

# **COLLECTED ESSAYS**

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**THEATRE • LIFE**

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**Block & Tackle Productions Press**



**Co-Founders Elfin Frederick Vogel and Michael Bettencourt**

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# ***Writing Plays***





## Death to the 10-Minute Play!

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Death to the ten-minute play and all its variations! All right, I agree, a *bit* severe - but something about the short-play format does not sit right.

A short play has no room for dawdling; it must begin, middle, and end itself with the least ambiguity possible. To do this, it must trade in easily understood symbols and emotional entanglements, and deal in a snapshot sort of way with the struggles of human life.



Death death death death!

In the end, this makes the short play both a conservative art form and the perfect format for a techno-rapid consumer culture bludgeoned into the short attention span and continual appetite necessary for a satisfactory rate of corporate profit.

But this “smallification” is only part of my discomfort. To me, the short play, no matter how skillful, equals finger exercises for the pianist. It doesn’t stretch the narrative muscles, doesn’t meet the challenge of maintaining an audience’s interest over the long haul (and deeply enough to keep the audience from thinking about its ever-present need to go to the bathroom). It encourages glibness rather than discourse, conventional pay-offs over pricking ambiguities.

In other words, an over-emphasis on, and an over-promotion of, the short form leads inevitably to short thinking, short sight, short cut, and shortcoming.

Should they be executed? Of course not. Let a thousand short-play festivals bloom.

But let’s not mistake them for genuine theatre. Let us put our energies into hitting the long ball, that is, write the pieces that will still speak (when the body can no longer speak) to audiences gathered in future dark rooms who will still be struggling together to understand, who will still be hungering for light and life and something deeper than the momentary kick and the casual aside.

Like the Babe, that’s where I’m pointing.

(October 2001)

## Guidelines for Writing Plays

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Over the years I've made seven guidelines for my writing that have steered me well.

One: Each play tries to answer the Passover question "What makes this night different from all other nights?" Everything in the script should solve this question, when the "normal" suddenly isn't.

Two: Give actors interesting stuff to do. Provoke them in ways that trigger discovery and surprise. If actors are interested in what they're doing, the audience will be interested.

Three: Apply "What if..." to everything in a script in order to generate new possibilities for the dramatic narrative. Never settle for "based on a true story," which is boring and dishonest. "What if..." is a solvent and provocateur - use it liberally.

Four: Comedy isn't funny lines. It rises out of the human situation on the stage. Detailed observation mixed with the right pinch of irony and skepticism will always evoke humor. Which leads to....

Five: Take it seriously. I saw a play where the playwright mistreated his Christian characters because he wanted the audience to laugh with him about their "benighted" condition. But this breaks faith with the heart of dramatic writing: to accept that nothing human is alien.

Six: Never use "I remember" or monologues or phone calls: Weak tactics to get across exposition - dramatically inert, a form of cheating, a species of laziness.

And seven: Do the desk time. Every day, I keep my writing appointment, even if only it produces crap I'll delete later. Without the desk time, nothing valuable ever gets produced.

That's about it.

(August 2011)



From seven come the many that make the one - if my math serves me correctly.

## Script (D)reading

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There sit the scripts. The entrants to festivals for three different theatres.

I honor what they've done - they've attempted, they've chanced, pulsed by art to bring something into the world that had not had existed before. How can that not have honor?

But my God! What gets loosed on these pages! And before long I'm ranting about the emptyheadedness and blandness and thinness, and the - and the - and the -



Each pile of scripts resembles a rampike,  
the remains of a standing  
dead tree, a stump.

Sigh. Perhaps not all playwrights who call themselves playwrights should call themselves playwrights.

Elitist? I don't know. But based on what's come over the transom, I keep wondering. Their material exudes the pedestrian, mired in all the treacly and adrenaline subject matter that provides the compost for major-market television and screenwriting - theatre as just a suburb of reality, and that "reality" not really reality but a stew of advertising priorities, corporate profits, and narrowed human psychologies.

Perhaps festivals like the ones I read for are at fault, privileging text over what makes theatre really "theatre" ("no more than three characters, minimal sets, no technical challenges, no props - now talk"). I can appreciate why Beckett wrote a play that had only an exhalation in it, just to shut up the chattering onstage that passes for our passing lives.

And, as they say in the movie trade, if "a good movie is one that gets made," perhaps a good play is one that gets produced, regardless of the contents of its characters.

All right. I have to write up my evaluations. Deep breaths, clear the mental decks, take each on its own (de)merits and be honest without rancor. One more deep breath. Okay, one more. Then exhale.

(February 2005)

## The Thrall of the Authentic: Version 1

When I saw *columbinus* at the New York Theatre Workshop in 2006, a “Living Newspaper”-style examination of the shootings at Columbine High School on April 20, 1999, one of the first things the actors do is remind the audience that what they are about to see is based on transcripts, interviews, etcetera, etcetera. In other words, it’s based on a true story.



"Based on a true story" is always falsified by the demands of the narrative, which require trimming, tucking, eliding, loosening.

And I think: So what? I am being told that because the story is authentic (assuming we know what that word means), “You cannot *disbelieve* it.” That is, you don’t have a choice about how you respond to the story because it is true, it happened, and your imagination will not be allowed to gainsay or re-draft its reality by saying “but what if....”

What would I do? First, I’d strip away the Columbine reality completely and simply have two young people who want to murder their mates, existing in some undefined time and place.

Then I would examine the moral lesson that I wouldn’t want people to put into practice: it felt good to do what they did because of the power they had. I would defend doing this by quoting the playwright Terence: “I am a man; nothing human is alien to me.”

And I would also try to tell this story in a way would at least make some in the audience whisper to themselves “I, too, have wished I could feel that same power,” to tell this story so that we could hear the contra-dictions in our mind’s ears about two simultaneous and overlapping true stories: they are monsters and they are human, they disgust me and they are like me.

No closure, no summation, no release - just a ponder on the messiness of our moral lives.

Is this what Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris thought about/felt/mused upon? I don’t know, and I don’t care. If the facts get in the way of the story, then it’s time to jettison the facts because there are more useful and interesting truths than the facts.

(June 2006)

## **The Thrall of the Authentic: Version 2**

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Whenever a theatre production states the words “Based on a true story,” my first thought is, “Stop cheating.” The play will be good if it’s a good play, not because it’s based on a story billed as “true.” Stop telling your audience what to believe before they sit themselves down in your theatre, and stop misleading them with the notion that a “true” story is equal to a dramatic narrative.

My second thought is, “Maybe it would be better if you did a documentary or wrote an investigative report.” Theatre is not the medium for the documentary/journalistic impulse.

I didn’t always think like this as a playwright. I began writing plays from this same tutorial impulse. I agreed with Emma Goldman that drama was a powerful vehicle for bringing ideas to audiences: the playwright as instructor, the audience in need of my instruction.

I no longer tap into this arrogant approach because I’ve come to see that theatre’s “true story” is actually quite small and specific: to examine the human heart under the pressure of knowing that death lurks just around the corner.

And this examination needs just one tool: protagonists must fall apart to find out what glues their parts together, and the audience must experience this change as visceral - in their viscera - without being tutored by the playwright about the change’s meaning, purpose, direction, or usefulness.

Playwrights create a staged reality, resembling “real” reality but not its cognate, not a “based on.” And if they’re smart and honest, they’ll provide no closure, no summation, no release - just a ponder on the messiness of our moral lives.

If facts get in the way of the story, good playwrights jettison the facts in favor of a journey through the inconvenient lifescape called the human being. They know that there are more useful and interesting truths than a “true story.”

(June 2006)

## Exposing Exposition

Exposition: the curse of the playwright - how to job in information an audience needs to understand a play without it sounding like you're, well, spooning them the information.

When exposition is done badly, you can hear the wind-up immediately: "Do you remember when we...?" or (as an action onstage) "Let me read this letter out loud that I'm writing."

But I often wonder if an audience needs this kind of background information at all to participate in the play. The action of a good play is always forward, and if there is a good explosive dramatic nugget at the core of the piece, there is no real need to visit the past or review a list of "why's." The issue at hand, in the present tense, should be sufficient to hold our interest.

This doesn't mean that the audience doesn't need some foreground information to situate them in time and place, and for me, the pleasant challenge in this is to make the information-giving part of the dramatic flow.

As much as I can, I banish phrases like "Do you remember?" and "Well, in 1943, in Beirut..." in order to force myself to become inventive about how the story's information slips over the stage's apron and into the audience.

In order not to bore or distract an audience, all exposition needs to be folded in to dramatic action - one should get the information without ever feeling that it has been delivered or ladled-out. (Like Sam Goldwyn was supposed to have said, "If you want to send a message, use Western Union.")

And just enough is the right amount - audiences are always less interested in the information than they are in how the information warps the dramatic space-time continuum around the characters and their struggles to come to grips with something about life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

(May 2013)



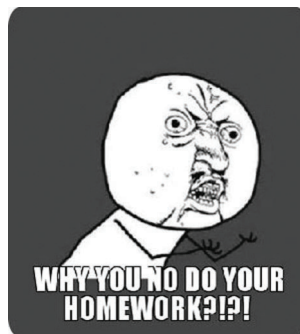


## Doing The Homework

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Many playwrights do not do their “homework” to anchor the script in the reality they are trying to present, and this sloppiness usually comes in three flavors.

First, an inattention to process. In a play I saw with a police officer and a psychologist questioning a child about a crime, the writer clearly knew nothing about forensic interviewing, and so nothing the writer said was honest. She substituted queasiness for truth.



Do the homework, and the work will most certainly bring the audience to home.

Second, an inattention to physics. A play in our workshop involved a man dying in a bathtub after being gut-shot by a woman handcuffed to a sink. Almost all the questions were about the bathroom’s layout, the length of the chain on the handcuffs, where he put the gun down, and so on. The playwright said that she hadn’t thought about this but that it didn’t matter - she just wanted our emotional response. Our response was frustration with her carelessness.

A third inattention is when a playwright does not think like a director and an audience member. So many of my fellow playwrights think that the *writing* comes first, but a playwright, like a choreographer, is first a sculptor of space and time. If a playwright wants to just write dialogue, write a radio play. But to create “theatre” is to think in 3-D all the time because every play is a solar system of interacting gravities.

Not doing the homework makes the audience pay attention to irrelevancies. At the very least, don’t make them sit there with a burr in their brains as the actors work away.

But even more importantly, detail is a syntax: it builds texture and “thing-ness” in the play. Syntax can always be broken to bring the audience to new imaginings. But if it is broken through lack of skill or laziness, then all we have are shards that bruise. Do the homework, and the work will most certainly bring the audience to home.

(February 2001)

## The Nature of Human Nature

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I once reviewed a play about an Iraqi war veteran afflicted with PTSD, loosely based on Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck*. What irritated me most about this "so well-meant" play was the playwright's model of human nature, confined to psychology (where actions come from DSM-states of being) and essence (an ahistorical "that's just the way people are").



Human nature is not a "nature" but a story we tell ourselves about what we think we are and aren't.

I conceive of people, and thus my characters, as "materialized," creatures defined by the material conditions of their lives: everything historically dependent, driven by economics (that is, how people get their living), subject to chance and irony, nothing to do with any fiction of some truth that goes unchanged through time. This materiality is as much a character in the play as the character that comes out of it, and I have to bring it in to shape the character/world of the play.

This also means that because material conditions can change on a dime, my characters are apt to change on a dime as well, not boxed in by any essential natures or psychologized profiles, and they change because they fight to manage how they live within (or without) the changed conditions of their lives.

I wish my fellow playwrights would expand their thinking about what grounds the human nature structuring their characters and their narrative demands. Too often they curb their characters and stories, at least to me, within an under-powered concept of what drives people and the lives they live.

To write a play about an Iraqi war veteran with PTSD simply to make him a victim without offering some deeper investigation of the who, what, where, when, why, and how is to miss an opportunity to make interesting theatre caused by employing a mediocre template of what makes human beings "human."

(January 2011)

## Imagination's Passport to Identity

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Thumbing through calls for plays reveals what I call "script ghettos": women, Latino, of color, and so on. Always "yes" to more and more voices, but ghettoizing playwrights only indicates a distrust, rather than an enlargement, of the power of imagination.

I have always thought of imagination as a kind of passport or "travel agency," where people can pretend to be what they are not and go to places where they aren't and bring all this back to an audience who can, in their turn, do the same thing.



Imagination is about the "not-I," and what a blessing it is to escape the "I."

But with the privatizing of the psychological and the re-segregating of "multiculturalism," imagination is no longer considered a communal or public power. Now it seems only women can be trusted to write about women, and so on, discounting attempts to cross boundaries because someone from the "outside" cannot be authentic and, therefore, cannot get it "right."

In plays I've written that, by this light, I shouldn't have written - about breast cancer or miscegenation - I felt energized because the subjects were so *unlike* me, which forced me beyond my blind-spots and culture gender as I took in suffering I had not suffered, indignities I had not had to endure. What a joy not to be confined to the poverty of my own experiences.

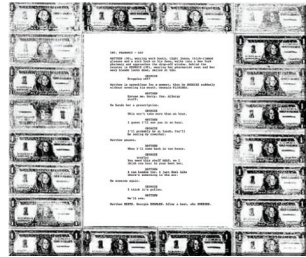
Imagination should go wherever it wants to go and report on whatever it learns, and not be harnessed to making an art out of the limitations of "insider" status. Every artist feeling free to create anything, like or unlike, enlarges the collective human understanding. Otherwise, all we'll get are communiques from competing camps or the approved narrow templates of the "human condition" - all of it stale, flat, and unprofitable, to quote one imaginative playwright.

So, let's get our imagination passports stamped, and with every creative effort we undertake, let's "light out for the Territory," as Huck Finn said, and see what we can see.

(November 2000)

## Market

In 2004, on a whim, I submitted my screenplay, *Ain't Ethiopia*, about an African-American man fighting in the Spanish Civil War, to the IFP/New York Market & Conference (a week-long independent film industry convocation). They accepted it as one of 200 projects out of 1600 entries from around the world, and visions of contracts danced in my head.



The “Market” was aptly named: a bazaar of pitch and schmooze and glad-hand in a treacherous and vaporish world. And I loved every minute of it.

As a playwright, I’m used to muted ambition and talk about collaboration, “vision,” noble self-abnegation, art vs. commerce. Not so at the Market, where money ruled: making more, losing little (or none). It *is* the “movie industry,” and no one worries if it is art or commerce. If it isn’t the former, it can still make money and put hundreds of people to work.

Why was I so pleased to be with the money-changers?

In part because they were so honest; in part because there are actual chances to make a living (slim, yes, but gargantuan compared to a writer’s non-income in theatre). And in part for the entrepreneurial spirit everywhere. Here were people unafraid to push hard for what they believed in - perhaps not a noble “believed in” but still one that got them up in the morning.

I propose that the “theatre world” should become this brazen, and so should I. Let’s face it - even in our venerable theatrical world it is not art vs. commerce but art as a commerce. Verdi believed in the box-office as did Shakespeare, who made his money and bought his real estate.

I actually got a couple of production companies to read this screenplay and a second one I have on deck. In the meantime, submissions go out and I wait for theatres to say yea or nay to a reading, a workshop, a production (be praised!) - all for the greater glory of the artistic self.

(September 2004)

## Mental Real Estate

---

A concept drummed into screenwriters and playwrights is “mental real estate,” the world-map an audience references to judge how “real” something is. Since the writing industry considers this territory pretty change-resistant, creativity lies in producing what has worked before, with enough new twists, turns, and hooks to keep it fresh and commercial.



The links in chains are not  
like other links.

But this real estate is hardly unchanging or unchangeable. In fact, for Americans, it's just a bourgeoisified, capitalism'd, psychologized point of view, flavored by the greed, ego, sentimentality, and melodrama that Americans like to think of as “human nature.” This real estate is just the place from which to start, not the place in which to end up.

Life bursts with such ferocious variety that writers with their eyes on the world will never need to jury-rig a plot-line again. But they first have to evict themselves from their mental real estate into what William James called the “buzzing blooming confusion” of life, a confusion that is both their birthright and their salvation as human beings.

Consider this: We are all subject to the mortalizing force of gravity. The only thing that will keep us carbonated is an art that maps new territories where we can become new people, an art that keeps us idiotically open to and amazed by the universe that is doing away with us.

“Mental real estate” denies what really makes us human: our radical, almost imbecilic, talent for infinite impersonation and replication. If art ever liberates, it does so by re-surveying the real estate to fit our real needs, not the ones brewed up by corporations or governments.

Our real home as existential human beings, our real turf, our , like it or not, lies in a dangerous openness to everything that is not-us, and using our art to patrol the frontiers of that openness come hell or high water, fire or ice.

(June 2003)

## Out of Touch

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I heard a good story from my friend, and while I haven't been able to source it, it has such truth to it that I want to use it any way.

When Muppet-creator Jim Henson died in 1990, his wife Jane was asked to relate a memorable moment about him. She told a story about a family trip to Italy and a visit to the Sistine Chapel. As they all looked at Michelangelo's work, Henson said to his assembled clan, "Only a hack would have had the fingers touch."



Only a hack...

I've just finished reading 85 fifteen-minute plays for a New York festival, and in so many of them - so so many of them - the fingers touch. The playwrights seem uninformed about the fact that what is called the "power of theatre" resides in the space between the fingers - in the space between bodies, in the rests between words, in the arc of a gesture starting *here* and ending *there*, in the not-saying of something, in the not-choosing the obvious path.

Too many of the writers instead elect not only to have the fingers touch but jam into each other, causing the aesthetic injuries that come from too much noise and not enough mystery, too much on-the-nose and not enough suggestion.

All intriguing things in human life come from the tension created by the almost-touching, the not-quite-said, the what-is that really is-not. Year after year, the writers continually make the mistake that what is important is their *words*. The words are just the launch pad for the real drama - the real drama being all the things that words can cause yet are not in the words themselves but only in the throats and sinews of the actors moving through theatre-space.

I wish these wrights would be more *out of touch* - that's how the spark will learn to jump between, and in jumping, shed energy all over the place - even enough to start new worlds.

(January 2011)

## Playing on the Screen

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I recently gave myself a self-lesson on screenwriting by adapting my play *A Question of Color* into a screenplay. The experience convinced me that every playwright, at least once, should re-draft a stage script into a screen script because the economy imposed by screenwriting flushes out the bloat in both language and staging and requires that images speak more loudly than words, since it is always the tyrannous eye, and not the ear, that must be pleased at the flickers.



The engine of stage work is, as Hamlet says, words, words, words. But Robert McKee, in his manual *Story*, points out that screenwriting is the opposite of stage-writing: one starts with the images, and then layers on words *if needed* - language can, in fact, can and must be discarded if it gums up the resonance of the image.

So, in re-drafting *Color* for the screen, I felt liberated by having to think first about what I wanted to *show* and then only later about what I wanted to *tell*. In fact, doing so helped me solve problems in the stage version because I had focused too closely on what the characters were saying and not what they were doing. I produced a script that more closely matched what I had really wanted to accomplish in the stage play.

And then, even more revealing and rewarding, was back-drafting from the screenplay to the stage script. Scene transitions became smoother, the characters more direct and forceful, the story both clearer and deeper.

By borrowing and blending, I found that both my screenplay and stage play became much more *composed* pieces, the elements more integrated and whole. In their own ways, they re-captured the dream-time of art that brings us closer to the home we call ourselves rather than delivering reportage on the interesting but transient thing we call "reality."

(May 2002)

## I Want To Be Shallow

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I give my stage characters very little “backstory” because, for me, when the lights go up I want the audience plunged into the Passover question of why is this night different from all other nights.

That doesn’t mean I don’t give antecedents for what I have my characters do. But “backstory” - a fake biography made up to give past-tense reasons for present-tense actions - boils things down to “psychological realism,” a narrow backstory itself which argues that the way we are is, well, just the way we are because of “human nature.”



Human nature is an ideology,  
not a biology.

Bollocks. “Human nature” is an ideological argument, not a biological one, made to justify keeping things as they are, which for us means the way power is set up under this regime of American capitalism.

