Michael Bettencourt

# Collected Essays: Volume 9
# Scene4 - 2004-2007

Block & Tackle Productions Press

# Collected Essays, Volume 9 Scene4 - 2004-2007

Michael Bettencourt

Block & Tackle Productions Press

Co-Founders Elfin Frederick Vogel and Michael Bettencourt

**To María Beatriz - always in all ways**

# Contents

# Introduction

The following essays come from my long-time association with the online arts journal Scene4 (scene4.com).

I have contributing for well over two decades, thanks to the superb editorship and friendship of Arthur Danin Adler. Here's a little bit of history about the endeavor from Mr. Adler himself.

*Michael Bettencourt, 2025*

* * * * *

Avanti Scene4

In the late 1990's when the spread of the internet was just beginning, we had a bulletin-board/list/usergroup called Actors Workshop. It was a lively discussion of all things theatre that attracted some fine writers with wit and gusto. Then it began to attract writers and other artists who wanted to talk about other arts, and media, and culture in general. And it grew and the writing became terrific.

So I and a couple of other writers decided to try to morph this into a publication, which we called: Views/reViews, a kind of informal newsletter that began to evolve into a more prescient magazine-type. It grew, and in 2000, I decided to launch it as a print magazine. It's title: Scene4scene.

We couldn't do it...because print magazines had become exhorbitantly expensive. So I decided to take it to the web until we could, not as an "ezine," but adamantly as "A Print Magazine On the Web," which means that the reading experience was everything, the writing, the layout and feel of every page.

It was conceived as white type on a black page (which also enhances graphics), no advertising to interrupt that experience, no links in the text to lure the reader off the page. Without florid advertising on the page, we relied on a few patrons who helped finance the magazine. Within a short time we dropped the word "scene" from the logo and renamed it just Scene4 Magazine. The concept has remained intact to this day.

For me, the magazine is a work of art that has given me 25 years of joy and fulfillment.

It abides.

2007

# Keeping A Small Theater Alive

(January 2007)

Interview with John Basil, Artisitic Director of American Globe Theater

On December 6, 2006, I spent a pleasant hour with John Basil, Artistic Director of American Globe Theatre (AGT), which has the distinction of being a very long-lived (going on 18 years) off-Broadway theatre that is, quite literally, just off Broadway, at 145 West 46th Street.

John established AGT in 1989 with a core group of actors drawn from the Riverside Shakespeare Company's summer tours. "We wanted to find a new way to invigorate the performances of Shakespeare, so the human themes of his plays would be accessible and entertaining for audiences of all ages." To that end, John employs an innovative, historically-based approach to language and staging called the Rough and Ready Technique, developed by John Barton and Patrick Tucker at the Royal Shakespeare Company using Shakespeare's "First Folio" edition of 1623.

AGT also does other classical plays by such playwrights as Ibsen, Chekhov, Shaw, and Molière, to name a few, and sponsors the annual 15-Minute Play Festival, now going into its 13th year, where 32 plays compete over a week of performances for prizes and recognition.

At the core of AGT's enterprise is its well-received Shakespeare for Schools program, where artists from AGT's extensive roster expose young audiences to classical theatre that is accessible, timely, and pertinent to their life experiences. The program gets kids "on their feet" to experience the rudimentary elements of theatre arts such as production, process, and performance first-hand, and the goal is not only to encourage them to think like artists but also to be informed audience members in order to keep the appreciation of classical theatre alive for the future.

Since 9/11, John feels the challenges to keeping a small theatre going have shifted in ways that force an artistic director like himself to both innovate and renovate. For the last 5 years, AGT has been losing audience, and thus money (often a great deal), on its mainstage productions. Many of AGT's audience dependables, what John calls the "culture vultures" of New York and New Jersey, have decided to put their money into other entertainment options, which John believes have more to do with "nesting" and thus a less adventuresome spirit when it comes to making entertainment choices.

This has forced AGT to make important survival decisions. Shakespeare for Schools has become the bread-and-butter for the company, and John has plans in the pipeline for starting an after-school program in October of 2007 to capitalize on its school connections and to continue the theatre education started in the classroom. John will not let go of the mainstage productions because they have been, and will continue to be, launching pads for many artists. He noted how, over the years, the productions themselves have produced a cadre of actors, directors, and administrators who have gone on to their own careers, and this "seeding" is an important part of John's vision of AGT as a stepping stone and generator of new theatrical talent.

But the mainstage shows will, by necessity, have to be scaled back in number and size. The 15-Minute Play festival will continue because it generates both good audiences and good "buzz" and in its own way nurtures new generations of writers, actors, and directors—but it's also cost-effective to run since each play brings in its own production team.

This state of affairs, where the theatre will have to a lot of outside theatre-related work in the schools to generate enough revenue to support actual theatrical productions sits well with John—mostly. But if he had his druthers (and the money to support them, and the time to implement them—he is 56 years old at the moment), he would like to resurrect the success of his hero, Joseph Papp. If John's first love is Shakespeare, his second love, in close contention with the first, is the presentation and exploration of new work. In fact, he explains that in his transition to director from actor, he learned everything he needed to know from confronting new plays. "I love giving life to a new play, especially working with its language and how that language reflects the reality of its day."

