



Illinois Humanities | February 2021

GRANTEE SPOTLIGHT

Three Questions: Q&A with Mikael Burke, associate artistic director, About Face Theatre



The Illinois Humanities Spotlight

Illinois Humanities highlights the work of our Community Grants program partners monthly through our “Grantee Spotlight.” It shines the light on our grantee partner’s work, offering details about the organization and the funded project, as well as a Q&A with a team member at the organization. More: ILHumanities.org/Spotlight

Project

“Kickback”

Location

Chicago, IL

Organization

Founded in 1995 with the belief that LGBTQ+ lives could provide the lens through which universal human experiences were explored, About Face Theatre (AFT) exists to create exceptional, innovative, and adventurous theatre and educational programming that advances the national dialogue on sexual and gender identity, and challenges and entertains audiences in Chicago and beyond.

Project Funded by Illinois Humanities

“KICKBACK” is a celebration of queer Black lives in the form of new, commissioned short plays and performances ranging from dance to drag to music and beyond. The project is being curated to reflect the multiplicity of experiences within a community that is publicly fighting for equality and survival. In partnership with the Rebuild Foundation, AFT will produce this event either at the Stony Island Arts Bank in South Shore or on a digital platform, depending on where things stand from a public health perspective. Other partners include the Frankie Knuckles Foundation, Chicago Women’s AIDS Project, and the Black Gay Men’s Caucus.

Q1

How do you see the arts/culture/humanities as being essential?

Mikael Burke: I have two answers, one perhaps more interesting than the other. In general, through the arts we expose the social contract, the parts of our society that are ugly and painful and need to be changed. The arts make those things palatable; we present them in a way that is easier to look at. Not necessarily to soften those experiences but simply to force us to encounter them with more of our full self. We often enter the political space in a very guarded way, and the arts open us up in a different way, to more fully open ourselves to these conversations in different ways. Also, with theater in particular — and probably other art forms as well, the theater is the place where we practice empathy; where we intentionally put ourselves into someone else’s shoes for a while and experience the world through another set of eyes. In doing so we practice empathy. I’m an idealist about this art form.



Q2

What is the most important thing people should know about your work?

MB: About Face Theatre is a company that produces performance works, educational events and experiences that at their heart are meant to create dialogue about gender and sexuality. There are two companies in town that mission-wise are dedicated to queer and LGBTQ+ stories. We try to be really particular about not just telling queer stories, but about furthering a conversation. About adding a new question to the mix, or adding a side to the story that we haven't heard before. The representation is one thing, of course, but how does it advance the conversation, or inspire a new conversation. And personally, I am a black queer artist, and as a director I intentionally seek out stories that are about communities that have been marginalized and finding stories where those individuals can be made central and integral to the story, not just peripheral or in relation to straight white people. And for me it is about recognizing — what people knew this summer and throughout the fall — that there is an all-pervasive systemic issue in how black, indigenous people of color are kept under foot. I'd like to think that the next work that I do is to expose the systems we try to navigate, and to pull the curtain back on the wizard, so people see that there is more going on there than is visible on the surface, and that needs to be addressed.

Q3

Who makes your work possible?

MB: That is a great question. I would say I know institutionally we are fortunate to be mostly funded by donor support and foundation support, rather than ticket sales, which is really cool. The people who make the work possible are the supporters — institutional and individual. We were very fortunate that unlike many other companies, when the pandemic hit, they had to shut down programming, and a lot of things had to change. Because we are not reliant on ticket sales, we were able to keep moving full steam ahead, for which we're grateful. And I think that's the realistic concrete answer.

Q4

Anything else you'd like to add?

MB: I think maybe just acknowledging that in this time when we are just finishing this election and the pandemic raging, it can be difficult for people to have a sense of why the arts are important in all this. I think at the end of the day what the arts do so well is to bring us together in shared experience; and I think that that in and of itself is worth saving, and investing in our opportunities or shared experiences, which are so few and far between. There are many things we need to change and improve upon in this country, and eventually we want to continue to find ways to come together when we can.

For more

[AboutFaceTheatre.com](https://www.aboutfacetheatre.com) | [@AboutFaceTheatre](https://www.facebook.com/AboutFaceTheatre) | [@AboutFaceTheatre](https://www.instagram.com/AboutFaceTheatre) | [@AboutFaceTalk](https://www.twitter.com/AboutFaceTalk)

About Illinois Humanities

Illinois Humanities, the Illinois affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities, is a statewide nonprofit organization that activates the humanities through free public programs, grants, and educational opportunities that foster reflection, spark conversation, build community and strengthen civic engagement. We provide free, high-quality humanities experiences throughout Illinois, particularly for communities of color, individuals living on low incomes, counties and towns in rural areas, small arts and cultural organizations, and communities highly impacted by mass incarceration. Founded in 1974, Illinois Humanities is supported by state, federal, and private funds.