More to the point about writing plays, using this notion of human nature as the basis for building stage characters constricts the storytelling to “personality” and “individuality” and “personal responsibility,” which cheapens all the outside forces that connect a real human to history and, in the case of our capitalism, to captivity.

Writers who write so that audiences lose themselves in “individuated character,” otherwise known as “backstory,” are ideological writers, whether they consider themselves one. Knowing this, and taking it to heart, will allow writers to access a different richness than what passes for “richness of character” these days: personages onstage that are intersections in a large web called “the world as it is today,” not worldlets hovering in isolated orbits of “individuality.”

If we write from this different sense of fullness, a kind of “Zen amnesia” where we forget what we know in order to find out what we know - if we become “shallow,” in other words - there’s a chance that our writing can help emancipate people from this brutal failure called capitalism.

And that’s the front story of why my characters don’t have backstories.

(February 2013)



## Slice Of Life

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The idea that theatre should present a “slice of life” is boring. The writing teacher’s canard about “Write what you know”: boring. How much more exciting to write about what I don’t know because it jacks me out of my cultural bunker and onto the more open road.

Slice of 

A change in tongue sparks  
a change in the real.

I think our theatrical writers need to break themselves out of theatre as a life-slice so that they can create scripts that not only “work” (another boring theatrical concept) but vibrate and flex and threaten. In the reading I have done for competitions and festivals - plays of all lengths - I have gotten so tired of the sameness of the situations and ideas the writers choose.

Yet another play about an executive seeking fulfillment beyond the corporate world, yet another play about communication issues or family wreckage - stuff oozed out of other stuff (video, television, movies), stuff based on wrung-out conflicts and resolutions and “arcs,” stuff that misnames cleverness and craftiness as imagination.

The writers don’t build “stage worlds,” don’t have an explosive tic for what theatre can do within the blast range of its four walls. Instead, they mimic a narrow swath of what has been boiled down and re-molded by corporate entertainment entities as “real life.”

Good writing of any kind doesn’t come from writing about what you know but writing about what you ache to know, hunger and thirst to know, writing that comes from who you aren’t - or aren’t yet.

Only in this way can writers get beyond the slice that is their life into life at large, and write things that are precious and trustworthy and full of a full humanity. We need more and more and more - and yet more - of this.

(December 2003)

## The Sweats

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Whether at a full production or a simple reading, I always reach a moment when “the sweats” arise. After a while the condition clears, but it never fails to happen: ten minutes in comes the attack of the failure-demons, their outward sign the wet negative half-moons under my arms and a forehead beaded and fluid.



The sweats is what mortality does to make you feel like a full moist human being.

Where does this dread come from? I think from simply being human because our whole lives testify to a failure in progress: the failure to keep from dying. And I can't deny that wanting to avoid the stress of that unavoidable dissolve drives me to find a retreat where the heart stills and the self does not feel so “at the mercy.”

But then when I do find that hearts-ease, I also feel this paradoxical dis-ease at letting go of the strain born from my mortality, even if such tension rubs my spirit raw. It's as if my body/mind does not want to release what makes it feel caged and jumpy.

This is what I have concluded about this conundrum: Relaxation has no dialectic. But I need dialectic to feel anchored to my life.

So I will take what relaxation gives me - it would be foolish not to - but I will never really be serene because, as bad as the sweats feel, I need them. (After all, I bear the mix of a semi-Catholic belief that we can salvage our imperfect selves and a Puritanical skepticism about redemption.)

Without the sweats, without failure and mortality, it's too easy to mistake contentment and peace as the purpose of a lived life. Failure and its fears give me a rich artistic lode of frailty and fracture. Happiness is not a source of art - the challenge is, as Beckett said, to “fail better,” not delete failure from the forces that in-form and re-form me.

(June 2004)

***Theatre***





## Antoine's Beef/Luther's Hammer

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André Antoine founded onstage realism when in the 1890s he hung actual sides of beef in the set of a butcher's shop and dragged his mother's furniture into a parlor scene. He felt some intimacy with reality had been lost in the French theatre, so he wanted to smash the vapid theatre practices of his day by dressing the stage with the greasy naturalism advocated by Emile Zola.



André Antoine dreams of beef.

Today we have our own version of Antoine's nemesis, a theatre that diddles itself for the purpose of seating butts and has nothing important to say about anything important. The real has been reduced to "self-reflection," the narcissus feedback loop, the "mirror mirror on the wall," the mistaking of the echoes of our own voices for the voices of gods. Unless we see ourselves up there, there is nothing really worth seeing - that is what the "real" has been reduced to.

Antoine's "beef" with the world needs to be our beef as well - no more narcotizing theatre, no more anodynes masquerading as art, a theatre with something to say about the things that need to be said and not this irrelevant pastiche of worn-out formulas, tics, and gimmicks.

We need something equivalent to the Reformation catapulted by Martin Luther, some analog to the 95 theses nailed to the door in 1517 - something that shakes the mind awake and begins to teach it how to smash the mirror, forego its selfishness, carbonate itself with a purpose bigger than comfort or acquisition.

I don't mean to be grim about this - if this re-formation is not done with love, then it just becomes vandalism or another form of empty performance art. But make no mistake: it is time, it is always time, when it comes to loving true theatre, to feel a bit Lutheran, heft the weight of the hammer in one hand and the paper wad of no-longer-can-be-unvoiced outrages in the other, and start pounding away on the cathedral door.

(July 2002)

## Backstage

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I was once fortunate enough to work backstage for *Peter Pan*. I flew people on cables, built sets, painted flats, enmeshed myself in the satisfying craziness that is the theater.

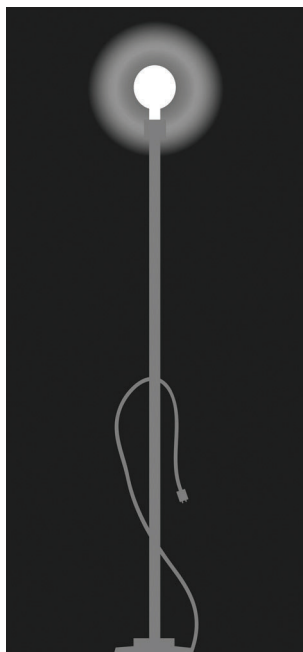
I've done a fair amount of "frontstage" work, where the "magic" consists of making an audience believe that ordinary stuff is more solid than ordinary reality and that for the few hours of the play we get taken out of the common, and the common gets taken out of us, and we get to see ourselves from a refreshed perspective.

But backstage you become privy to all the bones that hold up the flesh of the production, a jury-rigged rube goldberg of pulleys and screws and personal quirks. I remember learning this sharply during the first theater production I was in. The lead performer, who had just finished a riveting scene onstage, come off cursing at the rude boob in the third row and telling a dirty joke to the stage manager. I was shocked to see that he was not the character in real life that he was onstage, shocked to see the framing under the façade.

One might think that all these doses of "reality" would be disillusioning, but they aren't. They deepen the magic by expanding it. For every "mystery" that's exposed as you sit in the wings, other mysteries take their places, mysteries about why, given all the sweat and tedium and dyspepsia that comes with doing a show, people still choose to stretch themselves to receive that bath of light and applause, that moment of lift and completion, at the end of a performance.

Backstage I got to see people get their living together, braiding all their complaints and skills and points of view together to make a common moment of uncommon power. These aren't mysteries of contraption and light cues, but of recognition and purpose - in short, of living itself. The best show is often the one the audience doesn't see.

(January 2013)

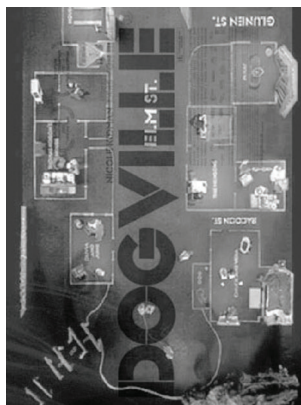


## Dogville

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Lars von Trier's *Dogville* struck me as the *Our Town* that Thornton Wilder wanted to write but didn't, especially given the way von Trier used similar theatrical techniques to tell his story (such as the chalked outlines of Dogville's geography on a soundstage).

Von Trier was trashed for his supposed anti-American slant, but all he did was take the platitudes that Wilder's denizens of Grover's Corners used to justify themselves and stretch their logic forward until conformity and "right-thinking" led to scapegoating and exploitation.



A fresh and bruising way to use theatrical techniques to tell its story.

In America, we need a political theatre that sails upon the broader seas of justice and injustice and the corruption of the soul when that soul can exercise such unearned power with impunity, as has happened over the last several decades. It needs to slip into a more depth-charged language that echoes the big narratives that haunt our cultural and spiritual memories: Prometheus, the Bible, Shakespeare. *Our Town* hints at that; *Dogville* refuses to hint at anything and instead exposes it all.

Theatre can do this kind of politics as no other art form can because on the stage one can have the cosmic and the canned soup sit side by side and find each other in the other, done in real time with real sweat and with consequences that can rasp our complacency like the tips of nails.

I do not talk about doing theatre that makes us "good" but theatre that can "better" our unfinished humanity by drawing upon that placental store of old stories and resonant language that can also help us track and cleanse the human capacity for self-deception and targeted cruelties.

*Dogville* hurt, but it hurt so good, as most growing pains do.

(December 2004)

## Eros On The Escalator

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Drama - theatre - can happen - often happens best - in the unexpected venues.

At one of the subway stations where I catch my train to work, long escalators glide passengers from the turnstiles to the train platform and back.

Occasionally, just to defy habit, rather than scurry down the stairs, I actually ride the escalator down, and it's then that I sometimes receive one of those perks that make life in this city worthwhile: I fall in and out of love for a short, sharp moment.



*In a moment's glance, a whole roundelay of emotion can be sung through.*

In the up-gliding contra-flow of people, often among them is a person who makes my heart and skin squeeze, who has a something - an "it" - that really sweetens the ticking clock. Usually our eyes don't connect, but sometimes they do, and one of two things happens - either the person looks away, or a flirt unfolds, a quick semi-erotic "yes," where our urban faces relax, caught in the bowl of our lips curved in smiles.

The flirt can't last - never lasts - longer than the time it takes to pass each other. But in that transit, the flirt is a stage play in miniature. Hemmed in by our counter-narratives (i.e., up and down escalators), in that connective moment boundaries get erased, pleasure and pain engaged, fantasy revved, dismay enlisted - a full life lived from the initial erotic hook to the mid-level sadness of the passing-by to the "lights to black" of the parting.

Yes, during most morning rush hours, it is that scamper down the escalator, impatient to ooze onto the train when it clatters to a stop and the doors open and close like scissors cutting us into strings of drone silhouettes. But every once in a while eros on the escalator happens, and that bloom does what art does best: dissolve the anonymous, complicate the routine, re-boot mortality, make being human a portable, if momentary, pleasure.

(April 2008)



## The Magic of the Magic of Theatre

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In what does the “magic” of the magic of theatre consist? The Marvelous Maria Beatriz asked this after we had seen, over two days, Lynn Nottage’s *By The Way, Meet Vera Stark* and the Belarus Free Theatre’s production of *Discover Love*, about disappeared citizens.

*Vera Stark* was stylish but so tightly tuned, without a hair misplaced, that the most one could do was just watch the passing show - one was not invited in or even necessary to the event.



Artifice makes reality real - otherwise, it is just raw brutal data.

Then the Belarus Free Theatre at LaMama’s Annex, a large space with some domestic items, three performers, a sound design, and a story of murder by political authorities, told in direct address to the audience, the words translated into supertitles.

And the Marvelous Maria Beatriz and I are in tears at the end. Why?

Directness, simplicity, honesty. How the performers invested the artifice with themselves and didn’t just move around inside it, instead shaping it the way a painter re-forms a canvas with paint. How all this shaped up as an invitation to the audience to complete the transaction, the translation, the transference, the transformation: the only way the production can be completed is not by applause but by the ghost lodged behind the eyes and carried away into the sun.

How well they deployed the paradox of theatre: the more “realistic” a production, the less real it feels; the more the artifice is embraced, the stronger the emotional and intellectual contact.

Those are the ingredients of the magic, how they reëlasticize time and space so that veneers crack and honesty seeps in and the daily and the contingent and the instrumental stand in momentary defeat while aesthetic pleasure teams up with moral respect to make each of us feel consequential and thankful.

The secular version of grace.

(April 2011)

## On Acting

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A lot of my friends are stage actors trying to make their living in “the business.” Bless them for pursuing a vocation with no guarantee of love, money, or appetite from the audience.

So why *do* they do it? Because nothing is quite like the heady experience of bringing an audience to that moment when artifice turns to truth and the audience walks out with more than what it had when it walked in. That is the edge on which actors live: like shooting craps, the occasional good run keeps the actor coming back one more time to see if the luck will hit again.



Schmacting my heart away.

But there is an even deeper magic in this transformation. Theatre happens by the “rough magic” of Shakespeare’s Prospero, who hoisted new visions out of the most ordinary materials - bodies, voices, gestures, biographies. Working for Prospero, so to speak, is a potent employment: to know uplift without leaving the earth, to satisfy ambition without killing anyone, to read your own guts without seppuku, to take your meanest parts and without embarrassment show them off, to take life’s confusions and make them transparent, to become more than who you are without having to give up all the quirks and demons you have so artfully collected over the years.

This is what my friends in the theatre seek: not just those moments when the audience lifts its hands in applause like a blessing but, more importantly, the sense that they are *engaged in* and not on the outskirts of life, refining and refinding connections and not simply limping along towards death - all shaped by a discipline that releases what it creates into the uncertain and sometimes fickle, but always necessary, keeping of an audience.

For my part, I’ll always go see what my friends are doing, offer up my applause to keep them aloft so that they can pursue a dream that will sustain them in life until all the lights go out.

(January 2013)

***TheatrePlus***



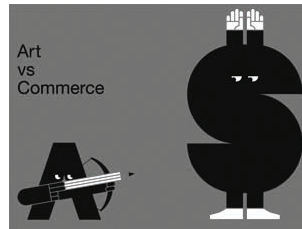


## Art vs Commerce

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Back in 2006, the O'Neill Playwrights Conference suggested that the Conference might want a share of a play's future earnings if that play had future earnings. High dudgeon followed, and the Conference backed down from sharing in a play's subsidiary rights.

I didn't feel that what the Conference broached was a bad idea: making money off the work that it does? What is so wrong with that? Ah, I see: art versus commerce.



Is this how it's supposed to work out?  
Hmm...

But this “debate” about art versus commerce has always felt dishonest to me. Art is a commodity, and artists have always treated their art as such. They “produce” it in order to “sell” it to an audience because very few artists want to toil in obscurity producing stuff that no one sees. So, inherent in artistic creation is the imperative to have some commerce with the world, and in order to create good art, artists need this struggle of resistance and acceptance, need to worry about whether the art can support not only their souls but also rent and food.

Truth be told, all artists need to sell themselves more and better. In fact, playwrights should take to heart the lesson of what the O'Neill did and find healthy ways to commoditize themselves so that they do not have to march to someone else's drummer all their writing lives.

A good case in point is Neil Labute. Whatever one thinks of his work, Labute is very successful because he has found a way to turn Neil Labute into “Neil Labute,” that is, the property about which people talk and with which they make deals.

Will he be remembered the way Shakespeare is remembered? Who cares? He can pay the rent and put food on his table and have enough left over to take a vacation or two and not have to punch a clock that someone else owns. And what is so wrong with that?

(October 2006)

## Authoritarian Musicals

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In his seminal *Arguments for a Theatre*, in a chapter titled “Fortynine asides for a tragic theatre,” Howard Barker notes two things about musicals: “The authoritarian art form is the musical” and “[When] you emerge from...the musical, you are anyone’s fool.” How right he is. Was there ever an art form that short-circuited logic and made conformist morals and politics palatable than musical theatre?



You will applaud now!

Barker’s point is that musicals work like Aldous Huxley’s “feelies” in *Brave New World*: They mute cultural and moral violence by employing “magical thinking” to make us forget where we really are and by numbing us with the Novocain of spectacle. They flatten story material and characterizations by using well-worn tropes, rhythms, and psychologies to fit the work into the constraints of time, space, and audience-attention. They always have to move forward, like sharks through water, which gives the audience no time to ponder, review, disagree, disapprove - the audience is only invited to take in obediently what others have decided to give to them.

Authoritarian rulers also use these tactics - obedience, spectacle, flat portrayals, tested narrative forms, standardized psychologies, uplift and escape - to maintain power: there is not that much distance between *Mary Poppins* and our presidential election campaigns.

I do not mean to tar all musicals with this brush. Sondheim’s output shows a man trying to make the form do something different, and people like Rinde Eckert, in *And God Created Great Whales*, use music in theatrical ways to delve and divine.

But why musicals succeed so well in our culture, crowding out other forms of theatre, bears some mulling over - at least during intermission while one sips the overpriced wine in the plastic cup or contemplates the pink ping-pong ball from *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*.

(March 2012)

## Dead Mr. Beckett

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Samuel Beckett's estate is notorious for its legal battling to keep Beckett's work "pure." Court cases abound about people who have run afoul of these vultures.

The real issue, of course, is not artistry but money, or, more accurately, copyright.

Copyright began under the Constitution as a way to balance inventors' profits and the public's access to knowledge. Inventors had a limited, protected time to get what they could for what they had created, and then their creations became part of the public domain.



"I'll give you my plays when you take them from my cold, dead hands!"

Nowadays, copyright is a protection racket, all about milking content for cash-back as long as possible.

Such laws as the Copyright Term Extension Act of 1998 (alternatively known as the Mickey Mouse Protection Act) have flipped the Constitution's original intent by ensuring that those who possess shall never have to hand anything over to that public that gave them legal protection to create every iota of what they created. In other words, copyright has privatized invention, and as in all private ventures, profit flows to the shareholders only.

To really address the artistic issues raised by the actions of the Beckett estate, and by extension the creation of knowledge, we need to address the poison of copyright. Mr. Beckett has had a good run with his work; it is now time to pry off the dead hand of the past so that the rest of us, who made possible whatever fame he achieved, can have whatever go at it we want.

And that should apply to everything created under the legal protections given to inventors by the commonwealth, that is, us: you can have a reasonable period of time to harvest your profits, and then it belongs to us. You want more money? Stop being a parasite and go invent something new.

(July 2006)

## A Benedictine Theatre?

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Years ago I went to the Brooklyn Academy of Music to see *The Song of the Wanderers*, a dance piece by a Taiwanese group based on Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha*. In the dance they rained down four tons of golden rice; by the end, the stage was ankle-deep in the stuff.



I am unconvinced that darkness is the proper light to shine on human life.

During the usual post-show coat-gathering and watch-checking, a young man entered carrying a long-handled wooden rake. From the center he carved out a slow, deliberate spiral, every step distinct and planted. This one man doing this one meaningless act held the attention of these frenetic New Yorkers for 10 full minutes.

Why? The act had no “drama,” but it had *something* - a state of being that was also a state of nothing, a place of rest or unmolested wholeness. A reminder of redemption. Of origins.

Later, I read *The Cloister Walk* by Kathleen Norris, about being an oblate in a Benedictine monastery. “*Ora et labora*, pray and work, is a Benedictine motto,” she states, “and a well-swept floor can be a prayer.” Or a spiral etched in rice. Or an audience watching the man.

Prayer, rest, harmony, breath - what does any of this have to do with theatre, especially when we declare that art should disturb us for our own good? But for what end is all this disturbance? Do we leave better equipped because of it to make life bend toward - well, toward the rice, the praying and the work, the refreshment of the waters? I just don't know.

I find myself less and less convinced that darkness is the proper light in which to see human life, even if darkness dwells within. I am trying to find where the rice can join the risk, where rise and fall is as much about breathing as about ambition and pride, where Jeremiah and Buddha can converse.

A Benedictine theatre - how possible is that?

(July 2001)



## Theater That Does Us No Good

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I've seen a lot of stage work that tries to heal and teach, doing what my friend calls "Hippocratic theatre" that "first, does no harm." And for the most part it is dramatically inert. I ask myself, why make theatre that does this when what humans really want (at least the American version) are endless stories of how we take advantage of each other - because taking advantage, always jockeying for the inside rail, is what humans do best: it is our singular species talent. We are political animals that practice the politics of animals, and we are endlessly entertained by our power maneuvers, no matter how bloody and nasty they get.



