Tim Burke: What happens the day that you feel profoundly committed to and passionate about a work of theater and you want to take it to a community and the community either hates it or is utterly indifferent to it? Have you had that moment yet? Are you thinking ahead to that moment?

Nell Bang-Jensen: Yeah, it's a really good question. I think what I probably would do is not do that. I mean, I think there are shows I've made that have toured and gone to different places and usually the audiences where they're being presented are audiences who are pretty used to experimental theater, and who have bought a ticket, and chosen to be there. I think there's a lot of danger in taking what you're making to a community and saying you should watch this without talking to them first. I think what I would rather do is go to a place and say what do you need, let's make that.

There's some really interesting examples of theaters in the country right now like, Mixed Blood Theater in Minneapolis who they were trying to get people to come to their plays. They even offered free tickets to everyone in their zip code because they realized the neighborhood where the theater was, the fewest people were coming to their plays from that neighborhood. They said, okay, we'll offer free tickets. Some people came to the first one, and then the next show they did, no one came. They went back and they said, "Oh it's free, you didn't come." They said, "Yeah we didn't really like that play." They ended up working with them and they said, "Okay, we hear you." "What does this neighborhood need?"

Actually, the conversation that people were the most interested in having there was about vaccinations, was happening in neighborhood where people were really divided over that issue. They realized actually what these people were asking for, and they didn't need a Shakespeare play, what they wanted to make sort of like a public service announcement. That they could then be the forum for them to have these discussions about vaccinations. They made these plays that were all on that medical topic. They did the research, they joined with doctors, they had people from the community act in the plays, and it became a forum for discussion. Granted, artistically I think I don't want to just make plays about vaccinations, I'm interested in the balance of how we can work with people outside of the industry to create something that is for me, aesthetically and artistically rigorous and not telling people how to think. Also, making that with people who aren't just in our usual theater bubbles.

Burke: Right. I mean, in fact you were going right towards something I was thinking as you were talking, which is that one of the puzzles about both education and art is that sometimes what we want isn't what we need, if you know what I mean. That when you're educating somebody, or being educated, in a sense, there's a concession from the outset that you already don't know the things that you will come to know. That you don't necessarily even know the things that you need to know or want to know. Art seems to me to have that ability to surprise us too. Is there a way to work a happy medium there where you're giving people what will be needfully surprising rather than in a sense what they already think they want?

Bang-Jensen: Yeah. That's exactly the balance I strive for. I feel like all theaters should be doing that, I mean I think it's actually a place that's set up for an encounter. I think ideally some of what that encounter can do is unsettle certainties. I mean, I think it's really a place for multiplicity. I talk to my students about this a lot because when they first started going to shows in Philadelphia, they often have the response, "Oh, I really liked that." "Oh, I didn't like it." Most of the things they don't like are things that they're unfamiliar with so I really feel like people's comfort zones are formed by what they're exposed to. It would be great, and often for a lot of these kids it's South Pacific and King Lear. I think one of the responsibilities of art makers is to widen that comfort zone and increase where people are on that spectrum so they get more and more comfortable, or at least responsive, or open to work that will challenge them.

I mean, I think a lot about theater is a balance between just comfort, making people be in a space and think about something in a new way, and also recognition and the balance of the two. The recognition of, oh I felt that way before, I have empathy for this person and oh, that was put so beautifully it makes me want to cry. I really believe in, and I think I spoke with you about this playwright, Brandon Jacobs Jenkins who wrote, An Octoroon, a piece I worked on at The Wilma a couple years ago. He really believes that our audiences should represent our democracy in their response. He doesn't want to make plays where everyone's standing up on their feet at the end. He wants to make plays where some people are offended and they walk out, and some people are up on their feet at the end, and one person's crying, and one person's laughing, and one person's saying, "Oh, should I not have laughed at that?" Really have it be an experience that's not collective or communal, but one that's democratic and leaves the space for that.