But he also ruefully acknowledges that presenting untested and unknown work has its monetary pitfalls—AGT would always lose money on its Fall Festival of New Work and eventually had to discontinue it. And in the same breath he wonders if a Joe Papp is even possible today, and concludes "probably not" because the time and place don't allow for such breadth and daring. Now the niches are smaller and the scramble to find one that pays more intense, and a small resilient company like AGT can only swim with the tide while keeping a lookout for the main chance that will keep them going.

And to keep himself going as well. He sees himself as artistic director for only a few more years and is already thinking of the shape of his role as the "elder" of the theatre. "We need to continually look at the new," he says. "Years

ago, I never would have thought of a website—now it's essential to us. YouTube, MySpace, DVDs of performances—these are things we need to explore to see if they can help us do our essential job of presenting theatre to new and old audiences."

John, meanwhile, is not sitting still. He's published a book, *Will Power: How To Act Shakespeare in 21 Days*, continues his Shakespeare coaching program "Playing Shakespeare," and will be directing AGT's upcoming production of *The Tempest*. All in a day's work of a small theatre trying to make it through the off-Broadway wilds in 2007.

# Face

(February 2007)

I am working on a play that is also working on me. I've taken as my source a news clipping from a year ago about a BBC multi-part production called *Son of God*. For the series, researchers combined information from skull measurements of dead first-century Jewish males, mosaics, contemporary accounts of social and political life in Palestine, and so on to construct a bust of what Jesus *might* have looked like. The published picture of the results, of course, looks nothing like our imagined Jesus. This Jesus is swarthy, heavy-set, with short coarse hair and beard — in other words, "just folks," as my friend from Virginia would say.

The setup for the play concerns the team that put the picture together (based on accounts contained in the news stories). The time has come to unveil the picture as part of the series' promotion, and they are just about to go to a press conference to do that (the picture, though, has been circulating in the newspapers for the previous week, as a kind of promotion of the promotion of the show) when the Jesus that appears in their picture appears at their office door, saying to them, "You got it right." What happens next is what is in process now.

In the beginning, I sketched out the story of the play (I "storyboard" the scenes in my scripts before I pen dialogue, stage directions, etc.) as something brief and light and somewhat plot-mechanized: the "trick" of the appearing Jesus basically setting up an opportunity for the characters to talk about religious stuff in a way that would appear erudite without necessarily taxing the audience member too much about understanding or belief (sort of like Heather McDonald's a-little-bit-troubled ex-priest in *An Almost Holy Picture*). In other words, the piece had the conceptual skin of a ten- to fifteen-minute play, something quickly puzzling and intriguing and light-fingered.

But the more I looked at this picture of Jesus, the more it demanded something different — something more marinated. And what was that?

Jesus is one of those forces in our culture that one cannot ignore. Accept or dismiss him, yes — but indifference, no. This picture, in its earth(l)iness, in its de-magnitude, made me hungry in a way all my Catholic upbringing never had — hungry for something of what Jesus must have offered to the rude men and women who threw themselves over to follow him: peace of spirit.

When I'm cultivating a play idea that is not fruiting easily, I find the universe offering me things for consideration and inclusion. Maria-Beatriz has been reading Leonard Boffo's book on St. Francis' prayer for peace, and our discussions about the quiet spirit St. Francis tried to midwife in people have filtered down. I picked up on a book on radical Christian writings at the local used bookstore, something I normally would have passed over. For class I've read, again, Gorki's *The Lower Depths* and have been impressed in ways I wasn't before with Luka's offer of solace to the dying Anna.

And then there are my own changes in the hopper: embarked on a writing career that at times seems more joke than justified by talent, riddled by doubts about whether anything of what I am trying to do will add up to that proverbial hill of beans, one more chimera in a life pot-shotted by the skeet shooting of fate.

And so, this play is not about Jesus at all but about a hunger for a moment, a lengthened moment that would cover like a comforter, when all slings and arrows would cease, when taking up arms is done.

I find this urge for a place to rest coming upon me more and more these days. It's not simply from the ordinary chaos embedded in living in New York or the special-case chaos of the Iraq war, but it's also from a "YouTube" and "MySpace" chaos, where the urgency for celebrity is so strong it smells like desperation, and an American culture that seems bent on consuming itself, literally and figuratively, into oblivion.

I am also aware that that this urge for a place to rest can also lead to self-absorption and quiescence, making myself my own gated community, with a gated politics to match.

No, the "rest" is not about retreat so much as a need for balance, for a fulcrum upon which can be settled the multitude of sniping dialectics that constitute a life and, for a moment, perhaps even for no longer than the space of an inhale and an exhale, life/my life feels poised and receptive and aware/awake.

