join us. All right. You're going to be on an island in the Mississippi river. Let's talk about the location.

LEAH COOPER: Well, it's Raspberry Island, which I think a lot of people have seen but don't even realize they've seen. It is right next to downtown Saint Paul. It's under the Wabasha Bridge. And it's this little oval of land with a walking path all the way around it, and a bandshell right in the middle of it, and these beautiful steps at the far end that descend right into the Mississippi river. It's got bridges and trestles going overhead. It's got downtown on one side and the west side flats on the other. It's sort of in the middle of everything and yet I think people miss it.

CATHY WURZER: You could have chosen any other location, Leah, but you chose this one. Why?

LEAH COOPER: [CHUCKLES] Well, I mean, this project has been a long, long time in the making. And this island, the first time I saw it, it just really spoke to me. I think this piece is half theater, half ritual, and for all rituals, one of the first things we do is we sort of step out of the everyday, and an island is a perfect place to do that. It's right there in the middle of every day and yet it's outside of it.

CATHY WURZER: I like that. Well, let's talk about the ritual part of this. What's important to you about ritual?

LEAH COOPER: Well, at Wonderlust, we do theater a little different than conventional theater. We don't start with a script, we start with a community of people, whose stories we think are really interesting, but largely unknown, or misunderstood, or entirely silenced. And all of our shows are about one third professional actors and 2/3 members of the community that the play is about and who it was made with.

And we've been doing that work for about 10 years. And one of the things we just kept observing was how much theater artists use ritual to create a safe space for creativity, to create a safe container for sharing really big stories about complex things. And then the other thing we noticed was that when you make plays in collaboration with communities whose stories have been silenced, it turns out you're also working with people who've experienced a lot of loss. And we started observing this thing that we later discovered was named by a local psychologist, named Dr. Pauline Bosse, it's called ambiguous loss.

CATHY WURZER: Mm-hmm.

LEAH COOPER: It's all these losses that are profound but they're different than bereavement. We walk around carrying them but nobody really names them, so they get frozen inside of us. We don't get a chance to grieve them. So these two, frankly, obsessions of mine came together into this project, which is, can we come together to create collective ritual for naming and grieving ambiguous loss.

CATHY There's always something personal behind everything that artists do. So I'm sensing that there must be a story of
WURZER: yours. You must have a story of ambiguous loss, I'm betting.

LEAH COOPER: It's a really good guess. [LAUGHS] Well, you know, it's a funny thing. I think artists often make something that they think is about everything else, and then they get deep, deep, deep into it before they go, Oh, this is about me.

CATHY Right.

WURZER:

LEAH COOPER: And then it's a self-conscious moment, frankly, because we don't realize we're doing it. But yeah. You know, we first read about ambiguous loss when we were making a play about adoption and foster care. And ambiguous loss comes up a lot in the adoption community, for both adoptees and birth parents. And I am an adoptee myself. I'm a transracial adoptee. And I was told that I was adopted, I was told that I was multiracial, but I wasn't even told what my ethnicity was, much less where I came from and who I was connected to.

So that is for sure an ambiguous loss. And that's why I think her book really resonated for me. And it's probably why I've been drawn to this work all along, of working with people whose stories are misunderstood and silenced.

I happen to have a long list of ambiguous losses actually, including a family that experienced a great deal of mental illness, and disability, and dementia, including a lot of abandonment, and neglect, and a lot of just general chaos. In some ways, I feel like I lost a childhood, you know? And so yes, I think ambiguous loss speaks to me really, really personally. Every artist involved in this though, it turns out, also very personal.

CATHY Uh-huh. And I'm sure the audience when they explore the theme too will also find that they are living with
WURZER: ambiguous loss. The event is called *Lost and Found*. Lost and Found. So tell me a little bit about how this will kind of manifest there on Raspberry Island in the Mississippi river.

LEAH COOPER: Well, one piece that might look a little more like you expect theater to look is that we have for storytellers, performers, who have created a piece about their own experience with loss and with transformation. And they are scattered about the island. And then the other piece of this is that we have four guides, theater artists who are going to guide the audience around the island visiting each of these performers.

But between each performer, they're also going to do some interactive experiences that are about recognizing our own loss, and considering it, and thinking about ways that we can transform the experience. And I think a really important thing to know is that people can really just follow along and watch, or they can participate a little, or a lot. It's very open to whatever amount of participation people feel comfortable with. It's also really open to what kind of meaning they want to assign to it.

CATHY This is all a lovely full circle that you're working with.

WURZER:

LEAH COOPER: Yeah. There's no religion or dogma in what we're presenting. It's much more of a journey. We create a journey with a beginning, a middle, and an end, and a sense of resolve and some kind of small catharsis, or large catharsis, along the way. And as theater artists, we're sort of experts at letting an audience bring their own imagination and their own experience to something. And so that's really how this is a ritual. It's a journey where you can assign meaning and cast a wish around your own sense of loss.

CATHY WURZER: So because you're dealing with loss and grief, I guess you could say it's a wish for a happy ending. Is that what you're hoping actually manifests for some folks who participate?

LEAH COOPER: Absolutely. I mean, it's tricky. American culture really puts a pretty high emphasis on a happy ending and on happiness in general. And sometimes that can gloss over or even sort of force us to think that grief is not a welcome emotion or a useful emotion. Right? We get a lot of pressure to just move on, get over it. Be strong. Be brave. Be happy. Don't worry. Right? All of that.

And I think in this last 2 and 1/2 years, we've been really forced to slow down and it really just wasn't possible to move on. And I think part of what this piece is meant to do is to say, hang on, before we rush forward and pretend the last 2 and 1/2 years didn't happen, let's take some time to look at what we learn from our grief.

It's not to say that loss is a good thing or has a silver lining, but that the way that we survive loss is by asking ourselves, what can we learn from it? How can we transform it into something? How do we release what's not true anymore so that we can imagine what is possible. Right? And so I would say it's a little bit happy ending, but more so it's about finding understanding, and finding peace, and finding new possibilities.

CATHY WURZER: Now this is pretty personal for many people, right? What you're doing is personal, done in a group of strangers. And I wonder how people will react. It should be fascinating.

LEAH COOPER: We're also wondering. It's definitely an experiment. It is far more interactive than what we have done historically. I mean, all of our plays are made in collaboration with communities, so we do spend a lot of time guiding people into an experience where they are perhaps being more creative than they get to be in their everyday life, perhaps being a little more expressive than they feel safe to do in other places.

So we think we're bringing a lot of skill and thoughtfulness around creating a fun, and playful, and safe space. I know it sounds weird to say that we could be fun and playful about grief, but frankly, grief is a really natural experience, even though modern society sort of wants to suppress it. And so is playfulness. And we think that's kind of a doorway. And we hope that's how they'll feel safe among strangers, to just tiptoe into this, and that what they'll really do is take home some ideas and practices that they might incorporate into their own life.

CATHY WURZER: Should be fascinating. Leah, I wish you all the best. Thank you so much.

LEAH COOPER: Thank you for having me on. I really appreciate it.

CATHY WURZER: Leah Cooper is the co-artistic director of Wonderlust Productions. Their production called *Lost and Found* opens this weekend, August 19, runs through September the 4th. You can find more information and tickets at wlproductions.org.