Why is there such a crushing impulse in art for art to make people better than they are?

Why is it that commentators use the word "theatre" to describe bloody contests (like the "theatre of war" or the "operating theatre") or events filled with fraud (like Senate hearings)? Because the will to power, not the urge for healing, drives the scene.

We are drawn to stories about power like spectators to a crash. With power - winning it, losing it, stealing it, using it - we go for the anti-Hippocratic: first, *do* harm, and then do more.

So why make theatre that tries to redeem or purify when, in the end, that is not what excites us about the human comedy?

Leave salvationing to the cathedrals and megachurches, and let's create theatre that doesn't do us any good. We don't need more palliative care in our arts - we have enough of that, embedded as we are in a consumer culture that daily narcotizes us.

We need fresh, raw, brutish, comedic, de-sentimentalized portraits of ourselves - not because they will make us better people but because they won't make us better people, because they will tell us truths and then leave us the fuck alone to figure them out (or not) on our own.

(April 2006)

## Dogme(fill in the year)

In 1995, Danish directors Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg (later joined by Kristian Levring and Søren Kragh-Jacobsen) issued the manifesto known as Dogme95, an attempt to “purify” filmmaking by doing away with gimmicks and special effects. Embedded in the Manifesto was a “Vow of Chastity,” 10 guidelines for purification, such as “filming must be done on location,” and “the sound must never be produced apart from the images or vice versa.”



Dogme as an element of purification -- a chemistry of lean and trickless.

Theatre has its own need for purification, though the divide is different here than it is for cinema. The divide I seen in theatre is between “theatre” or the “theatrical” and the “dramatic” - the presentational vs. the gravitational. In screenwriting class, we were told that “if a scene is about what the scene is about, then you’re in deep shit,” meaning that if the scene lacked subtext, if it lacked a subterranean flow that pulled us in one direction while the surface flow pulled us in another, then the scene lacked drama, “punch.” All the audience is doing is watching an unfolding rather than an uncovering, neck-and-neck with the velocity of the scene rather than a little behind and working to catch up.

If subtext-turned-to-text defines “theatrical,” what makes the dramatic “dramatic”? David Mamet once said (and this is a rough paraphrase, taken from memory) that all great plays are, at heart, mystery plays, and that the characters in them are trying to say the unsayable.

Dogme95’s effort to “force the truth out of [the] characters and setting” was another way of saying this: abjure the tricks of the trade in favor of as unmediated a presentation as possible of the tectonics between the text and subtext of the characters’ struggles to make sense of the yet-to-be-sensed.

My Dogme(fill in the year) would say the same.

(August 2008)

## ***Mary Poppins as Capitalist Fairy Tale***

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Advertising for *Mary Poppins* promises that the story's "magic" will refresh one's spirits. But *Mary Poppins* is a profoundly weird piece: a capitalist fairy tale that is not comforting at all.

The real center of the tale is not the witchy nanny but the banker father (aptly named Mr. Banks) who may lose his job for making an investment decision based on his heart rather than the numbers. If they fire him, his family will lose the "magic" of their bourgeois lives, and what had once been flying (like the kites, like Mary herself) will turn earth-bound and ordinary.



However, this is Disney. The father's heart-made decision pays off royally, while the one that looked good by the numbers turns out to be a scam. Not only does he keep his job, he gets a promotion and a raise as well as apologies from the bank president. His response to his good fortune: he vows to spend more time with his family, and his employers readily agree.

In the end, the proper order of things is maintained: the bankers will continue to bank, the sweeps will continue to sweep (lung ailments intact), the bourgeois children have avoided deep pain, and Mary's work (that is, saving the middle class from itself) is done as she literally flies off into the sunset (i.e., out over the audience to the second balcony).

While they believe they have been offered "magic," in truth ticket-buyers have been inoculated against the Occupy-Wall-Street mentality, re-educated that the right people got the right things and that the world as they know it is the world they should know and accept.

*Mary Poppins* and the ideology of the ruling class: who knew they were in such a tight embrace? And don't forget to have your picture taken next to the iconic figure of Poppins up-up-upping away with her umbrella (as if one could, with just the right Disney point of view, lift away from these sordid streets).

(January 2013)

## Sita Sings the Copyleft

I wrote an essay titled “Dead Mr. Beckett, restrictions imposed by the Beckett estate on production of Beckett’s plays. The essay took aim at the protectionism turned into: “Copyright law now is about figuring out how to get the public domain and milking it for cash-bait.”

There are, however, other ways to do this “yes-based distribution model” of Nina Paley, creator of the animated film *Sings The Blues*. Here is what she says on her website about *Sings The Blues* to you. Like all culture, it belongs to everyone. Making it explicit with a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike license. Please distribute, copy, share, archive, and show the world the shared culture it came, and back into the shared culture.



I like this whole approach very much, this “yes-based distribution model.” I don’t know if it’s viable. It may be crazy (and crazy-making) to buck the economic tide like this.

But it’s equally clear, as the music industry found out, and the book and newspaper industries are now discovering, that what Paley calls “the old business model of coercion and extortion” does not map well with a burgeoning web-based world.

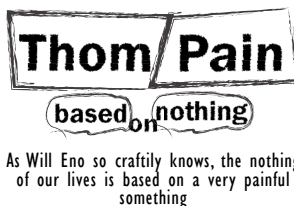
Like it or not, every cultural institution has to find a way to re-invent itself in the light of digitization and social media, and there are precious few guideposts for how to do that. As Paley says, “we’re still making this up as we go along.”

And for a playwright like myself, who will never make a living from my craft, what do I have to lose by making my work available to anyone who wants to use it? The “getting done” is just as important as the “getting paid,” and the latter should not stand in the way of the former.

(February 2010)

## ThomPain (Based On Something)

When I went to see *ThomPain* (*based on nothing*), Will Eno's piece about a man's search to find some meaning in a meaningless world that has made him endure a fair amount of pain and embarrassment, my liking for the play was distinctly in the minority on that day, a Sunday matinee with a very senior crowd in full complaint mode.



After the show I waited in the lobby to compliment the actor. Waiting with me was Peter, who had had 9 hours of back surgery recently (his ride was coming around). This was the first show he had been to since then, and he did not like it. (It didn't help that he thought it would be about Tom Paine, the pamphleteer.) We started a chat, and he asked what the play meant to me.

I said to him that it was all about the pain he was feeling in his back. And that started us talking about pain and suffering and our human attempts to explain it. And suddenly he looked away into the middle distance and said, "Now I understand it a lot better."

At that point the actor came out, and we both spoke to him, with Peter recounting our conversation and his own slow realizing of what the playwright was trying to say. The three of us shared a nice moment, and then Peter and I left.

What happened on that stage was real theatre; what happened in the lobby was also real theatre: two humans figuring out what they can carry away from the place that makes the time spent there well-spent, some nugget of clarity that pacifies the shadows.

I would say that what happened in the lobby was Act II to the play's Act I and that perhaps what separates a good play from a weak play is whether it's got tucked away that extra "lobby act." Many scripts don't, so they're forgettable and forgotten. But on this day this small post-show run gave us all our ticket's worth, and the take-away felt very good indeed.

(April 2006)

## The Mysteries

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A rare find - a production that moves me gut-deep: *The Mysteries* (based on the York and Wakefield Cycles of medieval mystery plays), directed by Brian Kulick of the Classic Stage Company. I've seen the production twice, and each time this atheist (post)modern man has finished in tears - not tragedy tears but something bordering on bliss. Bliss! What a foolish feeling in 21st-century America. But it has brought me back to the heart of theatre.



Going through the phases of our selves.

We may pay lip service to theatre's religious origins but, in reality, we trace our theatrical roots back to the materialists of the last two centuries, and our art has turned into a constant explaining of ourselves to ourselves.

This is liberating, but with a price: we have no way to talk about our coming deaths. And this leaves us moderns hungry for anything that can do what faith used to do for the creators and performers of the Cycle Plays, which chronicle the human hunger to find a home where suffering ends and peace begins: give reason, give comfort, give hope, give light.

Kulick's production ends with the Cycle Play of Christ's harrowing of hell, where he gathers his fellow sufferers and brings them upward into the light of peace. Whatever this play meant to its original viewers, for me, it was about stepping into the light, chronicling our hungers, seeking solace in fellowship (actor to actor, audience to actor and back), and then stepping out into the unavoidable night - this is theatre helping us harrow our own hells in order to bring to the light the better selves lurking among our discards and disappointments and murderous designs.

I left the theatre remembering what I didn't even know I'd forgotten about the possibilities open to this flawed and fluid creature called "human," which means I left it equipped with all that any art in these dry secular times can hope to pass on.

Or, to say it another way: I left the theatre humanized. And how rare and delightful a thing that gift is.

(January 2004)







***PoliticoCultural***





## The Art of the State

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Every artist understands, as George Orwell did, that “every work of art has a meaning and a purpose - a political, social and religious purpose,” and that the reason for investing the blood, sweat, money, and belief into the work of art is to make that purpose “viral” throughout the audience so that they become infected with a new idea and, in turn, pass it on to others, who in turn...and in turn...and so on. In other words, artists are propagandists.



But if "artists as propagandists" is allowed, then it is also true that somewhere on this continuum propagandists can be artists.

But if artists are propagandists, then the converse is also true, that propagandists can be artists. And here is where theatre - the techniques of, the live energy of - exerts its greatest power - not on Broadway but in the megachurches, the offices of spin doctors, the advertising board rooms, the permanent campaigns of politicians.

Nobody today exits a major theatrical production feeling changed (or even motivated to change) because nobody goes in to the production with the desire to change anything about himself or herself. They just want to feel satisfied that their two hours haven't been wasted.

But you can come away from a daily onslaught of clever propagandizing ready to buy, convinced to vote or not vote, reaffirmed in the fight against the devil and his industrial output of sin. This is because the theatre behind all these pitches is blent seamlessly into our lives - theatre as a part of who we are, what we do, how we breathe. Theatre that gives us something back for our time invested (even if it's not always a good something). Theatre that doesn't pretend to be a medicine for our own good. Theatre that confirms rather than demands confession.

Perhaps one thing the propagandists can't quite get is the intimacy that comes with theatre, the live sweaty thing that happens on stage. But they can form pretty good fakes of it, enough to fool most people, and that's all that matters to the state as it practices its theatrical arts.

(October 2005)

## The Fever Dream of Captain America

My play *The Fever Dream of Captain America* has a simple story. A cab driver who prays at a local mosque amuses the other cabbies with the story of Steve Rogers, a.k.a. Captain America. Except that the cabbie calls it the “fever dream” of Captain America - the fever that comes from America’s taste for self-congratulatory violence but no stomach for empire.



An FBI agent, Muslim in background but not religious, coerces the cabbie to snitch by telling him that the story-telling will brand him a threat to the United States unless he cooperates. In the end the cabbie has no choice but to enlist in the fever dream, which for him is like one of Ridley Scott’s aliens that worms its way down your gullet, then explodes your heart from inside.

And so goes the fever dream today, our bloody swamp of spite and selfishness and brutality. Some may dissent, yet we, as a society, have chosen to enlist in incubating the fever.

And what do I do? I write plays, which is to say, I piss on a forest fire. I hope my futile gesture won’t prove so futile, I hope the good works some people are doing will reach a critical mass that will break the fever and bring people back to kinder hearts and less spleen.

But I also think a much more massive intervention is needed, an old-fashioned mass political movement that goes beyond the soft touch of the social media and the airiness of Occupy, where people build barricades (physical and virtual) and throw their bodies on them.

My fever dream is a revolution that re-anchors this self-professed Judeo-Christian democratic culture in the Christianity of liberation theology, the Judaism of tikkun olam, and the democratic energies of [fill in the blank of your favorite rouser of rabble].

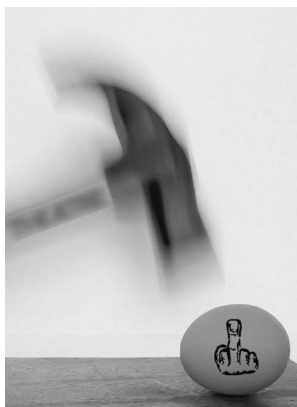
Unless you like the current fever dream. If that’s the case, then let’s talk - I’m curious to find out why, since it makes no sense to me.

(June 2012)

## **Politics Is An Egg The Theatre Cannot Hatch**

I am in a state of dismal about theatre. It is called *The Coast of Utopia*. Part I, Tom Stoppard's take on revolutionary history. Of course, Stoppard must be reflexively praised for his attempt - after all, he is "Stoppard," and Stoppard has earned the right to reflexive praise for being "Stoppard."

But it's not clear to me what he wants to accomplish with this artistic bloviation of a dead politics. One thing, though, this play will not achieve, ever ever ever, is the political and personal renewal of its observers. This is because (as much as I hate to say this) theatre, at least in our era, is not built to make this happen.



Theatre is not built to make politics happen theatrically.

Theatre may be able to examine the effects of politics' explosions, but it is always a survey of the heart's precincts, the inner courtyards of human experience. The horizon is constricted, the words' audibility falling off after a few dozen meters, the audience's attention inevitably linked to how much the characters reflect back to them about themselves, how much "identity" knits up the space between stage and seat. Theatre as Rorschach.

This makes theatre closer to poetry than anything else but also lesser than poetry because audiences can tolerate less strangeness in form and delivery. Distance in other art forms can actually make us feel closer to the art because it makes us re-work ourselves, thus building an affinity to the work. Not so in theatre, which is why theatre remains the lighter-weight art form that it is, the hydrogen or helium of the artistic periodic table.

I won't go see Parts II and III - I have only so many hours left in my life (and only so much money in the wallet). Mr. Stoppard, if your play has done anything, its fearsome murkiness has made me re-calculate my own writerly directions. Your play is a dead-end for me; now how do I find my way back out?

(November 2006)

## Necro-Political Theatre

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Each year, on September 11, in New York City - on “9/11” - people scramble to assign a meaning to the event, engaging in what I call “necro-political theatre”: the living using the dead to own the day.



Necro-Political Theatre is reverse zombie, where the living feed upon the dead.

After years of dramaturging this “Theatre of 9/11” to their own specifications, the necro-political actors have turned that day of tragedy into cultural and political kitsch.

They’ve been able to do this because they’ve morphed 9/11 from a historical event into a Rorschach print, upon which people project whatever happens to be roiling inside of them.

This is par for the course of 9/11 necro-political theatre, which scavenges from both journalistic theatre (“ripped from the headlines” no matter how old) and absurdist theatre (grafting mythologies and religiosity onto 9/11 that tip the day into the fantastical).

We might consign this kind of critique to a PhD dissertation if it didn’t have such horrible repercussions in the “real” world. Necro-political theatre got us into Afghanistan and Iraq and may propel us into Iran. It has savaged our civil liberties and hollowed out any will for radical (even moderate) social and political change.

Any antidote to this? Since it’s theatre that got us in this mess, only theatre criticism can peel away the veneer down to the nakedness of the Emperor and his empire. But people like Frank Rich or the late Alexander Cockburn, who did this so well, will never have the reach of a Limbaugh, so it falls to each of us to become a savaging theatrical critic of the necro-politics that drive our polity today, or else there will be no polity left to criticize and thus redeem.

(October 2007)

## Rage As Healing

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Perhaps it is art's purpose to heal - but during these meltdown days, I would argue that any healing we are going to have - useful, purgative, truthful healing - will only come from honest moral rage at the stupidities, lies, and fuckings-over of the princes in charge of our capitalist dis-order.

How heals rage? By first blowing the stink off oneself (as a good friend of mine once said) and getting back to a flat-bottomed point where one can rest momentarily bleached out and exhausted, as the body and mind will feel when purged of poisons and alarms.

Only then can one pick up the pen or brush or chisel to begin the rage artistic - not art made to soothe the ego and the ultra-personal, but an art of passionate impersonality, a fiery coolness, driven by a hatred of everything false, slavish, stupid, predatory.

In the end it is an art about making things better, about showing people how they can act better than their selfishness and fears allow them to act. It is ultimately, then, about love. Not the sentimentalized crap spooned into us by our entertainment culture, but something much harder-edged, without schmaltz and dreaminess, almost in the realm of sacrifice, what Christ must have felt on the cross, both human and inhuman (since he was both), both heart-shattering and released.

This is a rage which is a healing where the wound is more important than the medicine, since the wound is what keeps us alive and awake, the wound, as British playwright Howard Barker puts it, that the rope makes as we are pulled from the swamp.

An art that keeps the wound open, rage that cleanses, love both suckling and sundering - these will heal the affliction of being alive in this country in the era of our bipartisan meltdown.

(February 2009)



What is rage but a serious way of paying attention? If you are not enraged, you are not paying attention.

## Red Rover

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The title refers to an episode of *The Mentalist* in season four (May 2012), which, for a mainstream police procedural, raised itchy questions about the link between revenge, torture, and justice that also link to our current governmental acceptance of brutality in the service of liberty.



From which deep sea issues such vast and interesting waves of cruelty?

In the episode, a man is murdered by being buried alive. To get the murderer to confess, Patrick Jane stuffs him into a coffin in a freshly prepared grave, linked to the outside world by a video monitor. Being put into the same situation as the man he murdered cracks the case.

The morality of the torture doesn't matter to Jane: no murderer should ever escape, and if principles get in the way, then the principles should be ignored. Balance in the world requires it.

Sound familiar? This is the United States in this year of our Lord (and probably for many more years to come), a nation defined by vengeful cruelty, but without any of Jane's redeeming, if ambiguous, morality. We practice this cruelty not only upon the bodies of foreigners but also daily upon ourselves. The free-floating violence permeating our culture has made us class- and race-free because at any moment any of us can be considered outside the pale and ripe for execution, all equally in someone else's cross-hairs and one trigger-squeeze away from oblivion.

I used to hope that America would repair the disparity between what it is and what it could be if only it would come its senses and do the right thing. Now I don't think it has any senses to come to: just a crazy quilt of festering lunacies and selective histories. I don't know what it means to be a citizen. I don't know what it means for balancing public witness and private insularity. I don't know what to do, and I don't know how to handle not knowing what to do.

Red rover, red rover, send an answer right over - soon.

(February 2013)



## The Sociable Contract

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As a wordsmith I love when reality words me, as it did one day from a man updating the insurance map of the property where I work.

He explained to me the importance of keeping tabs on how a property gets used, and not just by the owner. “For instance, if people come through a hole in the fence and cross the parking lot, and that goes on long enough, you’ve got an easement, even if it isn’t official on the map.” He had a name for this phenomenon and spoke his poetry: “Ripening shades of title.”



What phrase better captures the tricky process of evolving into a “human” human being.

One instant truth: We exist only because we are embedded in a matrix of human invention. Like it or not, my life depends upon the company and kindnesses of strangers.

Which leads to another truth: A society of humans means that every one is touched by what anyone else does, whether there are six or six thousand degrees of separation.

Nothing says, however, that the ripening claims and their shades must nourish or preserve. In many places, the ripening of dark shades of title has led to slaughters of every degree: the world often seems over-ripe with these deadly claims.

Most people, I suspect, in their heart of hearts don’t want a world like this, like Hobbes’ state of nature. But to ripen into a civilized human being, shaded by compassion, responsibility, recognition of common aims and aspirations, requires self-discipline, study, humility, a sense of humor, reduced ego. Being civilized is an acquired state, not one that comes naturally.

A good society, then, one concerned about the shades of title each has upon each, would nourish that kind of ripening of title to each other. This really has to be our sole task as human beings; otherwise, nothing can really mean anything worthwhile.

(August 2012)

## Zero Dark Nothing

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The Marvelous Maria Beatriz and I went to see *Zero Dark Thirty*, drawn more by the controversy around it than anything else.

But having seen the movie for myself, I'm sort-of thankful to Kathryn Bigelow for making it, though probably not for reasons that would please her.



The United States of America makes for one sad-ass empire.