Don't know how this will play out in the play — but Act II is always the hardest.

# Spring

(April 2007)

When this is published to the world, the vernal equinox will have passed and spring, supposedly, will be knocking sweetly against my storm windows. Instead, over the past few days the wind-chill factor has been quickly sending the temperature downward and winter is panhandling some more patience from us until it finally leaves.

But I know that spring will soon be really here. The air will lose its sting and edge, soften into a gauze that hangs, like Spanish moss, from branches, phone lines, the eaves of garages. Spring will water the dry tongues of our bodies, moistening them into verbs, making them articulate. This restorative tonic of spring is what poets celebrate when they write their praises to the season, what Longfellow called the "wonder and expectation in all hearts."

But much of what we think as actual "spring" is really the end of spring, its final report, the white tail of the deer going over the fence. By the time we get around to noticing spring's beauty and fizz it's usually over, and something we had hankered for since the scolding storms of January has once again slipped by. Despite our resolve to pay attention, we get so busied making a living that spring sifts in like a fine dust until, with great surprise, we suddenly find it thick enough to write our names in and wonder where it all came from.

George Santayana held, I think, a better notion: "To be interested in the changing seasons," he said, "is...a happier state of mind than to be hopelessly in love with Spring." Prior to what we've officially termed as spring are a few "pre-seasons" of the season, and noticing these gives us more time to appreciate the yeasty conclusion we rise to in April. e.e. cummings named one "just-spring," when the world was mudluscious and puddlewonderful. I like the small season right before "just-spring," when the world is melting and the air can still carry an electric charge of sharp chill. I find this usually on my first bike ride. The scabrous snow, darkened and more salt than water, runs away along curbs and down drains. The vowels of loosened water mix with the hiss of my tires on the road, the slur of the chain over the sprockets. In the sunlight I can feel the advent of August, but in patches of shade lingers a cool vagrant who steals my sweat and makes my skin perk and dance. I like best this prickly interregnum between the harsh edge of March's ending and the opening sultry drawl of April's yawn.

There are other small seasons in spring if you think about them. It's important to notice them and not let them be swamped by the official induction ceremonies granted to March 21 and Hallmark cards. Too often we want to move quickly from what we don't like to something we think we want, and we wash over all the odd quirky bits of time and space that could give not only momentary pleasure but also a more lenient and durable fullness to our lives. There is a season, as the Preacher says, and it would be good to add as many seasons to his list as we can.

# Why I Want To Be A Poet

(May 2007)

I've been writing a lot of poetry lately and have decided to start sending the stuff out. But there's a voice in my back mind which keeps droning "Why bother?," which is also saying "You won't make money at it" (true) and "What the world doesn't need is another book of poems" (true again). So why do it? The usual reasons of ego and hubris. But also something a bit more pure: a love and a thirst for language so expansive that it forces me to try to make some dent in the obdurate world I live in.

Language is one of the most fascinating artifacts people have ever created (even better than sliced bread and snooze alarms). But language is not simply an artifact, multifaceted like a diamond or sparkling like a Renoir. Without it we would be ignoble savages, unable to communicate with one another or hold counsel within our own selves; it is, in other words, the closest thing we have to a soul, to an essence, something without which we would not be who we are, and this is why we protect our right to have it the way we want it with such fierce love.

Poetry is that essence in its best voice. In the highly condensed and symbol-ridden effort that a poem is, all the clutter that characterizes most of our language interactions is cleared away so that the bones of an object or a feeling or an insight shine in all their calcium whiteness. Poetry is a sharpener of the senses, a penknife whittling off the woodenness that threatens so much of our daily living.

To me, the only sensible purpose in life is to live life; nothing higher than that is built into the universe. And for me "living life" means gluttonously seeing what there is to be seen. Poetry is my eyes. Writing a good poem forces me to manifest not only the atoms of the individual thing I'm seeing, but also the force-fields around it that mesh with all the other forces that make up all the other things in the world. To write poetry I must be brutally sensitive to the web of things which catches me and defines me. To write poetry I must soak myself with the gasoline of words and then torch myself so that I can burn bright enough to see what's going on around me. Writing poetry, that act of language and fire and rope, makes me alive, makes me feel purpose in a universe that too often feels like a severe joke.

My poems won't change anything. But scribblers like me keep an edge alive against the threat of the official and the condoned. And occasionally we buzz out a phrase that sticks and brings out a smile or a thought that hadn't been there before. Not bad work for a day.

# The Desert of the Real

(June 2007)

Maybe it's just the kind of theatre I've been seeing lately, but it all feels so unreal. This is not the unreality of experimental theatre or anything like that but, in fact, the opposite: plays earnestly (and I do mean earnestly) trying to investigate the human condition—or at least the human condition as understood by the playwrights, which seems to consist of lots of family dramas with secrets aplenty revealed or earnest young people having to come to grips with some dark side of themselves or love in the ambiguous Naughts.

