



ART REACH  
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## Using Theater to Express Social Concerns and Inspire Change

Lisa Jo Epstein tries to explain to me the moment that led her down the path to owning her own theater organization. It was an interactive theater workshop she attended. “We were all marching back and forth across a room. It was boring....a metaphor for doing something you don’t want to do, and then one of my friends jumps in the middle and starts dancing.” At this point, Lisa Jo actually stands up in the middle of the small coffee shop we are sitting in to imitate the dance motion, which is difficult to describe in words.

“She disrupted everyone by dancing, by the joy of movement, and she affected change, people couldn’t march, the line became buoyant.” This story is just one example of how she has seen the power of theater change people. Her work is now about giving that power to more people through her theater company, Gas and Electric Arts.

Lisa Jo embodies her work in the way she expresses herself so vibrantly. She uses hand gestures and is not shy about standing up to better demonstrate a story. It is inspiring to behold her energy and enthusiasm when speaking about her career.

Lisa Jo Epstein has been working in theater and education for over 20 years. From her graduate studies at the University of Texas—Austin to working in Paris with Augusto Boal, she has been passionate about using theater to effect change and empower people. Now, with Gas and Electric Arts, she hopes to bring these ideas, which are practiced all over the world, to Philadelphia. She believes that a partnership with Art-Reach will help her to connect with more people in our region. Her program is called Community WORKS! and is listed in the Theatre section of the In-Facility roster.

Lisa Jo's workshops are about providing people with a comfortable environment to share their stories, “giving people a smidgeon of space to acknowledge that they are important, they have something to say, what are the different ways of saying it, and having fun with that.”

She has worked with people of all ages and backgrounds and has a wide variety of techniques and methods she uses with different groups. At high schools she has done workshops where over the course of several weeks students construct a series of scenes about issues they face. This culminates in an interactive performance where the audience can step in to confront the topics addressed in the play. These types of workshops

incorporate her work with Augusto Boal, a pioneer in the concept of the “Theater of the Oppressed.” The idea is to use theater to express social concerns and inspire change.

However, not all of Lisa Jo’s workshops are about a public performance. Sometimes they take the form of story circles, where people act out and listen to each others’ stories. These are not necessarily about creating external change, but are self-contained and therapeutic. Often, her workshops are about providing people with a comfortable environment to share their stories, “giving people a smidgeon of space to acknowledge that they are important, they have something to say, what are the different ways of saying it, and having fun with that.”

Every workshop that Gas and Electric Arts offer is customized to the needs of the individual groups. Lisa Jo tries to meet with groups beforehand to figure out the best way to do that. She talks about her “backpack of tools” that includes numerous activities and techniques. Particularly for Art-Reach she can adapt when necessary: “I have all of these activities. I want to put them at the disposal of the people and they can be as informative or active as they want it to be.”

Ultimately, she feels that the most important purpose of her workshops is their ability to build community and bring people together. In an attempt to sum up how she feels about her work she beams, “[It’s all] deeply moving on so many levels; crazy and fun and about stories and honoring the challenges in our lives, saying we can face them, as long as someone else will also be facing them with you.”

To learn about or schedule the program Lisa Jo offers Art-Reach members visit Lisa Jo’s listing, Community WORKS! on the In-Facility Roster or contact the programming department at 215-568-2115 x4 or X5.

-By Allison O'Dea