This movie is a rare time when we get to see our brutal empire-focused ideology in action, what it does in our name and with our money.

We also get to see how club-footed and inept our empire is. Despite its advantages in technology and torture, a low-level admin assistant digging through old information unearths the clue that leads to the end-game.

Third, it exposes just how addicted we are to our poisonous cowboy mentality and to the belief that we can force reality to bend to our will when we put our American mind against it.

Fourth, and perhaps most important, it shows how our state is engaged in a war that it pretends to understand but doesn't really. Getting bin Laden a decade after 9/11 ended up meaning nothing: it won nothing, it stopped nothing, it solved nothing, it ennobled nothing. After trillions of lost dollars and thousands of lost lives, the United States is economically weaker, less respected, and incapable of figuring out how to solve its own fate. If the terrorists' intent was to weaken the tiger, they have succeeded.

So, thank you Kathryn Bigelow for opening up a window onto the crappiness that is the war on terror prosecuted in our name and with our money. Now, get out of this business of making propaganda pieces for the government, lest you be branded as the war on terror's Leni Riefenstahl, and go make a good movie again.

(January 2013)

## Blackfest

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In 2011, when I received a notice about “The American Slavery Project,” sponsored by “The New Black Fest,” a theatre project arranged around the sesquicentennial of the Civil War, I was immediately annoyed.

The project’s mission statement - to celebrate work that “boldly and refreshingly explore[s] slavery and/or the Civil War” - felt both past its prime and insufficiently bold.

“Slavery” and the “Civil War” are terms without settled meanings, but even if they were, does that knowledge, told “boldly and refreshingly,” really have any transformational voltage in the world of the United States in 2011? Like it or not, it’s old news.

I also felt the festival’s mission is insufficiently bold. The slavery system the promoters need to “explore” is the current American prison system, which is as systematically racist and apartheid-like as the older “peculiar institution.”

The dismantling of the barbaric and corrosive penal system needs to happen right now, if not earlier, and a festival like this should focus on the slavery that matters most to this generation, perpetrated through the law books and paid for by our tax dollars.

I applaud, as I always do, any effort by my fellows to speak to the things that afflict us in ways that help us to understand, resist, advance.

I only wish that this particular effort hadn’t settled on such a limited discourse. Perhaps in its next go-around, it can blow a brighter trumpet and call us all to a different set of arms.

(March 2011)



First, I think this focus is past its prime, and, second, I think it's insufficiently bold.

## The Radiation of the Color-Line

Why, in whatever year of our Lord this is, are we still worried by skin color? Not long ago, I had a reading of my play *Ain't Ethiopia*. Here's the logline: "After whites lynch his wife, African-American Jesse Colton goes to Spain in 1937 to fight against Franco, only to find that he must face down his home-town fascists if his life, and his wife's death, are to mean anything."

THE COLOR LINE



Whoever thinks we are  
a post-racial society is color-blind  
in the worst possible way.

Jesse connects with a Hemingway wanna-be, Dewey Moore, and when he decides to confront his wife's killers, Dewey agrees to witness his death and carry the story to the world.

I thought a play about a black man's search for justice would be fairly non-controversial, given a black man in the White House and so and so on. But some of the after-event comments showed me that the "background radiation" of color still hisses through our cultural cosmos.

A young African-American woman felt that handing Jesse's story to a white reporter implied that black people depended upon white people to achieve justice. A few white audience members had a problem with a black man from Mississippi understanding the political theories in play, though that wasn't a problem with several same-class white characters. Other white people neutered the story by elevating it to the "universal" instead of keeping it local to Jesse.

I suppose this could simply be chalked up to diversity. But it is also true that even with a black man in the White House, the "background radiation" has not only not gone away but has seeped into everything more deeply - even in lesser venues like play readings.

One woman said that I was just "rehashing old, well-documented issues. Nothing new here." I wish that she were right - but she's not. W.E.B. Du Bois' "color-line," voiced in the ancient year of 1903 in *The Souls of Black Folk*, still cuts a wide swath. Jesse's sacrifice and Dewey's report of it still have a long way to go.

(November 2009)

***Musings***





## By Design

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I used to work for the Salvadori Center, an educational not-for-profit that uses the design of the built environment to study math, science, social studies, language, art, and technology. After hanging around the Salvadori staff - trained as architects, engineers, mathematicians, and artists - I concluded that every human life is a built environment designed by deliberate choices.



Every human being is a built environment  
-- there are no human "natures," only  
human contraptions.

What does this have to do with the making of theatre? Perhaps of all the disciplines labeled "art," theatre has the largest "built environment" component to it. Not only do we build spaces in which we present theatre, but the stage itself, the literal and the symbolic stage, is an environment designed to produce a "world." And for that world we build facsimiles of human beings called "characters" - the built environment we call a "self" - and arrange them in ways to take them apart to see what makes us tick like the explosive devices we are.

For me, then, my role as a playwright is to design a theatre to be performed in the built environment of a theatre that, at one and the same time, mimics and dissolves and repatriates the designed theatre of a human's being.

I am not interested in the tedious business of pantomiming or repackaging the real world onstage - I can't do it that well, anyway, and many others can do it far better than I can. I'm more interested in this exploration of other worlds, other designs, other possibilities, that leave the self open and do not design it into a "too too solid flesh" too soon.

If art has any claim to intrude on our "ground time" here on earth (to use a phrase by the poet Maxine Kumin), it has to be its ability to keep us open without convincing us that any one design is *the* ultimate, final design, to remind us (and remind us again and again) that "designing," in all its whirling permutations, is what "being human" is all about.

(December 2007)

## The Fallen Ice Cream

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August in New York. He stood there mid-sidewalk like a rock in water. But what I remember first was his body-angle, lop-sided and ready to keel over - and, in one hand, an ice-cream cone. The wheeled backpack I was pulling towards Port Authority got tangled in his wind breaker - thrown or fallen onto the sidewalk - and while I worked at freeing it, he yelled at me.



Real theatre can happen wherever life leaks into the world.

At this point everyone ignored us: New York pedestrian autopilot. But I couldn't ignore him - I had wheeled over his coat, and so his humanity leaned on me, even more so when, just as I freed the wheels, down he went, and out poured lamentation about his disrespected coat and toppled ice cream from a New York street in the boiling month of August.

Imagine that sweltering street: the DNA layering of spat gum, hawked spit, sweat-mist, plus that paste of tire dust and leaked oil and pigeon pee. And what could I do but what I did, as far in as I was? I told him to grab my hand. He did, I pulled, and up he swam.

And here is what went through me. My hand on his, in his, the touch of my skin against his - corded, tough, sandpaper'd: the shock of alive. He let on he was okay - I gave him a buck to replace his cone. And off he went. That was the end of that for him - but not for me.

Before reaching for him, I could still keep him two-dimensional and ignorable. But once live hand touched live hand, it was impossible to deny the shared liveness. Once contact is made, it remakes everything: it splits the husk, drowns the bastard named ego, smells of meaning.

Of course, I thought, as I got my bag and walked away, a good anti-bacterial hand-washing as soon as I got home. Thus is the nature of this absurd life - thoughts of good deeds, thoughts of germs. We can get infected in so many interesting ways.

This is my definition of real theatre.

(April 2013)



## Gallery Going

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Of a Saturday, I will take myself to the Chelsea section of Manhattan to visit the art galleries carved out of old industrial and warehouse space. The galleries' architecture resembles black box theatres: minimal lighting, sparse comfort, scaled-down production values, and the expectation that you are pretty much on your own to figure out what's on offer.

These galleries are also very capitalist in nature since their whole set-up frames consuming a product, like a bazaar or a souk (or, for that matter, like a theatre space).

This is part of what makes the gallery-going such a strained dialectic for me.

Sometimes the art touches me, but I'm touched in a context that feels disengaged from an organic artistic process: a clean room, hush-hush, with some functionary behind a high-walled cubicle, and all of us isolated units from which value can be extracted (much like audiences sitting in the dark).

All this put me in mind of something Tennessee Williams mentions in his "Notebooks," where he quotes a friend saying that a healthy society does not need artists. If we lived in a society less fractured by capitalism, would we have artists as we now have them? Who would they be, what would they do, how would we do it with them? And what would it be like to live in a healthy society? (The ache of that question can make one weep.)

So, at the end of my jaunt, I come out glad to have made the safari, not sure of the use of the effort (like the good puritan I am, pleasure for its own sake is a hard row to hoe). This mirrors my own prickly relationship with playwriting and the theatre and my life, where oftentimes I find myself loving to write while, at the same moment, wondering what use can be made of anything I produce, half-believing (and sometimes more than half) that a good compost or a well-baked loaf of bread is better for the world than anything I have to say or do.

(September 2006)



A style that the monied gentry can abide.

## The Macho Zone

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Many years ago the Marvelous Maria Beatriz and I were traveling from New York to Boston by bus. As we boarded, a desperate woman holding a young boy and with a little girl in tow handed Maria Beatriz the boy (who was suffering from a cold) and blurted out that the bus line would allow one child to ride free with the parent but not two, and since she had two children but only her own ticket... So we got on the bus, sudden parents of a new son.



The blessing of those moments when we can slough off the irritating weight of our egos.

Four hours to Boston, so time to hear Kati's story of an abusive relationship and cradle a wheezing snot-filled cranky little boy named Macho and play games with a polite little girl. Kati's friend would meet them at South Station and then help them get home to Puerto Rico.

Except that South Station is a big confusing place, and the friend could not be found, so they took the girl and headed off to scout while I stayed with Macho and the luggage.

So, I am holding this wheezing, sleeping boy against my chest, swaying, the two of us a still point in the crush of people, his breath through my shirt to my skin, each protecting the other: I was in the Macho Zone - a place clear, clean, and full of grace. And finite, of course. They found the friend, and off they went to Puerto Rico, and us to home and memory.

What has this to do with theatre?

I've often thought that great art is great because it creates its own Macho Zone, releasing us from conscience into the liberation of expecting nothing in return, otherwise known as grace.

I feel that if I can create one or two Zone moments in my writing, I can count myself successful. But it's not something I can arm-twist into being. Just as with Macho, all I can do is cradle something human and let what washes over me wash over me - and then record it with as much honesty as I can, send it to the world, and hope it makes it home to Puerto Rico.

(October 2008)

## The Midwife's Magic Towel

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Would it ever be possible to have a genderless world?

I got a glimpse of this when, in an article on home births, one of the interviewees tells how he and his wife had invited friends to witness the birth and invite the child into the world.

When the child came sliding in, the midwife, after cutting the cord, immediately covered up its genitals with a towel so that no one in the room, including the parents, knew if she cradled a male or female.

What a deliciously ironic moment!

Because they didn't know its sex, the language of their invitations to join their human community had to address the whole child. Finding their cultural definitions useless to describe what had happened, they had to, if only for a moment, create some new way to see that child. In that momentarily new philosophical soil cultural regeneration could take root.

If this society of ours ever is ever going to find its way past this insane phase of profit and the greater glory of the dividend, it will need to use that midwife's magical towel to delete any bogus divisions between people, whether they be rich/poor, black/white, or male/female. And that will happen only when we discard the capitalist regime under which we live, enamored as it is of divide and conquer.

(June 2009)



What, really, is a gender, and how much veneration should we give it?

## Old Lady on the Ten-Speed

A usual day in the life of an administrative director of a small, progressive educational non-profit - everything from prepping events to unjamming the photocopier. I admit that I resented all the effort and easily descended into the sticky self-pity of “Oh Poor Michael.”



Real theatre can happen wherever life leaks into the world.

I was walking to the subway stop when a little old African-American lady on a ten-speed, drop-handled touring bike eased past me, her seat so low that her knees churned high like the piston arms on a paddlewheeler. A cane dangled off the left handlebar. Her back was S'd by scoliosis and pitched forward by osteoporosis, and her thatch of white hair riffled in the breeze.

As I watched her with compassion and astonishment, my self-pity dissolved. I can only describe it as my heart cracking open: an immediate, right-between-the-eyes respect for the energy this human being expended in keeping her heart intact as she made her inexorable way.

Because living can produce so much dismay and be snuffed out in an instant, we often wear a thick hide of “Oh poor me” around our hearts for both medicine and barricade. But as the paraplegic cartoonist John Callahan once said, self-pity is like wetting your pants: at first it's comfortably warm, and then it turns very cold. The old lady on the ten-speed reminded me just how cold and how to make the struggle even if I didn't immediately understand why I should.

But her image did not just say, in puritan tones, to suffer adversity to improve the character. When my heart cracked at seeing her, I also smiled at the pure “Yes” of her paddlewheeling down the street. Against age and rusting knees, she steamed home. Certainly I, with mobile knees and half her age, could do the same. I sat in my rickety subway car converted for the rest of the day into light and patience.

This is my definition of real theatre.

(April 2013)

## Original Sin

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At an old job of mine, I used to stop off once in a while at one of those ever-present bagel coaches to grab one of those ever-present bagels to gnaw on before going to work.



This day, as I approach the coach, I pass by a ragged man in ragged clothes sitting on a ragged stoop. His chocolate face splits into a smile that shows the vibrant absence of any front teeth, but it's a good smile, a touch crazed but open, and one I don't resist matching.

Out of my left eye I watch the man sidle up to me. "Could you buy me a cup of coffee?" the words slurred because of the missing teeth. Now, I get dunned all the time in New York, so I wasn't surprised, but this felt all right: an offer I could satisfy without any real sacrifice, and the loneliness gets a momentary defeat. So I say, "Of course." "Large?" he counters. Pleased by his skill - hook me, then reel me in - I say, "Of course" again. "Regular," he says, "two sugars."

The smiling man snatches the coffee to him in a gesture that says, first, I *need* this coffee and, two, I better get it before he changes his mind. As I'm paying and taking back my bagel and change, he gives me a frank look, still smiling, and says, "I like people, I really do, but you know, the problem is original sin - it made everything bad between everybody."

Then he turns and walks back to his stoop. I walk past the people who, every morning, look damaged to me, or lost, or stunned, or bewildered, or grim with purpose. And this morning they look no different. But I know he's glad I bought him the coffee, and I'm glad I bought him the coffee, and while a person could say that nothing's changed, I feel like there's just a little bit less original sin going around. For the moment. I don't know if that is a triumph or not, but it feels this side of good. I'll take it. And I gnaw through my sustenance as I walk away.

This is my definition of real theatre.

(December 2008)

## Raising Consciousness

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On a playwright's listserv where I lurk, the contributors recently had a set-to about whether plays and playwrights should raise the consciousness of their audiences/readers. I thought they all made a rather unwarranted assumption in their arguments: that there is, in fact, something called a "consciousness" that can be raised. I am not so sure.



The cairn of our consciousness is lightly balanced -- a series of dreams with weight.

First of all, the question should not be can we raise the consciousness of an audience but can we raise the consciousness of an audience that lives in a hyper-virtualized capitalist system like ours.

And my answer would be "not so much" because that consciousness is akin to a dream, mediated, prepared, shaped by corporate forces about which we (choose to) know little and over which we have no control. All we need to do is think about the hypnotics offered by our society, from video games to consumerism, and the resultant political apathy and quietism, and it doesn't take much to see that our consciousness doesn't have much weight to it.

So, given the topic, what would I have said if I had contributed? I think most theatre reinforces and renews the sleep we are in. Even when it moves us, it is the kind of movement we have when we jerk in our sleep - a response to a dream state. Even theatre that purports to rip away the veil doesn't challenge this sleep we're in; it just roils it a bit more than usual.

In short, if we are so asleep, how can any consciousness be raised? What would a "raised consciousness," one supposedly so raised that it gained some power to look outside itself at the roots of its own limitations, act like in our hyper-virtual capitalized society? And how would we know a "raised consciousness" if we came across it, and it came across us?

I am sure there are good counterarguments here - I just don't have any myself. I'll be glad to entertain anything anyone has to say on the topic. So, please, start blogging.

(April 2013)

## Good Art Slaps Us In The Face

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Good art slaps us in the face, puts a thumb in our eye, a spike in our ear, a knife in our ribs because this is what we really want it to do, so starved are we (more starved than we know) for what does not lie to us and does not numb us.

These reflections come out of another round of volunteer script-reading. The Formula that drives these scripts (you know The Formula: a hook at the end of Act I, with reveals and reversals to ratchet up “the stakes” to a crisis/climax with an aftermath, and so on) means that by page 10 or so, one can pretty much guess the emotional ending if not the exact plot details.



Whoever said that art must soothe or uplift or tell us we have better angels?

But The Formula is tedious, tedious, tedious. I have three suggestions to writers. First, stop writing character descriptions. This keeps you from locking the characters in and gives you room to make them surprising and perhaps even interestingly unmanageable.

Second, contrary to The Formula, the narrative never “needs” to go anywhere, it just needs to spin itself out according to the energies of the characters’ pursuits (which may also change as the characters either do or don’t accomplish what they’ve been set out to get).

Third, and to me most important, bring back death. We know that our lives happen with death as the backdrop of our being, but we’ve pretty much taken death out of the theatre, except in the most maudlin way, which means that we’ve taken out tragedy as well, and once tragedy is traded in for sentimentality, we’ve lost a way to be honest with ourselves about ourselves.

We are starved (more starved than we know) for what does not lie to us and does not numb us. So let’s stop creating “content” that keeps us so malnourished and create art that does us the service of wounding us into being awake and alive.

(June 2005)

## Our Mediated Lives

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What mediates us also makes us.

This year, again, the Macy's fireworks fired off from the Hudson River. Boulevard East in Weehawken jams up with Asians (ranging east/west from India/Pakistan/Bangladesh to the Philippines and north to China, Japan, and Korea), African Americans, Spanish speakers from Central and South America as well as the Caribbean, and probably from geo-religio-ethnic categories that exist in no sociology textbook.



What mediates us also makes us.

Their colors, voices, foods, musics, and passing-the-time games - these are the real fireworks, the real reason to be at this gathering at all.

As for the fireworks themselves - they went up, they exploded, they came down, repeat, repeat. What struck me this time, though, was this, which is why this entry has the title it does.

As the first rocket pierced the evening, a forest of arms arose holding cameras. All of sudden, all attention to the event became filtered through the device. (The woman next to me sent a photo, with text, to someone else in the crowd, as if they were not sharing the same experience.)

It reminded me of a story told by Bruce Babbitt, the Secretary of the Interior for Bill Clinton. He watched a group of Japanese tourists at the Grand Canyon line up with the Arizona sunset in the background as one person, with a Polaroid camera, took a picture of them.

Out whirrs the photo. And the group gathers to watch the Polaroid develop, ignoring the actual sun as it sets.

The device mediates the experience, and we get lost in the translation/transaction.

And that's what it was like on July 4. Except for the children, who had only their unmediated eyes to do their looking. As usual.

(July 2011)



## ***Longer Thoughts***





## Adapting a Memoir into a Play

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Through a shared friend, I met Sara Beattie, author of *A Question of Color*, a fictionalized memoir of her great-grandparents, Susan and John Morgan. She wanted to turn *Color* into a stage play; was I interested? I had never done an adaptation but that did not stop me from immediately agreeing to the offer.

**ADAPT**

What did the term "faithful" mean in reference to the original material?

In 1907, in North Carolina, Sara's great-grandparents married, but their marriage was illegal because Susan Morgan was black (and Cherokee and Choctaw) and John Wicks was white. They lived, as Susan called it, in "the box" formed by their lie (John passed himself off as Indian with a lighter skin, but no one believed him). In the end, the lie came out in retribution and sadness.

Three things appealed to me about the story. First, the story itself as a story. Second, the fight that John and Susan made differs only in degree from the same fight inter-racial couples have to make today in the United States. Third, the "message" about our common humanity and the need to see how much the "question of color" in our culture still governs us.

Here is what I learned about doing an adaptation.

First, what was the actual story I was going to tell? It couldn't be the one right there in the pages - John and Susan get married, acquire land, have two children, open some businesses, and so on - because, as Keith Johnstone points out in *Impro*, "the trouble with such a sequence is that there's no place where it can stop, or rather, it can stop anywhere." Novels can be "leisurely" in this sense; plays cannot because onstage a clock is always ticking.

