



The powers that have for centuries been engaged in enslaving the masses have made a thorough study of their psychology. They know that the people at large are like children whose despair, sorrow, and tears can be turned into joy with a little toy. And the more gorgeously the toy is dressed, the louder the colors, the more it will appeal to the million-headed child.

-- Emma Goldman, *Patriotism: A Menace to Liberty*

The Art of Anarchy

Chris Davis

Playwrights' Forum debuts a new script about the life of Emma Goldman

Today, when we think of anarchists, chances are only two images spring to mind. We either see a vandal with liberty spikes brandishing a can of spray paint or a ragged, wildly bearded, possibly bomb-toting, turn-of-the-century immigrant loudly declaiming the evils of capitalism. Neither image -- both of which are products of some nascent nationalism in the supposedly liberal-leaning media -- comes close to telling the true story of anarchy in America.

Though couched in violence it was essentially a pacifist movement and at its core was a supreme faith that humans are all basically capable of being good to one another. Like the communists, they held that man's evils were directly tied to existing laws and class structures. Ur-anarchist Emma Goldman and her peers fought against the forces that allow one man to starve while another feasts. In doing so she proved without a doubt that true liberty is little more than the greatest American myth. Her assertions that crime and suffering stem from inequality and that capitalism is nothing more than an insidious brand of slavery forcing the masses to labor for peanuts so that a lucky handful can grow fat made her the archenemy of business. Her successful struggle to institute the eight-hour workday during a time when sweatshops were commonplace only cemented this mutual antipathy. Her brilliant speeches against conscription during WWI likewise made her an enemy of the state. Though the First Amendment should protect the right of dissent, Goldman's fate seemed inevitable. Her arguments made too much common sense, and they eventually landed her in jail.

Playwright Michael Bettencourt's *Dancing at the Revolution*, an overtly theatrical retelling of the Goldman story, is at its best when it questions our most sacred beliefs. In a recent interview the playwright shared his views on Goldman, art, and anarchy.

Flyer: *It's hard to read Emma Goldman without buying into the notion that people are fundamentally good. Do you believe this?*

Michael Bettencourt: I don't know if people are fundamentally good or bad. Humans are infinitely plastic. They can become whatever they want. They are both products of their environment and shapers of their environment. If you give people decent circumstances and an investment in creating those circumstances, by and large they'll turn out all right.

Why is it important to reawaken interest in Emma Goldman?

She was a tree-shaker. She wanted to rouse people to believe in the power of their own ability to think for themselves. Her greatest contribution to American politics was her defense of the freedom of speech. Her suffering on behalf of people's right to think what they wish and say what they want is her greatest legacy. She showed it's the people who rock the boat who need freedom of speech most of all.

Dancing at the Revolution is obviously a work of political theater. What effect do you hope the play will have on audiences?

I hope it has the same effect on the audience that Emma Goldman had on me when I first read her. Regardless of what her ideas are -- ideas that are very workable if people wanted to do it -- she had a sense of purpose and a strength of character that I found very attractive. All the philosophical, intellectual, and ideological stuff aside, I want people to be drawn to her for that. I want them to make an emotional connection with the character hoping that there will likewise be a connection with her ideas.

Even a theater of ideas has to be based in action. Too much philosophy sends the audience off to dreamland.

The thing about stage work is that it's three dimensions with the fourth dimension of time. You can't pause it, get something to drink, and come back, so for an audience there has to be a hook.

You don't seem to have much use for realism.

To me realism is a fiction. It doesn't exist. That whole notion that started in the 1890s about taking a slice of life and presenting it as real as possible is impossible. There is no way to cram all the details onto the stage. It's just another kind of artifice. Why not take the next step and say that it's all artifice and within the four walls of the theater anything can happen and it can happen any way we want? We aren't bound to ideas of psychology and appropriate dialogue or what is appropriate dialogue. Anything can happen as long as it is justified by the terms of the play.

Playwrights' Forum's production of Dancing at the Revolution opens at TheatreWorks on August 16th and runs through September 1st.

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