But it's not really the subject matter on the stage—even if overly familiar, these setups are of the human condition. It has more to do with the actual act of being in the audience: I feel at a distance, both literal and aesthetic, from what's going on up there. In other words, I do not feel any complicity in the action and the story. Nothing much is being asked of me, and, in return, there is nothing much that I have to give back.

What is going on? My current reading is Slavoj Žižek's *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, his observations of September 11, 2001, published a year after the attack. (The title comes from Morpheus, in *The Matrix*, which he got by way of Jean Baudrillard.) In it he talks about the "virtualization" of reality under the pressure of global capitalism, and this offers a helpful pry-bar to get at what I have been observing. These plays, though set on examining what appears to be reality, feel unreal because we have all already seen these stories before in some form through the relentless efforts of our economic system to take in everything and return it to us for sale. So relentless is this system that we have encoded in us hundreds of "scripts," the collection of which we consider to be a map of the real world and upon whose truth we stake our bet that life has meaning.

Another telltale sign of this virtualized reality is how unreal the real feels, as if it has lost some anchor in substance, some link to the physicality, the "thereness," we associate with something real. Reality becomes just another show seen through the mediation of a capitalist structure intent on never losing our attention.

This distancing (which is not the same thing as Brecht's alienation effect) is something I clearly feel in the theatre, and it comes not from (or not only from)

the repetitiveness of the stories but from what I mentioned above: my lack of complicity in the proceedings onstage.

In other words, nothing about how the theatrical piece is being done—its "means of production"—causes me to have to examine myself as part of what is going on "up there," on the boards. I am allowed to hide behind an aesthetic scrim and voyeur the proceedings—much like how our capitalist system works, which affords us all manner of choice as a way of fooling us that we are actually participating in the machinery that determines the course of our lives.

I confess I don't know how to create a theatre of complicity, at least one that isn't contentious, sententious, and/or pretentious. It's more than just some avant-garde kind of audience-teasing (or -bashing). It has something to do with reconfiguring the actual topography of the theatre space, getting outside of "black-boxness" with an audience "there" and a playing space "there," and see the whole space as "theatre" (and "theatre" not being confined to what is confined by the four walls, ceiling, and floor).

It also means giving reality back its weight, and then "enstranging" it (to use a term by Victor Shklovsky) so that we can not only re-see just how weird the ordinary and mundane really are but also see that we have a place in reality and are not just some brains with software floating outside of it while gazing at it.

As I said, I don't have the talent—yet—to create this sort of theatre, and it's likely that even if I can, it will not make much of a dent or acquire much of an audience—after all, most theatergoers don't go to the theatre to be shaken out of their virtual scripts, they go to have those scripts confirmed. But theatre, I believe, is the only artistic form that can challenge and re-appropriate our virtualized commodified consciousness because of the dialectics of how it is done and the collaborative process at its heart (despite the usual industrial model that most productions follow). And I will figure it out—especially if anyone reading this has any ideas about how to go about it.

Care to share? Let us share.

# Directing *André*

(July 2007)

Michael Bettencourt and Elfin Vogel

*Elfin Vogel, Director*

Directing a classical play – any classical play – and by this I mean plays that originated at a time when the prevailing cultural and historical context was quite different from ours – raises questions that may seem obvious to the theatre aficionado. Why revive such a play? How far to bring the play, with the help of all available means -- visual, auditory, performance-wise -- into the present? Should the text be left untouched (as some companies insist with Shakespearean texts), radically deconstructed, or more gently edited/amended for modern sensibilities and expectations? Is it possible to "honor" the original work and to do something "faithful" to an author's "intent"? Should the text be considered a stable text ready to reveal its meaning to all comers, and that this meaning can be carried over into a production performed by today's actors, and designed by today's designers?

A conscientious director of a classical play needs to ask all of these questions, and many others, because the realization of such a text on stage – whatever that stage may be – is a translation of sorts, a confrontation of the past with the present, and what I do as a director must, in some way, make that confrontation yield a composite understanding about the times that created the play and the times in which we have come to the theatre to experience it.

In the following, I want to take the reader through this process, using the example of my recent production of *André* by William Dunlap.

In the best case an artistic director or producer invites the director to look at a play and consider directing a production. In this case it was the Metropolitan Playhouse and its artistic director Alex Roe. The Metropolitan Playhouse is dedicated to the production of plays that are part of the process of American culture – for the most part, but by no means always, rarely produced plays from the middle to distant past. *André*, written by William Dunlap, whom some consider the founder of American theater, qualifies in many respects. Written in blank verse, it flaunts rather than hides its Shakespearean aspirations of being a tragedy, but one based on a recent historic event.

Thus the play would resonate with his audience, still in the process of healing the deep rifts that the Revolutionary War had created between loyalists and those who favored separation from England. Resonate it did: the audiences booed and the play was not performed again for a long time after its initial two performances.

This play was offered, I read it and thought it was a weak play, overburdened with narrative, important plot points hinging on absent characters, and while the verse (and the length of the speeches) seemed inspired by Shakespeare, the wit and poetic invention did not live up to the brilliance of its model.

I felt, however, that the basic situation – the fate of a prisoner of war at a time when the laws of war were in their infancy, and many of the thoughts and ideas expressed (and sometimes driving the action)—seemed so resonant with what was being said about the current war. I began to formulate a radical deconstruction of the play, and a presentation that would intersperse Dunlap's text with contemporary texts from news-sources, government statements etc.

This scheme was rejected with the argument that to deconstruct play that was so forgotten would deprive the audience of the pleasure of getting to know the text in its integral form, and that such deconstruction was not really the mission of the Metropolitan Playhouse. Rather, that a certain respect for the text, a commitment to letting it speak on its own terms, would be the more appropriate approach. I considered this approach and decided to take on the project, provided that a respectful-to-the-text approach would not have to mean to leave it completely untouched, or to attempt a recreation of performance and presentation conditions of the late 18th century.

*André* takes place on the day of John André's execution by hanging. Convicted as a spy after having been caught in civilian clothes, with a false passport and with the fortification plans for West Point in his boot, he hopes to have his execution changed to death by firing squad, a less exhibitionist and shameful death than hanging. Efforts by several characters to either save him or to change the form of execution fail, and the play ends with his hanging.

The play became interesting to me on many levels. While perhaps not written as an anti-war play in its day, it speaks as one in our time. Questions of the treatment of prisoners of war and of the laws of war, then still in their infancy, occupy us intensely today. The core conflict of the characters pitches private, personal moral motivation against the principles of war, the demand that individual preference is subjugated to the larger need of society, and of one

that is – as America was during the Revolutionary War, still in formation, in no way solidified or codified in laws and regulations. That these concerns are still alive today is perhaps the most hopeful sign that all is not lost in the present, low moment of this country's history.

Dramatically, *André* is a difficult play. The title character appears entirely passive, his concern one that to us, in the twenty first century, is almost incomprehensibly abstract: he has accepted his judgment – condemnation to death – but is exceedingly concerned about the manner of his execution. Death by hanging is, by the code of his time, ignoble, shameful. And as a man who (as far as we can glean from the historic record) has invested much of his efforts to become accepted by a society he considered above his upbringing, he wanted to die an "honorable death," befitting an officer: by firing squad. Only when a woman, Honora, his former fiancée whom he had assumed long married to someone else appears on the scene does he waver for a moment and abandon his "manly" (or, in the old sense, virtuous) stance for a moment. When, long after we began to work on this play, the video depictions of the hanging of Saddam Hussein appeared it became much more tangible to me how appalling a death a hanging is: the condemned is being exhibited, made subject to mockery and derision by those who witness his death. And if the executioner is inept or cruel, then the execution can be an extended, painful struggle, accompanied by brutal injuries.

On André's side is Bland, a young American officer (likely modeled after Alexander Hamilton, who had attempted to convert the historic André's sentence), who intercedes on André's behalf with his superior officers. At the core of his behavior I found a profound love for André, fueled by gratitude, admiration, a deep sense of loyalty, and finally (even this is only hinted at in the play, though strongly enough to justify featuring this element) erotic love. In all his fervor and effort to save André, Bland fails. He is rebuked by the General, by McDonald, an officer close to the General, and ultimately and most painfully by André himself.

The main antagonist in the play is the General, the unnamed George Washington, who is conflicted about the decision to execute André, but feels that he is bound and justified both by the judgment of the officers who sat court martial, and by his need to set an example that the English foes would take seriously. One of the dramatically most effective scenes of the play is the confrontation of Bland with the General, where Bland asserts his right as a free

person to protest and disagree with his commanding officer in the strongest terms.

In preparation for a production I work always in two directions: from the inside out, that is, from the text and the research related to it, and from the outside in.

From the outside in refers to the all the production elements that are not text: the theatre, the selection of actors, costumes, props, lighting and stage, and particularly the way the audience relates to this stage. The Metropolitan Playhouse produces in a black box theatre with about 50 seats, arranged on three sides around the stage. The stage itself is perhaps 20 x 18 feet. There are four entry-exit points, but no crossover between the two off-stage areas

The inside-out work has three phases – getting to know the text and conducting any necessary research, working with the dramaturg and preparing the text (for example by cutting, rearranging scenes etc.) and finally, in the early part of rehearsals, discussing the text of each scene and each role with the actors. In this last part – which also involves the dramaturg – we begin to "make sense" of the text. This making sense is perhaps the most intimate part of the collaboration between actors and director. With an 18th century text, written in verse, many obstacles must be overcome. Conventions of word-use must be examined. A phrase such as "how all resistless is a unioned people" (Seward, Act I, 2) is not easily understood; we cannot assume that an audience understands this to mean "the will of a unified people cannot be resisted." A play that is filled with many such lines requires extensive work, where the actors have to penetrate the opaque text and illuminate it in their interpretation.

