

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Twist of Fate Leads to Play of Hope

Erik Patterson · Thursday, August 7th, 2014

On January 31, 2007, my best friend's head exploded. It was a ruptured brain aneurysm. I was at my parents' house when I got the news. It was such a shock that I couldn't speak. I wrote the words down: "Uma in ICU. Brain aneurysm. They think she might die." I handed the note to my stepdad and we both burst into tears. Within hours, my mom and I were on our way to New York, along with several of Uma's closest friends, to join her fiancé, John, in the waiting room, where we would hope and pray and visualize Uma getting better. She and John, who live in Los Angeles, had just arrived in Manhattan to celebrate their engagement. In the middle of the night, Uma awoke with a horrific headache, and the nightmare began. She was 27.

The opening of my play, "I Wanna Hold Your Hand," at [Theatre of Note](#) in Los Angeles on August 1st brought us all together again. Uma and John were in the audience, along with several friends and family members who had gathered in that waiting room when Uma was in her coma. During the rehearsal process, Uma met with some of the actors to help them better understand her ordeal with her aneurysm and subsequent stroke, and her journey of recovery. When I think back to those dark days in 2007 when Uma was in her coma, and then I look at her now as she gives advice to actors about how to portray a character with aphasia, I'm in awe of how far she's come. It really does feel like a miracle. She continues to inspire me.



Uma (l) in rehab. The playwright's experience of Uma's medical emergency led to a play of hope.

The play was also inspired by people we encountered in the neuro-intensive care waiting room. For a week, we waited alongside a brother and a sister whose mom was also recovering from a ruptured brain aneurysm. If you've ever spent time in an ICU waiting room, you know what a gnarly place it can be. Even when it's good, it's bad. Yet, it can also be surprisingly life-affirming to share this suffocating space with total strangers. You bond instantly and end up having these INTENSE moments because these strangers seem to be the only people in the world who understand how scary it is here. In this waiting room. This hoping room. This fearing-the-worst-but-praying-and-visualizing-your-loved-ones-getting-better room. This place where people are randomly brought together by a horrible twist of fate.

You're in this together, so you help each other out. You give each other advice. You remind these strangers what questions they should ask the doctor when he comes back. You buy each other sandwiches from the deli around the corner. You hug them when they're crying. You have unexpected—but deeply needed—moments of levity. You do all of these things because you're just so grateful to have other people going through this fear/hope thing with you.

Uma woke up from her coma, and we moved on, out of that waiting room, and I have no idea what happened to my waiting room friends, or their mom. The last time I saw them, their mom had also woken up and was on the road to recovery. That's all I know. I don't know why we didn't exchange contact info. I guess we were only supposed to help each other through that moment and then GET ON WITH the outside-the-waiting-room part. The surviving-and-building-a-new-life part.

One afternoon while we were still sitting in that waiting room, one of them said to me: "You're going to write a play about this some day." I couldn't picture ever getting to the place where I could do that, but I liked thinking about the possibility. I liked the idea of being on the other side of this time in the waiting room, when my friend would be out of the hospital and healthy and better. The thought of that became something to hold onto. It helped get me through the scary days.

And she was right. I did write a play inspired by that experience in the waiting room. It's a fictional version of events, but those strangers and friends I spent so much time with in that waiting room will recognize little moments we shared together. After opening night, both Uma and John told me it had been painful to watch – but painful in a good way, because it reminded them of how far they've come. Uma said she's never seen her struggle with aphasia reflected in a piece of entertainment before. As hard as it was for her to watch, she was grateful that people would leave the play with a better understanding of what she's been through.

The play ends where Uma and John's story was just beginning. The recovery process was unbelievably difficult for both of them and they continue to face many challenges, but they got married as soon as Uma was well enough and they have faced it all together. I will always be in awe of Uma's courage and John's devotion to her. And the actors in my play feel the same, after immersing themselves in the world of pain Uma and John had to fight their way through.

Something beautiful happens through the interplay of words, actors and audiences during each performance of my play at Theatre of Note. For a brief time, what happened to Uma happens to all of us. I feel it, and the actors and a number of audience members have told me they feel it, too. When the lights go down, Uma's journey becomes a collective experience that reminds us we are all mere mortals who face the possibility that at any moment, everything can change – for better or worse. Two things have helped us get through the hard times: maintaining a sense of gallows humor and never letting go of hope. As one of the characters says: "The doctors are always warning you not to have false hope. But you've gotta have hope." That's what I want to leave the audience with. Because I've seen what hope can do.

The more I fictionalized this story, the deeper and more real it became. And now, when I sit in the dark at Theatre of NOTE and watch these wonderful actors bring my play to life, I get lost in the story. I forget what's real and what's made up: it all feels real to me. Because ultimately this play has taught me something very important about my craft: life doesn't imitate art. It is art.

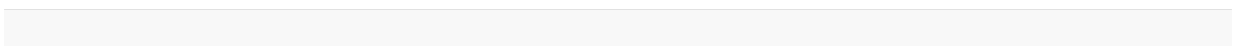
I WANNA HOLD YOUR HAND

WHEN: 8pm Thursdays, Fridays & Saturdays; 7pm Sundays, through August 30, 2014

WHERE: Theatre of Note, 1517 N. Cahuenga Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90028

TICKETS: \$25 @ 323-856-8611 or www.theatreofnote.com

Top image: A scene from "I Wanna Hold Your Hand" at Theatre of NOTE



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