So, instead of staying linear, I took newsprint and drew loops and knots and what Johnstone calls "reincorporations," looking for links not in the book but which I needed to give the play momentum. (This raised a question about what "faithful" means in an adaption, which I'll get to in a moment.)

Here's an example. Goforth, a dissolute white "gentleman," manages land which belongs to his wife. Becky is a black preacher who marries John and Susan and adopts them as her "family." To help John find work, she asks Goforth to give John a job. When I read that, I asked, "How did this descendent of a slave know the richest man in the county well enough to walk up to him on his porch and ask him this favor?" The book gives no answer.

So I made one up (with Sara's approval): Goforth and Becky had "known" each other in the past, and Mrs. Goforth knows about their "knowing" (which wreaks its own havoc later). This "past" was not in the book, but it was reasonably in the "past" of Becky and Goforth. Though not faithful to the book in a literal sense, it is faithful in a narrative sense.

I now saw Sara's book as a puzzle whose pieces should be "looped" together in terms of motives and triggers. I also started the writing of the script, listening for the "notes" these loops made as they vibrated. In many ways, the process became very much like making a musical score.

That is why a reader will find the speech rhythms written the way they are - not to recreate an early 20th-century North Carolina accent (whatever that might be) but instead to find intonations that carry the spirits of the characters. That is why a reader will so hear much actual music in the script - it seemed a natural follow-on to the "scoring" of the story. That is why a reader will find so much suggested movement - music must have its choreography to make the sounds visible.

What this proved is that the term "adaptation" misleads because it implies modifying the edges of an intact core. Freed from the "bookness" of the book - its original species - I could then "mutate" it for the "ecology" of the stage. The new work has its own aesthetics, its own gravity, its own armature.

About being "faithful." There are several things to be faithful to. One is the "facts," of course, but there is also a spirit that goes beyond the facts. I was lucky to work with an author who told me, often, that I had to write what I had to write. That she likes what I came up with only adds to the pleasure, but she made the point that the writer also needed to be faithful to a personal vision and practice.

Thus, "faithfulness" in adaptation is really a "house blend," different flavors kept in balance so that the overall savor ends up bringing pleasure, insight, and lasting memory.

I am pleased with how the new work hangs together, and I look forward to trying this again.

(April 2000)

## Turning An “Issue” Into Art

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In the United States, “issue” or “political” affixed to “play” usually sinks it in a blink, the assumption being that the work will be “soviet”: graceless, didactic, medicinal.

But issues and politics, like surveyors, lay out our lives’ geography, so we should pay attention to the big knives that sculpt our little rounds. How to do this without going “soviet”? Consider *Homeward Bound*.

*Homeward Bound* is co-written and co-produced with my wife, the Marvelous Maria Beatriz, who at the time was a social worker at one of the known hospitals in Boston.



Hank abuses Juanita.

The play locates itself at the intersection of immigration and domestic abuse. A young Mexican woman marries an American citizen who, after he brings her home, refuses to make her “legal” and uses her illegality to oppress and violate her. It has had several performances and readings.

The play grew out of a composite of cases that Maria Beatriz handled at the hospital, and we wanted the play to honor those particular people and their suffering. But we also wanted to bring this common situation “above the radar” to show that such abuse was not only a result of individual pathologies but also pathological systems of nationalism and inequality. And we wanted to write a play that people would find aesthetically pleasing and not the equivalent of penance: we wanted to turn the issue into art.

Here is what we did. First, we crafted a single story of a single woman, Juanita, who, against her mother’s wishes, marries Hank Armstrong from Nebraska, who is in Mexico on business. Charming at first, he later turns jailer. Juanita manages to escape and connects to Cristina Lefcadia, who heads an agency working with battered immigrant women while involved in political battles for funding and recognition.

At the end of the play Juanita, Cristina, and Mother gather to recite a poem that declares that the violence will stop only when our hearts are purged of anger and shame and “love rises to life over the dry bones of death [el amor sube a la vida sobre los huesos secos de la muerte].”

## Staging

From the beginning we wanted to create in *Homeward Bound* what the novelist John Gardner called “the continuous dream.” We had the actors onstage for the full 90 minutes, making all costume changes in full view. Scene changes were choreographed to flow out of one scene and into the next, covered by music. In this way, the scene changes themselves became part of the action of the play rather than its interruption.

## Cultural References

With the staging set, we looked at other lexicons to universalize Juanita’s story, such as the quinceañera; Los Dias de Los Muertos [the Days of the Dead], with its butterflies and marigolds; and NAFTA (Hank calls working in Mexico being “NAFTA’d”), with all of its association with gringo imperialism.

## Dance

In order to also tell this story in dumb-show, we used dance, color, a “visual monologue,” and the dramatic power of the shawl.

In the quinceañera the girl must dance the vals (a waltz) with an older man, often her father or uncle. The woman must never lead - that is the man’s province. The double message is clear: “I will hold you and guide you and you will be safe as long as you follow and smile.”

Five tango sequences occur in the play. (Tango is specifically Argentinean, but its blur of passion and violence makes it perfect for showing what happens when the former morphs into the latter.) Each tango shifts the emotional pitch from passion to possession so that the audience “hears” the play in a different way.



Hank and Juanita tango.

## Color

Los Dias has a color “code” that we reiterated throughout: pink (for celebration), purple (for pain), and white (for hope).

## Visual Monologue

In the scene where Juanita reveals to Cristina what Hank has done, Juanita offers Cristina her story through a “visual monologue.” Mother brings out a table on which rests a stainless steel bowl, a paring knife, a cleaver, a cutting board, and a white towel; in the bowl is a large ripe tomato. Juanita “tells” the story by first coring the tomato, cutting it in half, gutting one half and

squeezing its contents into the bowl, and then doing the same with the second half. She wipes the implements and her hands, and then sits. We wanted the audience to feel that they had just watched surgery on the human heart.

### The Shawl

The vocabulary of the shawl is spoken in almost every scene: Cristina has a red one, Mother a white one, and Juanita a blue one. As Cristina says to Juanita, “My mother gave me a shawl, when I was eleven....A shawl is an amazing thing, no? I never wanted to lose its warm sheltering weight off my shoulders. The way it draped over my arms, tapped my young spine as I walked. So many things in a shawl, no? It made me feel wise.” We wanted to make them literal “threads” throughout the play that, over and over again, bind, punctuate, protect, defend.



They wear their shawls for life.

Through all these “echoes” (and many others we would have done if we had had the money), we pushed the story, the “issue,” the “politics,” so that the audience would be unable to walk away saying that they left in the same state in which they entered. But we did it in a way that did not sermonize them or guilt them to take counter-actions.

Instead, we wanted to reach their hearts and spirits so that any action springing out of watching this play, whether it was “activism” or simply replaying it because they could not get the story out of their heads, came from a place of balance and nurturing, not anger or blaming (or at least not only from there).

*Homeward Bound*, like the monarch butterfly, carries a soul on its wings, but it travels in league with millions of others similarly laden. It is that multiple and fluxing journey that matters most. For us, when the sky darkens with a host of returning souls, all bent on forcing life to spin out its fullness in fairness to all, that is the sight that makes the heart thrive and the mind take flight and keeps our fingers on the keyboard so that the next play, and the one after that, and all which will come, flow out in electrons jazzed with love and a fierce desire to see things done right.

\* \* \* \* \*

[As *MOTHER* begins, *JUANITA* joins them, wearing her shawl as if in mourning.]

MOTHER: Because the barbarian is not a man even if it wears a man's face.

JUANITA: The barbarian is the anger and shame woven through our hearts.

CRISTINA: From doubt and violation --

JUANITA: From unhappiness and vast oppression --

MOTHER: From dreams denied and truth dismembered --

JUANITA: From our mortal flesh as brief and cheap as morning dew.

CRISTINA: (*Brings her shawl to her shoulders.*) No more must any of us --

MOTHER: (*Brings her shawl to her shoulders.*) Man, woman, or child --

JUANITA: (*Brings her shawl to her shoulders.*) Walk the dry road of fear with a voiceless heart.

ALL: Because only we can turn the burden into song.

JUANITA: It can be now.

CRISTINA: It can be here.

MOTHER: It can be us.

ALL: Yes.

*[As each speaks, she will take off her shawl and hold it out in front of her.]*

MOTHER: Because love --

JUANITA: Because love --

CRISTINA: Rises to life --

MOTHER: Rises to life --

JUANITA: Over the dry bones of death.

MOTHER: Over the dry bones of death.

ALL: El amor sube a la vida sobre los huesos secos de la muerte.

*[In one coördinated movement, they wrap their shawls and present a line of strong women. The light remains on the three of them, then bumps to black.]*

(June 2000)



## Meeting John Doe

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I have always liked Frank Capra's *Meet John Doe* (screenplay by Robert Riskin) about a media-created celebrity named "John Doe" coöpted for political gain by his creators. This tale about celebrity, entertainment, and politics is still as fresh and lively today as it was in 1941.



The John Doe that John Doe meets  
is unlike any man he has ever met -  
including himself.

In that same year, the Screen Guild Theater did a radio play version, and there is a musical theater adaptation as well. (The movie and script have been in the public domain since 1968.) But there's never been a dramatic stage version. Until now.

On October 9, 2012, the company I co-founded, Block & Tackle Productions, put on a reading of *Meet John Doe*, adapted from Riskin's screenplay. The adaptation went quite easily, once I figured out stage equivalents for what Capra did with the camera. Here's a list of the decisions I made concerning the stagecraft:

*Characters:* Of course Capra could job in any number of actors. I had two actors (male and female) play utility roles (e.g., the editor's secretary, John Doe's bodyguard) as a way to present a cavalcade of characters without breaking the budget.

*Scene Changes and Sets:* I hate when plays become about set changes. I like fluid shifts from one space into another. To allow for this, I created the minimum needed to set a scene, which can be moved on by stagehands or (I prefer) the actors themselves, something like the fade out/fade in of a film.

*Projections and Sound Design:* To streamline things further, I built in a strong projection and sound scheme, even using clips from the original movie.

That's the easy part. The more challenging work comes in making the story dramatically interesting. Not that Riskin's story isn't. In 1941, a newspaper wanting to increase its circulation runs a scam when it creates a fictional John Doe, an Everyman who threatens to jump off the roof of City Hall on Christmas Eve to protest the injustices of the world. They then hire a destitute man to become this John Doe, with the stipulation that on Christmas Day, he disappears with his payment in hand. However, his "protest" catches the attention of the nation, and an inadvertent political movement begins,

coöpted by the owner of the newspaper for his own political ends. It all concludes on the rooftop of City Hall on Christmas Eve.

The challenge to me was to keep some of its “1941-ness” (especially in the dialogue’s pace) while making it also feel contemporary without necessarily “contemporizing” it with updates.

First, wherever possible, I kept Riskin’s original words. But if they didn’t work, I changed them to what I wanted to hear while still keeping some “Riskin-ness” in the language.

Second, I also wanted my story idea to be “harder” than the story that comes out in the screenplay. In Riskin’s work, John Doe (real name: John Willoughby, played by Gary Cooper) and Ann Mitchell, the scam’s originator (Barbara Stanwyck), sort-of stumble into the evils they perpetrate. Doe is a decent man who becomes fooled by the wolves of the world, while Mitchell suffers a crisis of conscience about how she’s let herself be used and aches for redemption.

I wanted them both more active in their decision to go ahead with a dishonest scheme, so I made them both more decisive about the course they choose to follow, cleansing them of sentimentality and holding them responsible for their actions. Both John and Ann know what they’re setting up, and even if events quickly get away from them, they know full well what deals with the devil they have made.

Finally, I wanted the end of the story to be “harder” than the one Capra settled on - I wanted the ending to be the one that Riskin argued for but didn’t get. Capra wanted uplift at the end, but Riskin argued that the only course of action, given the story they’d set up, was to have John Willoughby take the jump John Doe had promised to take, now that everything had been lost and Willoughby’s life had become a sham. I sided with Riskin in my version.

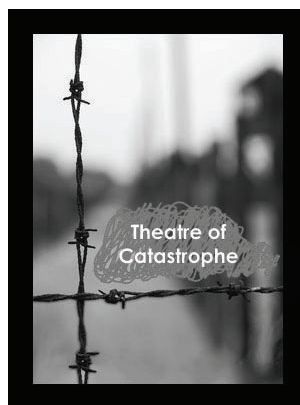
So, there it is: a renewal of an old movie that keeps the feel of the original without getting mired in nostalgia while freshening it up without obliterating the original by making it completely contemporary.

(November 2012)

## Howard Barker's "Theatre of Catastrophe"

I have just finished reading Howard Barker's *Arguments for a Theatre*, though it might be just as accurate to say that the book finished me.

Barker has been described as "the most terrifying export since the football hooligan," and just as the hooligan stomps hob-nail-booted through the garden of social niceties, Barker is lancingly acidic about what he sees as the homogenizing effect of the British national and commercial theatre establishment on ideas, actions, audiences, and culture. (Though Barker speaks specifically about Britain, with slight modifications his comments can apply to the American theatre as well.)



It is the wound for which we must be grateful, to endure the wound as a man drawn from a swamp endures the pain of the rope.

In Barker's view, this regime of "massaging theatre" needs to be defenestrated by what he calls his "Theatre of Catastrophe" so that real theatre, a "tragic theatre," can again breathe. I do not know how much of Barker I agree with, but I know that I have encountered ideas and arguments that I simply cannot dismiss.

Barker's model of a catastrophic theatre first has to be seen against what he believes is the state of contemporary theatre, which he variously labels as "populist" or "humanist" or "liberal":

The sterility of the contemporary theatre...follows from the theatre's sense of itself as an industry with a market, on the one hand, or a social service with a popular obligation, on the other.... Both of these positions require that the dramatist satisfy an audience in its perceived demands - entertainment or education. In attempting to satisfy these demands, the theatre slavishly performs functions more efficiently provided elsewhere and diminishes its particular power, poetry, the spoken voice, the hypnotism of the actor.

To Barker, this “market” theatre is aligned with an authoritarian culture (masked as a democracy) dedicated to making every secret of its populace transparent in order to better police them, what he calls “light as a *regime*.” A theatre that seeks to “throw light” on its subjects is, in Barker’s analysis, an accomplice in this social control.

How? First, by *lucidity* and *clarity*. The “dazzled culture [in the regime of light]...requires of art that it is - lucid. And if the text is to be lucid, the production must make its first ambition - clarity.” Critics and audiences insist on these “virtues” because they lead to the “elimination of the unhealthy state of not-knowing,” that is, a state of darkness, which could also be the home of secrets, sordidness, and “narratives it finds unpalatable.”

Second, by *message*. “The liberal theatre wants to give messages” because that is the inevitable pay-off of lucidity and clarity. These messages, “redolent of earnestness, responsibility, legislative/poetic romanticism” are a “sort of fake heroism” designed to offer the “great safety and security... of conscience-ridden observations, affirmations of shared values, humanistic platitudes” geared to “the spectacle of relentless harmony.”

Third, the message delivered by lucidity and clarity must be delivered through “the realist discourse.” Realism “presupposes a moral weakness in the audience, which must be presented with positive landmarks, like posts in an estuary, if it is not to be dangerously lost in the wastes of imagination.” “Real” speech, structured narratives, recognition, mirror held up to nature leading to “instant meaning” - all these devices and more must be used to make sure the audience does not get lost in imagination and comes to the “consensus of conscience and critique” required by the regime of light.

This “Theatre of Conscience,” as Barker calls it, “moves inexorably towards an art of anodyne humanism, in which the actors and the audience tacitly collaborate in an act of ‘saying’ and the theatre diminishes itself in the pursuit of the limited objective of communicating an idea...Behind this lies the notion of the author as a ‘good’ man or woman, whose trade is principally the dispensing of wisdom and whose vocation is the creation of harmony.”

The theatre thus created serves the interests of the larger regime by fostering an ersatz sense of moral agreement and downplaying or destroying (through criticism and the market) any theatre used for moral speculation outside the “consensus.”

Barker’s antidote? The re-placement of the pain of tragedy at the heart of the theatrical experience. Barker defines tragedy as

the most illegitimate of all art forms, the most devastating to social orders and consequently, the most de-civilizing, the darkest and yet simultaneously the most life-affirming, for precisely by standing so close to the rim of the abyss it delivers expression to the inexpressible, and stages emotions the so-called open society finds it almost impossible to contemplate.

He continues: "The secret of tragedy - its inviolable secret - its terrible power of dislocation - lies in the forbidden knowledge that...citizens have a fatal susceptibility to instincts which are perfectly incompatible with collective discipline." The "spectacle of human pain, of charismatic defeat that constitutes the fascination and strength" of tragedy is not pessimism or despair but the first steps, through "transgression" and "trespass," on a journey "intended to plunge beneath the ground of common belief and to test the ground of first principles."

This "anti-humanist" theatre will honor the independence of its audience by making no "compact" with it as to "entertainment, ideological instruction, humanist celebration or changed perceptions." Instead, inside the theatrical black box, which takes its "immense spiritual authority from the simple question 'what if...?'" , where "the imagination is wild and tragic,...its criminality unfettered [and] the unspeakable is spoken," the audience will be invited to turn from being "potential critics into collaborators and accomplices in an illicit act."

Inevitably, by replacing a moral accord between author and audience with a call to simultaneous moral *speculation* (which may or may not even have resolution, coherence, or legitimacy), Barker's catastrophic theatre will not "[offer] the reward...[but] will deliver the wound" of greater insight and complicity. The audience, so touched, "will endure the wound as a man drawn from a swamp endures the pain of the rope."

In a nutshell, the Theatre of Catastrophe "addresses itself to those who suffer the maiming of the imagination" and who have a desire, articulated or not, "for the restitution of moral speculation, which is the business of theatre." He continues:

The Theatre of Catastrophe is therefore a theatre for the offended....[It] is rooted in the idea of the soul, not as immortal form, not as a thing immune

from damage, but as innate knowledge of other life. In some, this knowledge is nothing more than a cherished hoard of stereotypes...[In] others, the Soul breaks with all images it senses corrupt or annexed by ideology (harmony, family, the public)... The Theatre of Catastrophe addresses these imperatives of the Soul [and] abhors reconciliation which is not won at terrible cost.

He ends by saying that this kind of theatre “demands more of its audience than all existing theatre.”

“Demands,” in fact, may be too mild a word for what Barker has in mind. To Barker, the only way a tragic theatre can help its audience go beyond conventional pieties into the home of “irrationality which is also home to desire” is through pain. His tragic theatre “declares pain is not only inevitable, it calls it necessary [and] makes a passion of pain” because the pain of the tragic theatre dissolves the tranquilizing dispensed by the liberal humanist society and its related theatre.

The “*ordeal* of the audience must be the first intention of the tragic theatre and the howling sound of breaking and strained strings its first polyphony.” Only through this ordeal in a theatre not infected by light and promising no relief from an existence predicated on pain and suffering can people reach deeply enough into themselves to recover their own humanity, establish a privacy uninvaded by the transparent society, and re-connect with their own sources of desire and imagination by rejecting those inflicted on them by commerce and liberalism.

As is clear by now, Barker’s Theatre of Catastrophe is committed to smashing the usual bonds between artist, actor, and audience so that something else can emerge - something anarchic and barbarous and steeped in pain, yet also because of that, unsparingly real and scathingly beautiful. And this is done to scourge people of the suffocating conformity imposed on them by society so that they can access their “pre-moral” selves and experience “the ecstasy of moral uncertainty.”

In terms of specific practices in the theatre of tragedy, Barker first insists upon creating a language as far away from natural speech as possible, a language that “breaks the bonds of the real, disrupts the familiar, scattered syntax of naturalism,...and draws the audience into a state of intoxication.” Once the ear is cleansed of “its domestic associations,” the audience member

will be able to hear, and then to speak, the “language of secrets...a form which brings to the surface - erupts from beneath the surface - the normally *unspoken*, the counter-discourse, the private.”

His staging suggestions, just as with his language, are designed to break audiences’ expectations about what theatre “is” and thus open up new possibilities for feeling and understanding. Instead of narrative comprehensibility, Barker wants to “deny narrative its authority by resorting to digression.” Instead of “alienation effects” devised to engage rationality, Barker wants to use alienating effects to actually alienate, as when he uses something like a completely unreliable chorus in his play *Golgo*. Instead of a “well-made” play, Barker will job in unthreaded elements, such as prologues which do not introduce the action, parables whose messages have nothing to do with the play’s actions, and unprovoked sound effects (such as the ghostly laughter in *The Last Supper*) that force an audience to speculate about meaning and connection.

In short, Barker’s stage practices disrupt normal expectations of theatre so that the audience can be in the position to experience something unexpected and eruptive.

But what about that *pain* thing? Sounds very much like “pain for your own good!” And, to be sure, there is a lot of that in Barker, just as there was in Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty. All those accumulated decades of naturalistic theatre practice, abetted by the state, must be stripped away if we, as individuals, are ever going to re-gain access to those fundamental sources of identity and will that define the “human” of human being.

This stripping away cannot be done without pain, but Barker means “pain” in a transformative sense, the pain that might be felt when old skin exfoliates and the nerves of the exposed skin burn with new sensations (what Barker called the “wound”).

However, for humans discarding the old skin does not happen simply because the season of ripeness has been reached: it is not *passive* and it is not organic. That painful ripeness - which in other contexts Barker calls “beauty” - must be reached by an act of will, and Barker wants to provide the means by which that will to transformation can be rehearsed, experienced, and quite possibly accomplished.

Through this *theatrical* sense of pain, terror, anxiety, and beauty, Barker sees himself as re-humanizing theatre, bringing it back to an essential state that has been corrupted by liberalism. He denies Aristotle’s promotion of

pity and terror as purgative (he calls the principles of catharsis and mimesis “suffocating” because they simply reinforce the suppressions of the collectivity) and Horace’s call for delight and instruction (he asserts “unequivocally...the abnegation of use-value” for the theatre). To bring individuals to the threshold of both the abyss and beauty of their own liberty, theatre must reach for its

banished powers - pain, poetry, and the actor’s voice - [and] discover in chaos and in pain the substance of social disorder, for the irony of art was always this, that it lent power to the powerless by its embracing of the forbidden, not by its reiteration of collective norms. Theatre for what, therefore? For nothing, for no end....like all great arts, for itself alone, and the tragedy is written because it cannot tolerate the strain of silence anymore.

Barker’s is not an easy theatre. Some will be repelled, some confused and disheartened. But some, like the woman in the First Prologue of *The Bite Of The Night*, will return, not because of what they find, but because of what they don’t find:

And she listened to everything  
Understanding some things  
But not others  
Laughing rarely, and always without knowing why  
Sometimes suffering disgust  
Sometimes thoroughly amazed  
And in the light again said

If that’s art I think it is hard work  
It was beyond me  
So much of it beyond my actual life

But something troubled her  
Something gnawed her peace  
And she came a second time, armoured with friends

Sit still, she said...

And in the light again said

That is art, it is hard work



And one friend said, too hard for me  
And other said if you will  
I will come again

Because I found it hard I felt honoured

For Barker, in that woman's "not-finding" begins all manner of possibilities for liberation, moral speculation, individual rebellion, and stringent beauties. The catastrophe that Barker wants to spark, the "wound" he wants to inflict, is like the violence of a volcanic explosion: the ripping apart of the existing topography creating new soils, a dying that also brings life back to life.

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Is Barker my new be-all and end-all? The academic part of my brain deals out all sorts of defenses and critiques that pick apart the inevitable lacks and obsessions of Barker's essays. But this dissing game is not sufficient or even relevant. Barker's attack on contemporary theatre is meant to be electro-shock without therapeutic rationale. Electrical words inserted like probes deeply, and savagely, into long-dried-out muscles carry a voltage of vitriol and cutting common sense until the muscles either recall their strengths and move, move, move - or frag into dust.

I have not yet decided how far to let this beast into the house of my own writing, since, as my other essays clearly show, I possess that inclination to teach and heal that Barker wants to oblivion. And, all truth being told, I would like to succeed in the terms set by the business Barker detests - and "Barkerizing" my writing is a sure way to derail that.

But he doesn't go away; he nags and itches like a thistle burr. The pressure of the hooligan boot against the face makes Barker's manifesto have that "vaunted" edge that so many contemporary works say they have but don't. And I cannot deny categorically - as much as I would like to - that the crunch of boot against cheekbone is completely unpleasant. Shiver down the spine: who knows where that kind of thinking will lead? Perhaps better to just write what makes for comfort and success... Yes, yes, of course... But then there is that jeweled serrated beast pacing outside the latched house - and the locks ache to open.

(December 2001)

## Howard Barker Strikes Again

I recently saw Lee Blessing's play *Going to St. Ives*, where I spent a workman-like evening of theatre. A full-length two-hander, the play's story pairs a renowned British eye surgeon with the mother of an African dictator who has come to London for surgery. The doctor eventually asks a favor of the mother: to convince her son to release four imprisoned doctors. She agrees, for a price: that the doctor procure a poison that she can use to kill her son and end his reign of terror. Against her ethics and common sense, she agrees, and thus ends Act I.



"How should we enter death? Is this not the subject of all philosophy and all theatre, despite the protestations of all philosophy and all theatre that they are instruments for living?"

Act II takes place in the African country, in the mother's house. She has been condemned for the murder, and the doctor, who has been working to get her released, has come, as part of an agreement with the government, to spirit the mother into exile. The mother refuses, choosing instead to suffer the execution the officials have planned for her as a way of redeeming herself for the murder of her son. The play ends with the two women bonded in tragedy, staring off into silence drinking tea while waiting for the executioners.

What made it workman-like was that the machinery of the play was so transparent. I could predict just when Blessing would job in the plot twist, the reveal that shifts the action, the second act monologue (in this case, by the mother) crafted to grip our hearts, the descent of the lights that signals the audience to prepare to clap. All the modules were expertly in place, and the ending note of sentimentalized mourning gives the audience just the right moral frisson that convinces them that they have been to the lip of Hell-Mouth and come back to tell the tale.

Perhaps I had this reaction because in the foyer, to while away the wait-time before the house opened, I read further into British playwright Howard Barker's new book of theatre-thoughts, *Death, The One, and the Art of Theatre*. Everything Barker says in this book, just as he did in *Arguments for the Theatre*, felt like a tonic blow against the machined apparatus I was about to see.

The book is a little difficult to summarize because Barker writes it as a series of aperçus rather than an extended argument, but he makes a primary

distinction between *the theatre*, which Barker links with congeniality, and *the art of theatre*, which he links with tragedy. He draws the primary distinction between them this way: “The play of the theatre asks *how shall we live?* The tragedy asks *how should we die?*” (94) He goes on to draw out the differences even more finely:

Since theatre ceased to make death its subject it surrendered its authority over the human soul. Since it allowed itself to be incorporated into mundane projects of political indoctrination and social therapy it abdicated its power. Always theatre is suborned by the idealism of its makers. Always it is traduced by the sentimental. In the art of theatre we pity the idealist as one pities the man with a fatal disease. This pity is strictly circumscribed. Whilst many have tried to make hospitals from theatres we keep our stage infection-free (2).

Tragedy, for Barker, is the sole source of theatre’s power. Tragedy is synonymous with death, but not death as the enemy or spoiler of life because “life,” to Barker, as it was to Ecclesiastes, is a vale of misery that cannot be escaped, and death offers release from, not betrayal of, life. The purpose of any art, insofar as art can have any purpose at all, is to give us the means to make something beautiful of our inevitable dissolution before that dissolution takes us away.

This beauty is not meant to lift us, (en)lighten us, heal us, teach us, but simply allow us to live without sentimentality and hope and other moral delusions and make an ecstasy of their disappearance. As Barker says, “How should we enter death? Is this not the subject of all philosophy and all theatre, despite the protestations of all philosophy and all theatre that they are instruments for *living?*” (18)

All of this, and more, in Barker’s book may appear counter-intuitive, that is, countering the watered-down Christian ethos we bring in to the theatre of redemption and forgiveness and resolved conflicts and just desserts and bald-faced sentimentality demonstrated by crying and identification: “The appetite for identification, which characterizes *the theatre*, has no place in tragedy, where the death of the protagonist is perfection, i.e., never a cause for tears... debased democracies make tears the lingua franca of collectivity (‘See *how human I am*’ says the weeping politician, ‘*I’m just like you...*’) (90)

But Barker is trying to put into play a theatrical practice that allows us to see as gifts what we might “normally” consider debits, and by these gifts craft an honest life in the face of a death that will consume us all at any moment.

Thus, *Going to St. Ives*. With Barker in mind, Blessing’s machinery became all too apparent, his intentions steeped in the usual *modus operandi* of arc and conflict and well-worn moral niceties. It was hard to be engaged with something so mechanical, no matter how much skill the machinist had put into covering over the cogs and wheels.

Barker is not a warm writer; his aesthetic is astringent. But there is something bracing for me about being in the company of such a thinker who asks that we risk being who we think we aren’t or shouldn’t be in order to understand who we are before it all goes into oblivion.

(April 2005)

## **Theatre of the Oppressed with the Oppressed**

In 2000 I had the electric pleasure of working with a group of people using Augusto Boal's "Theatre of the Oppressed" techniques with male prisoners at a Massachusetts correctional facility. Yes: using theatre of the oppressed with the oppressed. Here is an account of that year.

\* \* \* \* \*

Boal, who died in 2009, crystallized his ideas in his 1985 *Theatre of the Oppressed*, where he explained how to use theatre "games" (Invisible Theatre, Image Theatre, Forum Theatre, and so on) to practice how to overcome oppressions. He later extended this approach to look at psychological oppressions through "Cops in the Head" and "Rainbow of Desires" and to draft legislation when elected to Brazil's Parliament. He explained his work this way:

Hamlet says in his famous speech to the actors that theatre is a mirror in which may be seen the true image of nature, of reality. I wanted to penetrate this mirror, to transform the image I saw in it, and bring that transformed image back to reality: to realize the image of my desire. I wanted it to be possible for the 'spectators' in Forum Theatre to transgress, to break the conventions, to enter the mirror of a theatrical fiction, rehearse the forms of struggle, and then return to reality with the images of their desires.

### **Coming to the Prison**

My comrades - Joyce (a minister), Maria Beatriz (my wife and a social worker), Geoff (a social worker), and Dev (actor and director) - had all been thinking about Boal when Joyce offered us a chance to work with men in a program she ran called "Growing Together," based on *Houses of Healing* and dedicated to teaching "emotional literacy." The men had learned how to face the issues raised by their crimes, including anger, violence, confession, sorrow, apology, and restitution, as well as how to weather prison life without resentment or resignation.



Theatre as research for the changes we wish to see art help us create in our lives.

Joyce thought it might be helpful if they had a chance to do some theatre work and invited us to be part of Growing Together. (Of course, we had to “package” the program a little to get it past. We could not say, out loud, that we wanted to work with prisoners on practicing ways they could resist oppression. Corrections officials are humorless about such things.)

On our first visit, I thought of Arlo Guthrie, in “Alice’s Restaurant,” sitting on the Group W bench. We waited in a cold reception room, all metal stored in a locker (we had to pay a quarter for the key) while officers behind the Plexiglas vetted our paperwork. Then the thick electric door slid back, and we paraded into the “trap,” the foyer between the outside and inside worlds. There they stamped us with an invisible ink and ordered us to walk through a metal detector where, in the center, we had to pirouette to be scanned from all sides. One of us - a random selection each time - had to be strip-searched, done in a small windowless side room.

Only then, when we’d been scoured and noted and taken through two more “traps,” were we allowed into the first circle of those on the inside.

One more check-point, and then into the room, where 16 men - all ages, all shapes, all colors, all human - sat in a ring of plastic chairs, waiting. The second circle - the real circle. And then began a year of some of the best theatre work we have ever had the honor of doing.

### **Working with the Men: Part 1**

Yes, they are “criminals,” some having committed some very dark crimes. Yes, they are “prisoners,” owned by a correctional system with no real interest in their correction (this program, and all programs at the prison, are voluntary; the state provides no resources for education or rehabilitation). But unless they are the sweetest and most masterful con men ever to walk the earth, we have found them generous and affectionate, and, in terms of the theatre work, open, charged, and connected right down to their guts. Despite - or perhaps because of - their confinement, they come at this work with a force that many teaching instructors would envy. In short, they are still human beings, no matter how hard the society tries to tell us otherwise. Their “criminality” does not limit or delete their humanity.

Our work with them over the year has been done in three parts: 1) to introduce them to Boal and his techniques, 2) to work specifically on Forum Theatre, and 3) Cops in the Head.

In Part 1, we worked a lot with image and its power to evoke emotion and response. Much of Boal's prep work with actors is "pre-word," that is, investigating how the "instrument" of the body conveys power and powerlessness even before a word of command or insult surfaces.

For instance, in one of his games, Image of the Oppressor, participants choose up in pairs, A and B. Each person thinks of an event when someone made them feel powerless, and with that event in mind, each person puts himself in the place of the oppressor. Then A, using only his eyes, will try to get B to feel the powerlessness that A felt in that event, and B is to respond as truthfully as possible using only his own eyes to respond to what he sees in A's eyes.

Then the "joker" (Boal's term for the facilitator, or, as Boal calls it, the "difficultator") will say, "Now add the face," and A will add the face to his effort to exude the power that caused the powerlessness, and B responds with his own eyes and added face. The joker will then say to add a tilt of the head, then the shoulders, then arms and upper body, then the whole body (while staying in place), then moving and adding a sound, and only at the very end to add words. After a few moments, the exercise is stopped and the pair reverses the process.

The effects of this game are powerful - many on either side, powerful or powerless, will break it off as images of fathers, abusers, football coaches, and the like come rushing in. In the debriefing that follows, they get what Boal was getting at: one does not need words to press the boot into someone's face. Images, poses, an unblinking glare: they can all do the work. And they also understand, as we explain it to them, that the game is to sensitize them to connect with the other actors on a stage in a scene, that intention can be broadcast by body shape and gesture, and that they need to be aware of this in order to respond.

We also did lots of games just for fun and warm-up, like Bomb and Shield and Colombian Hypnosis, to get them out of their heads and teach them how to shape space to connect with other people. I can honestly say I have had some of the loopyest and most kid-like enjoyment I have ever had as these men, supposedly hardened criminals, the dregs of the society, rolled on the floor, made animal noises, carried invisible weights, and otherwise acted like engaged fools. In these unbuckled moments, as Boal intended, all the judgments get hung to one side so that we can come to this theatre work with our humanity in full and flapping view.

We stretched this image-power work in several ways, usually by having them make sculptures and body-machines on topics they chose, such as injustice, invisibility, racism, dignity. In these more formalized exercises, they would come up with jolting and piercing choices, things that none of us would have ever thought of.

In our last session before a summer break, we asked them, in the final exercise, what they wanted to say to each other that would carry them over the summer and help us re-connect when we got together in the fall. They could use any image, and they had to connect a word to their image as they made it. A small time for thinking, then the floor was open. And these 16 men, one by one, slowly and deliberately, sculpted a gift for each other and for us that in its simple yet fluted shape, the air annotated with a “peace” or “remember” as each man joined, left the space taut and thrilling all around us. Live theatre, yes - full-bodied and unfractioned.

### **Working with the Men: Part 2**

When we reconnected with them after a summer break, we wanted to bring them to Forum Theatre, Boal’s method of using theatre to rehearse possible challenges to oppression. The image work in Part 1 was “snapshots”; Forum Theatre was the snapshots turned into film, into motion. Forum Theatre provided a natural follow-on to the work we had already done with them.

In Forum Theatre, a group of “actors” collaboratively come up with a story about oppression. The story need not be a “grand” story. A story about a brother and a sister who are treated differently when they want to do something outside the house - the boy can go out but the girl must have a chaperon - would provide a perfect core.

The actors then “rehearse” the story into a play: without scripts, they come up with scenes, dialogue, action, and so on, all done collaboratively. The only requirement is that the play have a clear protagonist - the one who is being oppressed - and clear antagonists - the oppressors. The joker helps them shape and focus and, if the actors are stuck, can give them a “mode of rehearsal” to help get them unstuck - speaking the lines faster or slower, doing everything in dumbshow or with great exaggeration, and so on. Then, when the scene is “set,” the actors perform the piece for the audience.

Now, the audience in Boal Forum Theatre are not just passive listeners; Boal calls them “spect-actors” (an obvious play on “spectator”) because they have an important “acting” part in the process. As Boal says, the intention of Forum Theatre is “to transform the spectator into the protagonist of the



theatrical action and, by this transformation, to try to change society rather than contenting ourselves with interpreting it.”

After the actors present the scene once, they repeat the scene. However, during this second go-around, any spect-actor can shout, “Stop!” and take the place of the protagonist. The scene then goes forward, with the new protagonist bringing a “solution” to the scene to force it to a new conclusion.

The antagonists, though, as Boal points out, are the conservative forces; their job is to make sure the scene ends the way it is supposed to end, as it was rehearsed. They try to blunt, deflect, or beat down the challenge brought by the new protagonist.

The protagonist has to play the game within certain limits. The “solution” brought forward cannot be magical or unconnected to the action at hand; it has to arise, in some natural way, from the given situation. And if the solution the new protagonist brings forward does not work, any spect-actor can shout “Stop!” again and try something new, and the protagonist on stage must give way to the new protagonist coming on. This process can go on for as long as the spect-actors and actors want it to; Boal describes performances that go on for hours and hours.

Boal’s intentions are clear with Forum Theatre, as indeed they are with all aspects of Theatre of the Oppressed: what happens on stage, in the safety of the theatre, can become what he calls a “dress rehearsal” for trying to make actual change in real life. There is no guarantee that a solution hit upon by a spect-actor/protagonist will actually work in the real world; but, at the same time, the spect-actors and actors leaving the theatre at the end of the day can bring away fresh approaches to meeting their oppressive conditions and use these new ideas as a spark to craft actual strategies to free themselves.

In the prison, we took them through the entire process of preparation, rehearsal, and performance. First, we polled the group about themes they felt were important to address; the two they decided on was racism and the invisibility of prisoners to the general population. We then divided the entire group of 16 into two smaller groups of eight and gave each group one of the themes.

Then, each group of eight paired off, and in their dyads, they told each other a story, from their own lives, about some event of oppression that fit the theme. Then, still in their pairs, they had to blend elements from each individual story into a third story that did not belong to either man but came from their combined experiences.

Two pairs became a quartet and they joined their two “drafts” into another combined story; and finally all eight took these two new “drafts” and refined them into a single story that had bits from everyone’s experience but belonged to the group as a collaborated item.

Then we got them out of their chairs and into rehearsal, where they crafted all the dialogue, blocking, and narrative arc. After that, each group gave a “dress rehearsal” in front of the other group for critique, and then each group took the critiques back into the rehearsal process to refine the piece.

They took naturally to the process, being a pretty extroverted group of guys to begin with, pushing themselves to focus, acting as their own “jokers,” coming up with clever solutions for knots or dead-ends, having no inhibitions about taking on any role (one man had to play another man’s wife, and neither showed the slightest hesitation in putting on those masks), all of which showed a real affinity for stagework.

And finally, the performances themselves, where each spect-actor jumping into the place of the protagonist pushed the limits of the available solutions until ways emerged where a clear path to a greater freedom could be seen.

One example will have to do as a demonstration for the whole process. In the piece on the invisibility of prisoners, there was a scene where three men (the prisoners) were being “processed” into the institution. As originally drafted, the scene was completely degrading; the prisoners were berated, insulted, minimized. But the various spect-actors who jumped into the scene found ways to resist the overbearing authority without bringing further damage onto themselves: through a turn of phrase, a slightly straighter spine, an unexpected response that threw off the rhythm of deletion. They thus found ways to maintain a dignity in a place that originally gave them no options for that.

In Boal’s terms, they were able to use theatre to rehearse a solution to an oppressive situation. There was no guarantee it would work in “real” life; but the act of rehearsing it changed the people doing the act, and that change could be carried forward into the world like a seed.

That day ended on a high and deep note. Briefly, we had all been brought where live theatre can sometimes take us, where the ego disconnects and what we call our humanity or our essence or our better angels stand in easy and affectionate reach, not guarded, not dim, in common, in communion. In

theatre we had not only found a momentary solution to each of the stories; in theatre, we had also found a momentary solution to our distances and fears. This is, ultimately, what Boal wants his theatre practice to do: dissolve barriers to true connections.

### **Working with the Men: Part 3**

Boal's early work in Latin America was often done under repressive conditions. When he came to Europe in more-or-less exile, he found a puzzle. In countries nominally democratic and unrepressive, people were still suffering various tortures and constrictions, with high rates of self-destructive behavior in the midst of affluent conditions. What was going on?

From this initial observation he developed a way to "tweak" TOTO to look at the "cops in the head" and the "rainbow of desires" we each have that prevent us from doing something that, objectively, we have every opportunity and skill to do. "Cops in the Head" (the irony of the name was not lost on the prisoners) became our next theatre venture.

Setting up a "Cops" story, as in all work with Boal, goes through a process of unlayering an event. The story, which is decided upon collaboratively by the men, involves an event when the protagonist was prevented from doing something that he wanted to do. Dev gave an example of a story told to him by a friend. His friend, a black man, could not make himself walk through a group of four white men standing around the door of a subway train even though they did not act in any bigoted manner and he had no reason to think that they would not have simply moved aside for him. Something prevented him from doing that, and he waited until the next train stop to get off, even though it was not his station.

Once the story is set, then it is acted out/improvised: this is the picture of "reality." Then the actor playing the protagonist - the one unable to make the decision to act - selects members of the audience as his "cops." These are the voices that he recognizes as being the ones in his head that did not permit the action to take place. He names them and places them at a relative distance to himself, as a way of representing the "weight" they have: more powerful voices are closer and so on.

The audience can also suggest possible voices. They come and name themselves, and the protagonist can decide to keep any of the voices if he finds them relevant (or none, if he is content with what he himself has named).

Once the “cops” are selected, they come up with “scripts” for who they are - in essence, running the words in the external world that the protagonist hears in the internal mind. With the cop scripts set, various spect-actors then, through a series of commands from the joker, become “anti-bodies” to the cops, coming up with counter-scripts to the cop scripts. In a process of dialoguing the two scripts, ways come out where the cops can be dispatched, neutralized, or made into allies, depending on what the protagonist is trying to accomplish.

We did the cops exercise twice, with the second time much more powerful because it involved a simple act that happened almost every day in their lives. One of the men, who became the protagonist, told about an incident in the yard when he was talking with a person and another person came by. The protagonist did not want this second person, who had some status in the yard, to look down on him for talking to the first person. So the protagonist simply abandoned the first person to go talk to the second person - in short, succumbing to a kind of peer pressure - even though he wanted to stay with the first person because he preferred his company. (Apparently this kind of dismissive situation happened every day in the prison, and it was one of the thorns that, even though minor, caused a constant major irritation.)

The protagonist then chose his voices. Interestingly, he set up two “friends,” one very scared and one very aggressive, as a kind of binary star system orbiting around a common center of gravity point of combined violence and fear. Another “friend” was a “solid man” (slang for a kind of aristocrat in the prison), and finally his uncle. We went through all the unlayering and scripting and ended up with a powerful and disturbing session.

But it was in the debriefing where the rays of revelation streamed in. As Boal intended, the source of the solution to the “cops in the head” is not found in either banishment of the cops or in recruiting equally powerful anti-bodies (which could, without much problem, turn into their own cops). Instead, the dialogue between the cops and anti-bodies held the clues needed by the protagonist. More than once the actors playing the cops and anti-bodies remarked that as they dialogued for the protagonist, they started to come up with ways to solve the core problem because, through the dialogue process, they were able imaginatively to move into the emotional space of the “other.”

And that is a fundamental element of Boal’s “cops” work: the oppressors in the head are shifted out of their places of power when the protagonist, through the agency of the anti-bodies, can stand in the place of the oppressor’s power and see the world from that angle. By sharing the

place rather than being in ineffectual opposition to it, the protagonist can then rehearse ways to counter-script the cops' scripts. And, as is also crucial in Boal's work, seeing the world from the vantage of the "other" is always a way to negate the temptation to dehumanize in order to control.

They ended this session with one of the most touching gifts I have ever received. One of the men unfolded this small rectangle of paper and from it read a Thanksgiving Day blessing that they had selected about giving thanks and caring for one another. In a place not noted for affection, we all got out of our "other" skins for a moment and linked spirit to spirit, none of us defined but simply there and fully witnessed.

### **(Not The) Final Word**

Boal's work does not appeal to everyone. I have many actor friends who politely glaze over whenever I talk about this work to them, and some disagree with it completely, saying that theatre and politics do not, and should not, mix. But for us, we have experienced what we feel is real theatre - not the machinery of the "industry" but that sacred place we all say theatre both inhabits and protects, that takes the best of us (even at our worst) and makes the best out of it.

No doubt, what gives an added fillip of urgency and "edge" to the work we are doing is the location of our "stage," in the belly of the beast, so to speak. And our "actors" are not people who, at the end of the day, go home to check messages, set up new auditions, and fret about how they are going to make it in "the business." They inhabit the lowest and most vilified rung of our society, forever branded as defective. They run the voltage of their very present-tense lives straight into the work we give to them.

To be sure, some of their enthusiasm for what we offered came simply from the chance to do something new to break the routine. But they also entered this process already engaged in their own version of Theatre of the Oppressed in the prison, only it played itself out as silent resistance or isolated patience or anything else that could help them maintain some sense of their own dignity and humanity. What we offered was a way for them to take these sullen or inchoate or silenced "scripts" and give them air, light, and a hearing. We really did not give them something completely new; we just made a new vocabulary available and marked out some paths they could follow as they brought themselves up to the surface.

And this is not to say that we "saved" them, or that Boal saved them. Long before we got there, these men had been on personal journeys to find

their own honest redemption and to make amends for what they had done; this is what the Growing Together program is all about. Even if the society at large will never really believe that someone who killed another person can be redeemed enough to be accepted back into the human community, these men believe that they will find the ways to come to peace with themselves and with those whom they have hurt. What we brought when we brought Boal to them was simply another tool for them to use as they sculpt themselves into human beings.

Yes, some of these men have done terrible things. But they do not stop being humans because of that, even if the calculus of the prevailing law-and-order mentality zeroes them out and sums up that they have forfeited any affection from the society that has imprisoned them. In the oppressive conditions of the prison, our work can give them a few hours of lightness and help them to continue to calibrate their lives so that they can find a way to be human and stay sane. Again, this is not to deny what they have done, but it is also to recognize that they are not only what they have done.

Furthermore, given what we have read about the pathology of the prison system in this country, our work is a small way to put a brake on the incarcerated society America seems to be becoming. (We consider gated communities as part of the prison society, only at the other end of the spectrum.) We could do this through policy work - and we might. We could do this through polemic and agitation - and we do have plans to work on a theatre piece based on their stories and, if we can swing it, on stories gathered through interviews of the prison guards.

But for now, given our talents and spirits, working with these men, using the gift of Boal's teachings, is our way of using theatre to make our common ground less vindictive, more forgiving, ultimately freer and fairer.

(December 2000)

## What I Should Do When Race-Baited: Part 1

What is an audience? And what is the moral responsibility of actors/company to an audience? I had these questions jabbed between my ribs when I attended Classic Theatre of Harlem's production of Jean Genet's *The Blacks*.

Production values, cast energy, presence, articulation - superb. But halfway through a two-hour production (without intermission) came the issue of the knitting needles. In an improv clearly carpentered into the production (but not called for in Genet's script), one of the characters, Village, steps out of the circus atmosphere of the show, breaks the fourth and all the walls, to ask an audience member to hold the knitting needles.



What is an audience? And what is the moral responsibility of actors/company to an audience?

To continue, I am going to excerpt the letter I sent to them and all of their identified funding sources, a letter written in a rage that still boils in me, even if at a lower temperature now than then.

\* \* \* \* \*

February 18, 2003

Christopher McElroen, Co-Founder and Executive Director  
The Classical Theatre of Harlem  
c/o Harlem School of the Arts  
645 St. Nicholas Avenue  
New York, NY 10030

Dear Mr. McElroen:

On Saturday, February 15, I attended a performance of *The Blacks* and as part of the performance witnessed the deliberate humiliation of two audience members by one of your actors (a humiliation, according to several reviews, which is apparently a deliberate part of the show). I write this letter to you out of anger and dismay (and no small measure of shame for my not having spoken up during the incident). And before you congratulate yourself that my visceral response rises out of the artistry of the performance, let me tell that it comes in reaction to the

failure of your company's artistry and to a mean-spiritedness that, to me, has no place in the theatre.

As I saw it on Saturday, the character of Village (J. Kyle Manzay) first deliberately cajoled an audience member (a woman) to come up on the stage to get the knitting needles from him. She did not want to participate and said so several times, but Mr. Manzay continued to press her, saying, in several variations, that if she did not participate, he would "clown on her" for the rest of the evening. Finally, she agreed to come on the stage.

The cajoling seemed good-natured enough at first (in line with how the actors greeted the audience as it entered) until he accused the woman of reaching for the knitting needles like (I paraphrase) "reaching for a brownstone in Harlem." Said with a smile, to be sure, but no one in the audience missed the comparison's acid edge. It went downhill from there into Mr. Manzay's high-handed harangue of her as a racist until he released her back to her seat.

Later, when Mr. Manzay asked for the knitting needles back, he enlisted her companion to come up onstage to make the hand-off, and proceeded, in an even more vulgar fashion, to denigrate the man, making him get on his knees to simulate the "three-fifths" slave ratio of the Constitution and generally tarring this person whom he did not know with a vicious stereotypical racism.

What angered me so much about what happened? Every time I walk into a theatre I expect that I walk into a safe place, a place where the company putting on their performance will honor my presence and respect my integrity as a co-participant in what they want to do. "Safe," to me, means a contract between performers and audience that within these walls we will take a journey together.

That journey may disturb, provoke, anger, wrench, offend - but I will endure whatever riles the waters if I can trust that underlying everything that happens in front of me and to me is a based upon a shared humanity and a sense of mutual human frailty. In short, I will make the journey if I can



assume that while I am there, I will not be treated like an ignorant beast that needs correction.

You and your company broke that contract on Saturday night. You singled out two strangers, about whom you knew nothing, and trashed their characters by associating them with outmoded stereotypes and accusing them, without evidence, of racist beliefs.

You also exploited the audience by relying upon their good manners not to interfere, just as you later abused their trust by isolating people of color in the audience from everyone else, assuming, again without evidence, that every person of color brought up on that stage, simply because of pigment, stood in solidarity with what you were trying to do and say. In short, by descending to insult and false assumptions about racial identity and unity, you failed as humanists and artists.

Should my anger stand as a sign that your performance succeeded because it generated controversy and passionate response? No. As I said, I will admit that I felt ashamed afterwards for not denouncing what had happened on the stage, and I will not deny that that shame, in no small part, prompts this letter.

But this anger also comes from your demonstration of what appears to me as unearned arrogance and poisonous closed-mindedness. It comes from your exploitation of people's good faith and trust. And it comes from an intense sadness that you used theatre, an art to which I have dedicated whatever talents I own, for such retrograde and reactionary purposes.

I have enjoyed CTH performances in the past. No longer. And no longer will I recommend to friends and associates that they support the theatre. What you have done is unforgivable, and it will not be forgiven.

\* \* \* \* \*

So, back to my original questions: What is an audience? And what is the moral responsibility of actors/company to an audience? And, given my

own failure to act on that night, what, as a fellow member of the audience, is my custodial and collective responsibility to other members of the audience?

Here are my rough answers. What an audience “is” depends upon when they pay. Livingston Taylor, James Taylor’s brother, once said that what a performer does to and for an audience depends upon whether they pay going in or going out. If they pay going in, then the performer has no right to harangue them unless they know ahead of time that that is the meal being served. If they pay going out (think of the collection basket), then the performer can try anything, and if the audience likes it, they’ll pay; if not, they won’t.

The method of payment, then, sets up a moral contract that should be honored by the performer. We all paid money “going in” to see *The Blacks*. Thus, we did not pay money to see people humiliated or be ambushed by stupidity. To me, then, CTH broke a trust with the audience, treating them as if they were a “going-out” audience when, in fact, they had our money in their pocket and our unsuspecting butts in the seats.

And my own failure to act? The letter-writing is just the intellectual’s way of absolving cowardice. The right thing to do would have been to rise, yell, break the spell of audience courtesy, “ride to the rescue,” and brave appearing as the idiot spoilsport.

(Actually, my nephew designed a much better counter-attack, less individualistic, more theatrical and collaborative. With friends, devise a kind of Boal “invisible theatre” piece: buy tickets, and when the moment comes, hijack the show. Use theatre to combat theatre, use the artifice to expose the artificial. Unfortunately, given the lack of funds and too-busy schedules, I could not get this together, but it has a rough justice that appeals to me.)

I haven’t received a response yet from the theatre (and I won’t be surprised if I don’t), but I still wrestle with what I should have done that night. Yet in that wrestling and my sense of failure, I find embedded, ironically, a re-affirming of why I have joined my life to live theatre.

The lesson the Classic Theatre of Harlem wanted me to learn about racism and white guilt rolled off my back. But the roiling in my stomach and brain made me feel alive, whole-body engaged. When we can create theatre that does this in an honorable way, then we do something no other art form can do. In fact, it is important enough to devote a lifetime to learning how to do it - and hoping at least once that you can pull it off.

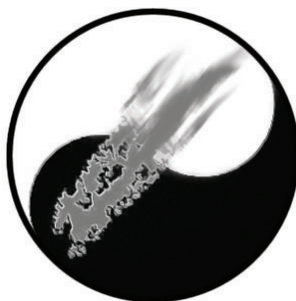
(March 2003)

## What I Should Do When Race-Baited: Part 2

What was the response?

A month later - nothing from nobody.

Finally, in late March I contacted my friend at the New York State Council on the Arts (I will call her Hannah) - she was on the “cc:” list for the letter - and asked her if she had ever received the letter. Here was her reply:



Why is there still blood on the tracks  
when it comes to black and white in this  
country?

Oh, the letter caused such a crisis. I have mixed feelings about it. I think we should all express our opinions, but your letter might have lost this company funding. And, Michael, they are an excellent and necessary company. One moment, with which you took issue, one artistic choice, should not imperil a company. I didn't see the show, so can't comment directly. But most of the NYSC staff - black and white - did, and felt quite differently- thankfully.

From your description, I probably would have lauded their courage in offending or provoking an audience, while most of the dreck I see requires stupefied passivity. That's what makes horse-racing.

In any case, and I say this with love, as a righteous and sometimes hot-headed person, I urge you to consider in the future engaging with the artists - giving them feedback and not potentially injuring the livelihood of the sincere and hard-working group.

Really, I say turn your anger at THE ROUNDABOUT and Lincoln Center and others that NEVER hire women or people of color, produce plays that are sexist, morally and artistically bankrupt, eat up the majority of public funding while catering to terrifically affluent old white subscribers whose tickets are subsidized by your tax dollars. Or just vigorously support the organizations you admire. More than half of them will soon be gone. Hoping *you are well*.

Here was my response to her (interspersed with quotations from her original):

Hannah, thank you for letting me know about the response to the letter. Yours is the first and only answer - neither of the theatre's co-artistic directors ever responded.

Your response made me (re)think a great deal about the event and my response, and if I can presume upon your patience, I'd like to respond (briefly) to what you sent me.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Oh, the letter caused such a crisis. I have mixed feelings about it. I think we should all express our opinions, but your letter might have lost this company funding.*

Was this an actual possibility - that one letter would carry such weight? You mention that other NYSC staff saw the show, saw it differently than I did, and that "thankfully" they felt differently - so I am assuming that their funding is still secure. In any case, I wouldn't have said anything different even if I thought their funding was at stake - if their point was to provoke a response, then they or the funders can't really complain when a response comes in, regardless of its shape or heat, as long as it's honest.

\* \* \* \* \*

*...they are an excellent and necessary company.*

I don't disagree - I liked their adaptation of *Native Son* - but, again, they are not exempt from what they provoke.

\* \* \* \* \*

*From your description, I probably would have lauded their courage in offending or provoking an audience, while most of the dreck I see requires stupefied passivity.*

After the seeing the show, and then again after reading your words, I wrestled with that word "courage" - were they

courageous in what they did? what does that word mean in this context? was there a real risk at stake for them?

After chewing on this, I have to say that they probably thought they were courageous in being so provocative, but, to me, given the power imbalance between audience and performer (that “audience courteousness” I mentioned in my letter), what they did was not courageous. I found it insulting - not so much the racial content of the provocation, but the way the audience people were used. If there is a space in our culture where people are not used - as employees, as consumers, as cannon fodder - it should be in art, and especially in theatre. It would have taken real courage to be gentle or compassionate rather than surgical. But compassion won't sell tickets.

No, let me take that last sentence back - too snide. When several dozen people in an evening make the effort to trek to 145th Street to see a show, they have already self-selected as people who support innovative, off-to-the-side, not-Roundabout theatre. These people should be treasured, especially white people (as much as I hate to use that construction) who in coming there are crossing a number of borders (real or imagined). I don't mean for “the white people” to be exalted, etc. - all that old racial stereotype crap. And I hate singling out “white people” as a subset of “theatre-goers at Classic Theatre of Harlem” - the darkness of the theatre is a democratic space, like the theatron in the ancient Greek theatres.

My point is this: anyone sitting their butts in those seats on 145th Street is a compatriot, a *compañero/a*, and they should be welcome guests in the house. I don't mind being prodded and provoked, but I won't tolerate being made to feel unwelcome. And that was the “sin” I saw that night: the hospitality of the house was violated.

\* \* \* \* \*

*In any case, and I say this with love, as a righteous and sometimes hot-headed person, I urge you to consider in the future engaging with the artists - giving them feedback*

*and not potentially injuring the livelihood of the sincere and hard-working group.*

As I said above, neither of the theatre's co-artistic directors ever responded, so there was no chance for "feedback." I would have liked the engagement, would have found it healing to have the talk. But, also, why keep it just in-house? If a vigorous response was expected, it's what they got, even if it wasn't in a form that accommodated them. I thought a lot about sending the letter out to other people and then decided that since they had decided to make their choice "public," then I could go that same route.

As an aside. My nephew actually came up with a response to this that I would have put in motion if I had had the time and money. Since one of the things that angered me that night was how the "owners" of the "means of production" used an unfair advantage on the audience, the appropriate thing to do (a lá Augusto Boal) was to re-capture the means of production and make your own theatre.

I was going to enlist a suite of trusted friends, buy them tickets, and when the scene came up, engage in a version of Invisible Theatre in challenging what they were doing. Who knows how that would have ended up, but it seemed (at least at the time) a more positive way to meet the Company on its own grounds and give a voice to those in the audience who may have been intimidated or reticent. (Perhaps I'll write a play about it!)

\* \* \* \* \*

*Really, I say turn your anger at THE ROUNDABOUT and Lincoln Center and others that NEVER hire women or people of color, produce plays that are sexist, morally and artistically bankrupt, eat of the majority of public funding while catering to terrifically affluent old white subscribers whose tickets are subsidized by your tax dollars. Or just vigorously support the organizations you admire. More than half of them will soon be gone. Hoping you are well.*

I'm not sure anger at The Roundabout or Lincoln Center is appropriate - they do what they do within the framework of

the way the system is set up. The better thing to do is as you suggest: support whom you love and build your own road as you walk it.

Well, enough presumption upon your time. Hannah, thank you again for your patience and attention. Stay in touch.

There was one final exchange, Hannah to me:

*Thanks for your thoughtful response. We just disagree, but it is still a pleasure to see how much you care. The dirty secret about NYSCA and other gov't funders is that any hint of scandal or controversy can lose a theatre funding. NYSCA's boss is the governor so when the administration gets such a letter, they just don't want trouble. They do not engage in thinking about aesthetics or philosophy. Sadly we get so few letters. I received one in three years complaining that we funded a theatre which excluded men. A grant was once threatened because it was presumed to be pornographic. The word pornography was in the title. It was an academic deconstruction. Sometimes I think we must leave it to the individual response. I still think you should be angrier about the other theatres, which are discriminatory and eat up most public funding- your tax dollars.*

What to make of this teapot tempest? As much as I like Hannah, I have a hard time abiding her rigid liberalism, categorizing people into "choir" and "non-choir." And I especially dislike that trespasses need to be kept "within the family." My impulse to write the letter ultimately came from my belief that my beloved art form too often refuses to engage the *terra cognita* around it, and so ends up incested and theoretical and Roundabout.

A morally angry audience member may be such a novelty that artists don't know how to deal with him, and, worse, may believe that they don't have to because such anger is, well, just so retro.

So, thus ends this tale - neither in whimpers nor bangs but with the usual irresolutions. Until the next time, when this butt will most definitely not stay in the seat it has paid for.

(May 2003)





## Thoughts on Staged Sex

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A revealing reaction happens whenever I see erotic intimacy on the stage (and in the movies as well): I feel, at the same, bored and embarrassed. I simply want to get past it to the next phase of the story. However, I greatly enjoy the anticipation of intimacy - the leaning in for the kiss, the hovering hand.



Why do you think they call the good part of a play the climax?

In other words, I prefer the arousal to the delivery.

I think that's because good theatre is built on arousal: rising arc, raised stakes, and so on. And when the climax of the play happens (interesting choice of words), it signals an ending, a dying off, a signal that our revels are now almost ended.

Who would not prefer arousal to farewell, anticipation of sweetness to the inevitable disappointment once sweetness is delivered?

\* \* \* \* \*

Naked bodies on stage distract me. I keep worrying about faux pas of all sorts - an uncalled-for erection, physical damage from set pieces. And actors never seem entirely comfortable in their nakedness up there, which then radiates into the audience, further distracting us from being in the dream of the play.

Half-naked bodies, unaware of themselves - now, that works for me. Why? Because something is left to my imagination. The peek-a-boo keeps me interested because I don't have full information. A naked body is a complete report. A half-naked body leaves out half the words, which doubles the imagination.

\* \* \* \* \*

Naked bodies on stage, or simulated sexual acts - and the audience seated in the dark, with voyeuristic watching as their only means of participation. What distinguishes a scripted rehearsed play with these elements from the shops that Rudy G. wanted to shut down under his regime in New York City? Well?

\* \* \* \* \*

One problem with sex on stage is that, like most simulated experiences, it can never be as interesting as the real thing. The audience is always conscious of the sex's "simulatedness," that we're being asked to take the fake as the real, and ultimately that is not very satisfying - it doesn't reach very deeply into us.

This is because sex on stage becomes commodified when it becomes packaged in a way to deliver a profit to the art's producers, whether that profit is monetary or aesthetic. Commodification is not restricted just to objects being turned into cash value for the marketplace - it happens any time creators, be they artists or manufacturers, take something precious to our human experience and retrofit it for their own gain. The dividing line between exploitation and art may be the degree to which the art's producers have a true custodial feel for what they've appropriated, but the process is still the same for marketeers and artistic directors: take it, use it, profit by it.

Does this mean, though, that there can never be sex on stage that is real, authentic, honest, "artistic"? Come on - would you really want to be in the presence of that somewhere not in the privacy of your own home, where the possibility of participation could go beyond simply viewing? Who wants to just watch? Better to leave sex off the stage - yes? no?

\* \* \* \* \*

Like religious belief, sex is best kept private. And that goes for the stage as well. In fact, perhaps the theatre should be a "sex-free" zone, where we can escape the relentless commercial blitz of T&A&C (C for "cock" - must not forget the gentlemen). Dare I say it - a place to experience our more refined feelings? How quaint! How Victorian! How refreshing!

\* \* \* \* \*

Eros and Thanatos are forever linked - this link is what makes life sweet/bitter. Eros without Thanatos is pornography, or at least titillation, done with all that "nudge-nudge, wink-wink" that never delivers the goods, done to get you hot and bothered and keep you in an unfinished state.

Thanatos without Eros is despair - a true response to our human condition but also unbearable. But Americans have banished death from their stage art and so have left themselves only with sex as their surrogate for the erotic/melancholic dialectic essential to understanding human life. Which is why sex on the American stage is often some combination of boring and self-embarrassed. How can it not be like this, since it is missing half its essential self?

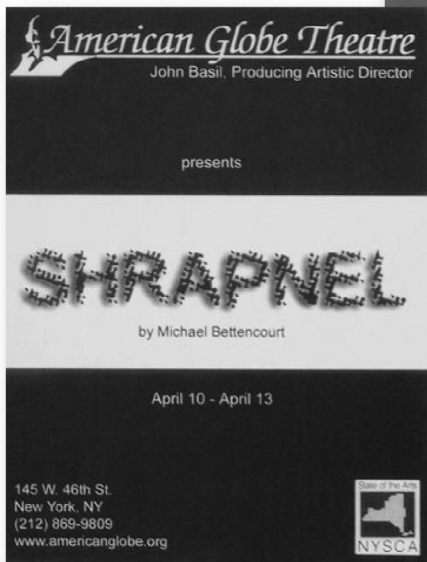
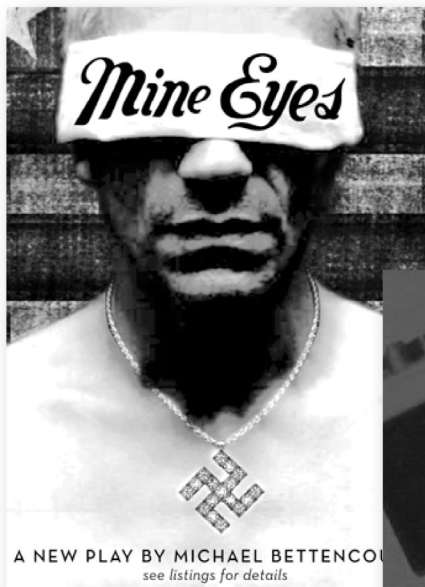
\* \* \* \* \*

Sex is subversive, a free relationship that undermines community and all fixed and hierarchical social relations. Sex has politics, in other words. But since Americans have pretty much banished any sort of liberatory politics from their stages, we get left with a whiff of naughtiness, which only invites titters, not manifestoes. Which is not surprising, since American's immature understanding of sex matches their immature practice of politics and their resolute stupidity about power.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the end, maybe the best way to deal with sex on stage is by way of spoof or farce. Sex farces are always fun because we can be naughty without being serious, the same way that the movie *The Full Monty* is funny and touching because we see buttocks rather than genitals. This way we can get the sex in without too much distraction and then move on to more interesting things. Which is what this essay should do.

(March 2006)



## Existential Eeyore: Part 1

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The prompt for this essay comes from reports by various people that I have an Eeyore strain, meaning (I think) that I am a glass-half-empty person, dysthymic if not depressed, lacking a certain fizziness. This nudged me to read Milne's two Pooh books, which I had never done, and do some web-rummaging to learn more about the donkey.



What, exactly, is going on in the Hundred Acre Wood?

Eeyore's gotten a bad rap.

But before I get into that, some groundwork first because I found Alan Alexander Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh* and *The House at Pooh Corner* really odd. Not charming odd or make-me-half-smile odd but odd odd, and not as bright as their surface appears.

A few academic writers have recognized this with tongue-in-cheek, such as "Pathology in the Hundred Acre Wood: a neurodevelopmental perspective on A.A. Milne," with this daunting abstract: "Somewhere at the top of the Hundred Acre Wood a little boy and his bear play. On the surface it is an innocent world, but on closer examination by our group of experts we find a forest where neurodevelopmental and psychosocial problems go unrecognized and untreated." Frederick Crews, in both *The Pooh Perplex* and *Postmodern Pooh*, uses Pooh to deconstruct the deconstructionists, all in good (if esoteric) fun. (But Claudia Nelson is completely serious in "The beast within: Winnie-the-Pooh reassessed" when she states that the books depict "the raw brutality of the supposedly peaceful English countryside.")

But one doesn't have to do such tunneling to still notice how strange is the Hundred Acre Wood. For instance, no one has parents - the occasional mention of an uncle or a grandfather, but no parents, even with Christopher Robin. (And though Roo has Kanga, we know nothing about a father, and who knows anything about Rabbit's interspecies "relations" that trail behind him).

Geography reveals a social hierarchy, with Christopher Robin's house high enough to avoid floods and Eeyore's hovel down in the swamp, illustrating their relative worths in the community. (Everyone goes to Christopher Robin for advice because he has learning; no one goes to Eeyore for advice, even though he, too, has learning.) Everyone encourages the newcomers in the

forest (the “immigrants,” so to speak) - Kanga, Roo, and Tigger - to live together (and thus separately from everyone else).

The material conditions of life in the Hundred Acre Wood are also strange. Pooh always seems to have honey in pots - how? And Kanga gives extract-of-malt to Roo and Tigger - where does she get it? Rabbit has condensed milk and bread - again, how? (Piglet eats acorns and Eeyore thistles - unprocessed foods - and it’s not clear what Owl takes in.) Who built the houses? Why is Eeyore the only one with a house not in a tree? And so on.

Maybe the author of “The beast within” has a point.

And the characters, as Milne has drawn them, are also quite, well, odd. Milne calls Pooh a bear of little brain but then has him compose poetry and makes him quite capable of planning and organizing (such as when he rescues Piglet from the flood by using an over-turned umbrella as a boat). Milne also makes him quite capable of completely misreading situations (the Woozle, the Heffalump), but no more so than Rabbit, Owl, or Christopher Robin.

But the oddest thing I find about Pooh is how selfish and gluttonous Milne has made his little bear - and how adeptly these unflattering attributes are turned into charming foibles. For instance, in the tale about Eeyore’s birthday, Pooh brings the donkey a gift of honey - but it never gets there because Pooh eats it en route, showing up instead with an emptied pot, which he gives to Eeyore as the gift. He never expresses any misgivings that that the gift is a make-do gift and that he has lied to his friend. Eeyore happily accepts it, and Pooh goes off satisfied.

And the tale ends with a lie when Milne, as the narrator, tells his son Christopher Robin that he, Christopher, had given Eeyore a set of paints and prepared a big birthday party for Eeyore - a complete fabrication designed to make the boy feel better about his forgetfulness.

In another chapter, Pooh goes to visit Rabbit and more or less forces himself as a visitor upon the reluctant Rabbit, who, courteous nevertheless, feeds Pooh honey and condensed milk. Finally satisfied (though he does pry a bit to see if Rabbit has anything more to feed him), he leaves Rabbit’s house, only to get stuck half-way-in/half-way-out the door because he has grown too fat. It takes a week of starving him, while Christopher Robin reads him stories, to finally pop him free, at which point Milne has him go his merry way without any concern about the inconvenience his gluttony has caused his fellow creatures.

Given the nature of life in the Hundred Acre Wood, perhaps we can forgive Eeyore his grumpiness since his world seems filled with unreliable or overbearing creatures doing many pointless things (such as the expedition to the North Pole). For Eeyore, any one day can bring about the following:

- *loss* - Pooh and Piglet, in a snowstorm, transfer Eeyore's house from one side of the swamp to the other without telling him.
- *assault* - Tigger bounces him into the river or falls on him out of a tree (without thanking him for the rescue).
- *abandonment* - The search for Small, one of Rabbit's many relations, is over for two days before Rabbit bothers to tell Eeyore, who had continued to look all that time.
- *being ignored* - No one remembers his birthday.

At this point I have to think that Milne is up to something, consciously or not, that is not only about writing a book will give the warm fuzzies to generations of parents and children (not to mention oodles of money to movie studios).

Next: Part II.

\* \* \* \* \*

In Part I, I laid down some track about the oddness of the Pooh books and what this oddness has to do with the character of Eeyore. Here, I want focus on why I think Eeyore is in the books and in our lives.



Why is Eeyore the only one to get angry in the Pooh books?

Of all the characters, Eeyore is the only contrarian: he sees rain when it's sunny, he predicts calamity when success looms. He is the only character who gets angry (at the end of Chapter 5 of *Pooh Corner*, about the letter A and learning), and while he admires Christopher Robin, he also fears what education will do to the lad (note Chapter 10 in *Winnie the Pooh* when Eeyore says that writing is over-rated).

Milne also makes Eeyore hungry for the kind of recognition that so easily falls into Pooh's lap (which Eeyore resents because he thinks very little of Pooh): recognition for his learning, for his intentions and his deeds (such as on the expedition to the North Pole, when he sits with his tail in the water to save Roo). But Milne has no one satisfy or even notice this hunger

(except for perhaps Christopher Robin), which skews Eeyore's spirit toward the curmudgeonly and distrustful.

Why does Milne have such a character in the line-up? What is he trying to tell his readers through such a presentation, especially when that presentation is so at odds with the books' timbre? And why would someone finger me as an Eeyore?

Perhaps another way to go at this is to ask the question this way: Everyone in the Pooh books has lessons to teach, or has had lessons assigned to them (Benjamin Hoff wrote two books about such lessoning, *The Tao of Pooh* and *The Te of Piglet*). What lessons does Eeyore offer?

Let's start with Hoff's rendition of Eeyore - call it the usual picture of the grey donkey. He calls it "The Eeyore Effect" (in the chapter of the same name in *The Te of Piglet*). Here is his central description of the Effect (all the capitalized words are original):

Eeyores, in other words, are Whiners. They believe the negative but not the positive and are so obsessed with What's Wrong that the Good Things in Life pass them by unnoticed. Are they the ones, then, to give us an accurate account of what life is about? If the universe were governed by the Eeyore Attitude, the whole thing would have collapsed ages ago. Everything in creation, from migrating hummingbirds to spinning planets, operates on the belief that It Can Be Done....Therefore, no society that wants to last is going to be guided by Eeyores. For Eeyores sneer at the very things that are needed most for survival and prosperity. (59-60)

So there.

Hoff associates Eeyore and his Attitude with negative-reporting media, the Puritans, Critics (yes, the capitalized ones), a horrible education system (the Education Eeyores), and, weirdly enough, people he calls the Eeyore Amazons, hyper-feminists who perversely act from a hyper-masculinity rather than from a true femininity.

In Hoff's bipolarish world, Eeyore's lessons are worthless because, in his view, all Eeyore ever does is "make others feel small, especially if they're



smaller than he is [which] makes him look big.” (53) Eeyore is a bully, a buzz-kill, a Tao damper. He acts how we shouldn’t.

Is this the reason Milne includes him in the Pooh menagerie?

Not exactly, I don’t think, because Milne has him behave in ways that are not just contrary to the other residents or a comment upon their actions. Eeyore’s actions are more complicated than that, in part because, except for Christopher Robin, he’s the only one who changes his behavior.

Let’s take Piglet’s assessment that Eeyore is “gloomy.” That’s not entirely true in the book. In at least two instances, Eeyore moves from anger and disappointment to genuine happiness: when Pooh and Piglet give him an empty honey pot and broken balloon as his birthday presents, and when Eeyore plays Poohsticks (after being bounced into the water by Tigger). Eeyore responds to kindness and attention, as we all do, and his seemingly perpetual gloominess may be a sign that while characters in the books often visit each other and do kindnesses for each other, not much of it feels genuine - a practiced politeness, a civilized “should.” His gloominess could be seen as a barometer of insincerity - the effort to stay engaged in a society that is, beneath its veneer, disengaged.

Eeyore is the only character that Milne gives fullness to because he is unsettled, unsettling, contrary, polite but not obsequious, snarly in his humility, purposefully cranky, intelligent, unillusioned. Everyone else in the Wood is somewhat monotone, which makes them easier to “love” (as many generations have): Pooh’s artful cluelessness masking as innocence, Piglet’s perpetual timorousness, Tigger’s goofiness, Kanga and Roo’s mothering act, Owl’s predictable wrong-headedness - like characters in a sitcom, they must retain an unconfusing personality resistant to change. Never will Pooh turn to the others and say, “My life feels suddenly very empty - and honey will do nothing to change that feeling.”

With Eeyore, on the other hand, Milne presents his readers with a challenge, a specifically Christian challenge about charity. It is easy to love the loveable character, but Eeyore requires one to put in some Christian sweat-equity because he is not willing to play that game. To love Eeyore means working to gain his respect, since he won’t give it to you without you making the effort to win it. To love Eeyore means accepting him as he is and foregoing any impulse to change or “improve” him. To love Eeyore means accepting the possibility that he will not love you back - no *quid* for the *quo*. (It’s no

coincidence that Eeyore's food is the thistle, with its nettles and beautiful blossom.)

So I think the characterizing of me as an Eeyore is not quite right - that is, as the common Eeyore, Piglet's gloomy one. Yes, there is that about me, but not just that. I am also one with thistles, who will be polite and courteous but is also rageful underneath, who distrusts learning's ability to teach us anything yet who never stops hungering to learn, who always thinks life gives us less than what it promises, that sentimentality is both comforting and untruthful, that life is dry rather than moist, cool rather than warm - that we are all fragile blusters of pain always on the cusp of annihilation who mythmake to soften this condition and gain some respite (because who can live for any length of time on the cusp? but that is where all good art gets made, so someone needs to live there). Eeyore's life is not easy, but it is actual.

If what I've said about Eeyore is right, then I'm glad to be Eeyore.

## Picture Credits

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I have tried to note where I found pictures for the illustrations (though I was not as diligent in tracking this as I should have.)

### Writing Plays

- Death to the 10-Minute Play!: <http://blog.barre3.com/2013/11/25/benefits-of-10-minutes/>
- Guidelines for Writing Plays: <http://www.coloribus.com/adsarchive/prints/tangram-sm-store-play-14170855/>
- Script (D)reading: [http://haicontroversies.blogspot.com/2011\\_11\\_01\\_archive.html](http://haicontroversies.blogspot.com/2011_11_01_archive.html)
- The Thrall of the Authentic: <http://phraseologyproject.com/P50>
- Exposing Exposition: <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/Exposition>
- Doing the Homework: <http://www.troll.me/2012/11/25/rage-face/why-you-no-do-your-homework/>
- Market: <http://designnotes.info/?p=6842> and <http://thehairpin.com/slug/screenplays/>
- Slice of Life: <http://sliceoflife.devillsroom.com/>
- The Sweats: <http://purple-owl.com/art-faces-fear.html>

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## About Block & Tackle Productions

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After more than a decade of projects together, Michael Bettencourt and Elfin Frederick Vogel joined forces to form Block & Tackle Productions. In addition to producing Michael plays with Elfin directing, B&T Productions also look collaborates with other playwrights and directors and explore different media for dramatic narrative, such as live-streaming theatrical productions, recording radio-play podcasts, and creating short films.

Whichever project B&T Productions pursues, it will create theatre narratives focused on our present times and where every part of the production - design (set, lighting, sound, media), performance, script, the brand of beer sold in the lobby, and the pre-show music - relates to and nourishes every other part. As often as possible, B&T Productions will do this in collaboration or conjunction with like-minded theatre-makers.

*Elfin Frederick Vogel* (Producer/Director) -- Elfin has directed over thirty productions in New York City and regional theatres, from classical plays (among others, *Othello*, *As You Like It*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Measure for Measure*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Three Sisters*, *The Cherry Orchard*) to 20th-century plays (*Six Characters in Search of an Author*, *The Real Thing*, *Exit the King*) and new plays, among them *Only the Dead Know Brooklyn*, *Excerpts from the Lost Letters of Hester Prynne*, *No Great Loss*, *Four Plays*, *The Sin Eater* (all by Michael Bettencourt), and *Moral and Political Lessons on "Wyoming"* and *Reckless Abandon* (by Vincent Sessa).

*Michael Bettencourt* (Producer/Writer) -- Michael is an award-winning playwright and screenwriter. As always, special thanks to Maria Beatriz. All his work (including longer versions of these essays and all stage scripts) can be seen at [www.m-bettencourt.com](http://www.m-bettencourt.com)

**Block  
& Tackle  
PRODUCTIONS**

[www.blockandtackleproductions.com](http://www.blockandtackleproductions.com)