The "outside-in" work is more obviously collaborative: it involves the conversations with the designers, and the analysis of the mechanics of the script, of its story telling: entrances, exits, locations, and what happens in each individual scene. How can the given design of the theatre be best used, or be modified to accommodate this play? How detailed must the set be, the properties, are lighting and sound driven by the need to illustrate story points or to amplify internal states of the characters?

While *André*, in our rendition, used 10 actors, most of the scenes involve two or three characters with only the final scene having 7 actors on stage. This gives the play an intimacy very suitable to a small theatre. Since it is a play that presents many short scenes taking place in various locations, we decided that the set should be simply the empty stage, as an abstract and artificial space.

Two standard 4x8 foot platforms, each four inches high, were later added, to allow for minimal difference in height and provide seating areas.

Creating a set in a small space is always challenging. The German architect and designer Tilman Schall created a set that made the space larger, and that suggested, in its dark-green/umbra background, with a convolution of bloody boot-marks on the floor and on some of the walls a cruel beauty.

Thus the set revealed one of the themes of the play: eros and thanatos, love and death in close embrace. The image, together with the sounds of exploding bomb-drops and other explosive sounds was chosen to keep the war present in the minds of the audience. The play, while set in a camp of the Revolutionary forces in the war of independence, contains no war scenes, but rather is focused entirely on various negotiations between two to four characters, where the principal point of contention is whether John André should be spared the already decided execution, or whether the mode of execution should be changed from the ignoble one of hanging to one more befitting an office – by firing squad.

I paid close attention to the lighting, in its multiple function as that element which creates visual space, gives it a specific atmosphere, and in its changes over time, sets rhythms (overcoming its own space-fixation) that are often experienced only subliminally. Here we chose a stark, expressionistic, decidedly antirealist approach, with strong color accents and high-contrast moments where actors moved in and out of lights as they moved through the space. The final effect approached the kind of shifts of focus that we associate more with film than with theatre.

Another aspect of the "outside-in" work concerned the costuming, where we chose to honor the historical situation of the play. By dressing the actors in the costume of the time of the play's action, we supported the "storytelling" aspect. In the juxtaposition with the contemporary element and the contemporary reading of the character's psychology, I see the intent of telling an old story but as a fable for now. The private cost of war, the fact that there are no winners, that both sides pay too high a price, that the most precious of human expressions, love, admiration, loyalty, friendship will perish, these were the messages I found in *André*, and that I felt made the resurrection of this flawed, forgotten play very worthwhile.

*Michael Bettencourt, Dramaturg*

In editing the *André* script for production, I kept the following "framings" in mind as a guide for what to keep and prune.

The most obvious was the differences in "ear" between an 18th-century and 21st-century audience. An 18th-century audience member would have heard *André* differently than a modern audience member, due in part to education and in part to stage mechanics, where lighting was dim and sound effects minimal, which necessitated a more stentorian acting style than is in fashion today.

An awareness of "acting style" also played a part in editing the script. Modern American audiences, long tutored in "the Method" as well as television and movies and psychology, are comfortable with letting silences as well as words "speak the speech" so that not everything needs to be spoken in order for it to be heard.

Acting style also shapes narrative flow. A modern American theatre audience member has different expectations of narrative than someone sitting in the stalls 300 hundred years ago. The narrative has to move along smoothly and quickly, with few if any digressions that feel "added on" or inorganic (no matter how organic or necessary the words may have felt to the original author).

Added to this mix were my own preferences as a playwright and theater-goer. I tried to keep to a minimum judgments grounded in what I would like to hear, but I cannot deny that my preferences for sound and sense guided some of what was kept and edited-out.

Last, but certainly not least, was the overall vision of the director -- what he wanted to get across with the play and the effect he wanted it to have upon the audience.

So my editing involved multiple approaches acting in parallel. I looked for passages that seemed over-explanatory or effusive, or that made literary/mythic references that would likely confuse the audience, and either pared them down or cut them out. I also smoothed out Dunlap's meanings where his syntax and poetic stretch made them especially tangled (while also trying to keep in as much of Dunlap's original meter as possible). I also rearranged passages, moving lines from one section to another, in order to help narrative flow and meaning, though I tried to do this as little as possible in order to honor Dunlap's original conception of his script's shape and purpose.

In short, as with any editing effort like this, I tried to keep as much of the original as "original" as possible while fashioning something that would appeal to and draw in a modern audience. I did this by deducing as best as I could, from biographical information about Dunlap and his script in my hand, what he wanted to accomplish on the stage but also using what 300 years of stage- and acting-craft have given us to use.

Thus, the *André* we crafted for this production was shorter and swifter than the original, and its "shortness," created by excisions and elisions, gave the actors and director some room to use silence, gesture, and posture instead of poetic meter to convey the play's conflicts and ideas.

Inevitably in a process like this, where the director has made the decision not to use the script unabridged, the question arises about how "faithful" the edited text is to the original. However, the term "faithful" can be tricky because its use implies another question: faithful to what? If amending Dunlap's words makes what Dunlap wanted to say clearer to the audience, am I faithful or unfaithful to Dunlap's work? I would argue that while I am unfaithful to Dunlap's words because of my editing, I am faithful to his intentions by making his sense more sensible to the audience. After all, Dunlap wanted to communicate something to someone with *André*, and if devices and references he used in 1798 to do this do not work in the same way in 2007, then an editor is faithful to the work if he or she can find ways to make the author's original efforts succeed in changed historical circumstances.

Thus, "faithfulness" in this kind of adapting is really a "house blend," different minor flavors -- honoring the foundational text, knowing the theatre-craft of one's own time, one's own personal vision and practice -- kept in juggled balance so I can deliver to the director a script upon which he can ground his vision of the production.

# The Gut in The Head

(August 2007)

As many readers of my pieces know, I have great admiration for the British playwright Howard Barker; his work has prompted several essays for Scene4. For all of that, though, I have never seen a production of Barker's work. But June and July 2007 in New York offered something of a Barker mini-festival with two works scheduled for performance: *Scenes From An Execution* (ending its run on June 10) and *No End Of Blame* (ending its run on July 14).

So, off I go to see *Scenes From An Execution* first - and, oh, what a disjunction between the theatre in my head as I read Barker's play and what moved before me on the stage.

*Scenes From An Execution* uses a well-worn trope as its starting point: the conflict between the artist and the state (or, better said, between the artist as truth-teller and the state as truth-bender). Venice, fresh from its victory at Lepanto in 1517, which secured itself against the Ottoman Empire, commissions a painting of the victory and hires Galactia, the best painter in Venice, to execute it. (Barker invented Galactia, but she bears a close resemblance to Artemisia Gentileschi, born in 1593 and renowned for being both a painter and a woman painter.)

Galactia wants her painting to tell a truth about the butchery of battle, and the Doge of Venice (and his brother, the conquering admiral) want the painting to celebrate the glory of the victory and the city that financed it and brought it off. Therein lies the contest of wills: between differing notions of authority, of power, of art's purpose. The play ends with a twist in our usual romantic expectations about artistic integrity, and the twist means to (as the whole play has meant to) make us think more deeply about power—about its seductions and perks and paradoxes and beauties and nourishments.

The production disappointed me because I felt it was not hard-nosed enough about Barker's hard-nosed examination. If Barker's plays have a temperature, that temperature would be cool in order to work against what Barker sees as the warmish and moist sentimentality of contemporary playwriting, with its emoting and sense-memories and psychologized characters. In this production director Zander Teller seems to have directed Galactia (Elena McGhee) to mine the character's internal strife over battling the Doge and the state to achieve her truth-telling in pigments—thus, much sighing and purse-faced angst: the

romantic meme of just another poor artist (the "good guy") caught in the nasty nets of state control (the "bad guy").

But Teller should have gone in the opposite direction, which I believe Barker laid down in the script: an artist every bit as calculating and selfish as the State and the Church she fights, someone we may not want to hug but nevertheless will respect because of the force of her inhumanness. Yes, I did say "inhumanness." For Barker, such a noun is not a drawback but is, as my wife would say when she sees something overly saccharine, "a bite of the chili pepper": the thing that clears the palate of the sentimentalized Christian ethos that dominates the current narrative practice of bringing light and understanding and forgiveness (if not redemption) to an audience, an ethos that Barker has scorned time and again.

*No End Of Blame*, the production that signals the return of Potomac Theatre Project to New York City's theater scene (after a 20-year sojourn in Washington D.C.), fared better in this regard. Bela Veracek, a Hungarian cartoonist who survives World War I, the Russian Revolution, World War II, and the Cold War thereafter, is in constant battle with the commercial and governmental institutions that praise and want to use his truth-telling talent but in ways that forward their own agendas, not his. (Again, Barker uses the cultural contest of the artist versus the corporate entity.) Director Richard Romagnoli kept stage and lighting design simple and spare, using common objects and defined lighting to set place and time. Rear projections of the cartoons of Bela were integrated neatly into the flow of the play's action.

Yet, to me at least, because the production lacked a certain fierceness—or, to re-use the term, "inhumanness"—Bela comes off as a victim of bloody-minded and art-indifferent institutions, his artist's soul sullied by the demand that his work have purpose and utility. To be sure, that element is in there. But it ignores that Barker built in to Bela's character his, Bela's, own bloody-mindedness and indifference that make him, in some degree, an anti-victim, anti-humanitarian, anti-redemptionist. Bela wants to be a scourge, not a savior, and as with most scourges, Bela is not necessarily a likeable person, but he is a person whom we can respect and admit that we need.

In this essay, I do not want to re-direct either Teller's or Romagnoli's direction (though, if they ever wanted to discuss it, I would enjoy the engagement). Instead, one thing that came to mind as I left the theatre each time is this: because of this ethos, this "regime of light," as Barker calls it, American actors

and directors, in aiming to hit the audience member in the gut, miss what I call the "gut in the head." Let me explain.

This ethos comes grounded in a historical splitting of the human being into "head" and what I call the intestinal, such as the "heart" or the "gut" or the "liver" (as in medieval times). Two corollaries came out of this split. First, reason (the "head"), while glorious in its power to analyze, can never prove the truth of anything because, carried to an extreme, reason always undermines itself by coming up against this or that logical inconsistency.

Authorizing the truth of something falls to the intestinal, the supposed locus of faith or intuition or sympathy. If one feels in one's gut that a thing is true, even if the head parades argument after argument against it, then that thing is true and must be followed. A tautology, of course (i.e., if I feel in my gut something is true, then it is true because I feel it in my gut), but nevertheless, there it sits, enthroned.

But what came to me after the performance was that this anatomy is too simple, which is why the productions felt less than full-voltaged. The head also has its own gut, and it differs from the one in the lower regions. This gut thrills to the truth of the intellect, to the cool aesthetic, to reason's scalpel, to the enstranged and the against-the-grain and the surprised expectation. To it, catharsis proves nothing, and being emotionally drained by Aristotelian fear and pity is simply a playwright's way of making the audience members powerless and passive voyeurs.

This is not a gut that most American theatre people know about because their training does not include knowing about it or cultivating it. But it has great power because it doesn't allow art to wash over us in order to pacify us; instead, it makes us work against the received cultural scripts that get in the way of understanding what is real and, by negating these scripts, makes us complicit in the act of making art. Barker captures this in his prologue to *The Bite Of The Night* about a woman coming to the theatre:

> *If that's art I think it is hard work*
> *It was beyond me*
> *So much beyond my actual life*
>
> But something troubled her
> Something gnawed her peace
> And she came back a second time,
> Armoured with friends

*Sit still*, she said

And, again, she listened to everything....
And in the light again said

*This is art, it is hard work*

And one friend said, *too hard for me*

And the other said, *if you will, I*
*will come again*
*Because I found it hard I felt*
*honoured*

In reference to *Scenes From An Execution*, the sentimentalized romantic approach to the issue of power in the play missed the gut in the head. If Teller had gone for that gut instead of the nether one, then the production might have tackled power in ways that would have made the audience more enmeshed in Galactia's struggle and thus more aware of their own ideas/temptations/desires about power. That might have made them more uncomfortable with the play or made the play too opaque—but, on the other hand, like Barker's theatre-goer, they might have felt honored rather than simply served or entertained.

If doing that, if going for the gut in the head, had made Barker's play come alive, I would have counted that an evening well spent. But in thinking about the gut in the head, it occurs to me that part of the reason why most Americans have such a turmoiled relationship with power is that they don't use the head enough (and the gut in the head) to think about how power is applied to them.

Instead, they sentimentalize power, thrill to an intestinal sympathy with those in authority, intone phrases "like the power of the Presidency" to soothe their anxieties, and forget to listen to—or simply ignore—the gut in the head telling them to sharpen their machetes along with their skepticism. And if what they consume for cultural nourishment doesn't do anything to counter that sentimentality, or the tautology of the gut intuition, then there's no mystery to why we don't storm the White House and kill the Caliban in the Oval Office.

This is a stretch, but perhaps not much of one, and needs its own essay, in any case. But the gut in the head—we certainly need more work that broadcasts to that. Barker is one. There are others. Let's find them and bring their dark light to the stage.

# Three Definitions of Real Theater

(September 2007)

*OLD LADY ON THE TEN-SPEED*

It had been a usual day in the life of an administrative director of a small, progressive educational nonprofit — preparing our professional development institutes, following up on a thousand details from 403(b)'s to reserving parking to unjamming the photocopier to answering the phones. I admit that on this day I resented all the effort and easily descended into an all too-usual "Oh Poor Michael," nurturing an untoxic but sticky self-pity.

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

I stopped short and watched her with a mixture of compassion and astonishment, as if someone had slapped me in the face and said, "Shape up!"; and my self-pity dissolved in an instant. Not because I felt the smug reassurance of "There but for the grace of God go I." No, I can only describe what happened as my heart cracking open: an immediate, right-between-the-eyes respect for how much energy this human being was expending in keeping her own heart intact as she made her inexorable way north.

Living is a tough business; to paraphrase what Betty Davis said about old age, life is not for sissies. And because living can produce so much struggle and dismay, we often wear a thick hide of self-misery and "Oh poor me" around our hearts for both medicine and barricade, especially when daily evidence reiterates how easily we can lose everything in a flash of fire or clash of armies. But as the paraplegic cartoonist John Callahan says, 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 how cold and unearned my self-pity was, how important it is to make the struggle even if I didn't immediately understand why I should or where I will end up.

But her image did not just say, in some grim puritanical tone, to suffer adversity because it will improve the character. When my heart cracked at seeing her, I also had to smile at the pure "Yes" of her paddlewheeling down the street. