

To Thine Own Self Be True

The Elements that Make Up APT's Essence

Introduction

APT is fortunate to know itself. Key constituencies – staff, artists, board, audience – generally agree on the fundamental elements that comprise the foundation of this organization – the elements that make APT unique and special. As we begin to plan for succession in several important positions over the next 5-10 years, including both the artistic and managing leaders, it's important to agree upon words and ideas that clearly communicate our common understanding of what APT is and what it strives to be.

This document lays out APT's essence: who we are, what we do and how we do it. In a series of conversations artists, staff, board and audience members, the key elements described below came up repeatedly as being essential to our identity. It's not a complete or exhaustive list, but it attempts to capture the most vital parts of APT. We often refer to them as “non-negotiables.” If any were eliminated, APT would risk sacrificing its quintessence.

We recognize that leadership transition will inevitably lead to change, and this is not an attempt to keep APT frozen in time. As has been the case throughout the history of this theater, each new generation of leadership will bring a fresh perspective and navigate new challenges. But by identifying the elements of APT that we hold most dear, we can better attract and develop candidates that are activated and inspired by those elements. We believe this document will be fundamental for potential candidates and other stakeholders to better understand not just APT as an organization but also the type of leader who would be successful here in coming years.

We've grouped the tenets into three sections: how we work, the art we produce on stage, and the audience experience. We begin with a set of guiding principles – ideas that resonate across the three sections.

Guiding Principles

- We start with and return to our mission and our values
- We believe we are at our best when we develop and maintain genuine relationships with the artists, staff and audience that together make up the APT community.
- We believe that how we do our work is as important as the work we do.

- We strive to be rigorous, curious, honest and responsible.
- We create an environment of trust which enables our community to thrive.
- We take great care with our resources, including time, finances, and our unique home in the woods.
- We are in service to our artists, staff and audience rather than a single vision or agenda.

How We Work

How we work at APT is foundational to our essence. The art and the audience experience we create directly stems from the culture we nurture for the artists and staff who work at APT. These key elements encapsulate our aspirations:

- We work to create authentic relationships with and among artists and staff to build trust and, in turn, form community.
- We believe every artist and staff member is necessary and valuable to the organization, and we work to continually cultivate that conviction.
- We value open and honest communication, and we depend on its practice.
- We are committed to rigor, excellence, and love for making theater in the woods.
- APT leaders understand their job is to be in service to the needs of the community ahead of their own agenda.

We strive for relationships that are authentic rather than transactional. **Authentic relationships** require genuine care and responsible honesty, and they must be grounded in respect, kindness and clarity. When this is the case, artists and staff reach a level of trust with each other and with APT. From that trust comes **community**, with a shared sense of belonging and purpose, collaborating on a common goal – to fulfill APT’s mission.

In this culture of collaboration, **every single person who works at APT is necessary and valuable**. Furthermore, it’s important that every single person *understands their role and believes in its value*.

To accomplish this, we depend on **responsible communication within the APT community**. We ask each person to listen for understanding, to be vulnerable and share their concerns, to not harbor frustration, to delve into uncomfortable conversations with bravery and respect, and to be clear and honest. We understand this type of communication can be daunting, *but it is a practice – a skill that is honed and becomes more facile with time and experience*. This requires us to take the time and effort to make sure everyone is heard; we recognize this is often not the easiest or quickest way to work, but the effort is worth it, leading to deeper trust and stronger relationships.

Rigor and excellence are imperative, individually and collectively, in our work. We are committed to continuous improvement, we're curious about how we can do better, and we act on that curiosity to improve. We believe deeply in APT's mission and aesthetic, and we **love creating theater in these woods**. The rural Wisconsin countryside allows for optimal focus where artists have literal and metaphorical space to re-charge and concentrate on their craft. Our location and the lack of distraction also lends itself to creating a strong sense of community among artists and staff.

Finally, it's important that **our leaders must be in service to the artists and staff that they lead**. They should model each of the elements discussed above – authentic relationships, effective communication, rigor, excellence, and love of the work. Beyond that, they need to be accountable, available, transparent, and open to feedback and change. They also must demonstrate care and respect in tangible ways: competitive wages, an appropriate work schedule, safe working conditions, and by having salaries that are equitable with the rest of the staff.

Creating the Art on Stage

We believe that sharing stories, especially through poetic text, illuminates the ever-expanding experience of what it is to be human. APT's mission is to perform these timeless, challenging poetic plays, with Shakespeare at the center, to as broad an audience as possible. At APT, there are several tenets that are essential in maximizing the impact of this work on stage for the audience:

- The creative process must be infused with intentionality, rigor and craft.
- Clarity and quality of storytelling are paramount. Poetic language, which lifts and enriches stories, is integral in our quest to fully immerse the audience in the story.
- The job of successful storytelling lies first and foremost with the actors, who must always be in service to the language of the play.
- The Core Company actors anchor the work on stage and are mentors within the acting company.
- We are committed to having a rich diversity of artists, dramaturgy and perspectives.

First, the work on stage must be infused with **intentionality, rigor and craft**. We hold ourselves to a high standard of accomplishment and thrive on challenging ourselves to do better. We invest in each production element and engage designers and artisans who have the skill and artistry necessary to serve the story.

Words matter in the plays we produce. **Poetic texts** have the power to transform audiences – they heighten emotions, challenge beliefs and hold a mirror up to our common

experience. It requires artists who not only prioritize language but who are committed to continually honing their craft.

To support this work, APT invests heavily in our Voice & Text program. Because voice production and storytelling are top priorities, we have a full-time Voice & Text coach for every Hill production and most Touchstone productions. Their work is essential to our ability to perform poetic texts well, so the audience has a deep and lasting connection to the work. This is the goal.

All collaborators in our theater-making process are vital, yet we recognize the actors, in service to the language, are **the primary vessels of the story being told**. They are live on stage, sharing the story and creating connection with the audience. So, it is a high priority to cultivate relationships with actors who have skills, bravery, empathy, rigor, curiosity and an exceptional work ethic. We strive to make APT a nurturing place for them to develop and evolve their relationship with language and storytelling.

The Core Company actors are the foundation of APT's acting company and are fundamental to the organization. They are leaders with significant experience and excellence in their craft. They model continuous growth and learning – traits that are at the heart of APT's culture. The expertise they have honed over years is beneficial to others, and they are committed to paying it forward and fostering growth in other artists. Also, because of their experience and talent, they are an asset in attracting other artists to APT.

Diversity makes our work stronger. We prioritize creating authentic working relationships with artists who have varied lived experiences. We seek out and produce plays that expand our audience's worldview and introduce multiple perspectives. Great stories well told from a variety of voices are at the heart of our mission to more fully understand who we are as human beings.

Essential Elements of the Audience Experience

We strive for our audience to have an extraordinary experience with each visit. The performance is the central event, but there are more layers that enrich the APT experience.

- Our location in nature and off the beaten path
- The variety of the rotating repertory schedule
- Activities and events that are presented alongside the plays
- An authentic relationship with staff, artists, and the organization itself

APT is **off the beaten path** in the beautiful Driftless region of rural Wisconsin. Our location requires visitors to travel a distance, which takes planning, effort, and anticipation. This intentionality ideally prepares them for the APT experience. Being here clears their minds

and allows them to be more open, more receptive to ideas and beauty. Seeing a play at APT in nature, away from their usual haunts, allows them time and space to contemplate the world and their place in it. In our world of content delivered on screens, there is a craving for more opportunities like that which APT provides – live, in the real world, surrounded by nature and others who are deeply immersed in the work and experience. We are proud to share our 110-acre home with our audience and are committed to caring for and preserving its beauty.

APT's **rotating repertory schedule** is also essential to the experience. With eight plays running in two different theaters, patrons can see wildly different stories over the space of a day or a weekend. Often, the different plays they see inform each other, adding to the depth of the patrons' experience. It's vibrant, exciting, and rare in the theater field. The hundreds of people who visit APT on any given day have unique but overlapping experiences, creating a sense of camaraderie and shared purpose.

Likewise, **the events and activities that accompany the plays** – spending time with friends, having a picnic together, walking, hiking, browsing the gift shop, attending a talk or a tour – all allow patrons to further create a unique APT visit. We also look to the businesses and residents of Spring Green and the River Valley area to add rich possibilities to an APT visit. They are valuable partners in engaging our audience.

Finally, similar to our aspirations with staff and artists, we pride ourselves on having **an authentic relationship** with our audience that is beyond transactional. Though we can't get to know each of our thousands of visitors personally, we care deeply about what they think. We focus on their needs, and we always work to do our best for them. Our goal is for them to feel ownership of APT – to feel that APT is for them and about them.

Conclusion

APT is unique. A destination, both for artists and audience, that feels beyond the ordinary. The pieces that make it special are intricately woven together – the focus on language, our home in the woods, community, trust, skill, relationship. Together, it creates an environment of belonging where people want to return.

We are proud to stand on the shoulders of the audacious vision of the founders, confident of the principles that guide us now, and ready to face the coming transitions with a strong sense of what we must hold onto so we can continue to grow and evolve.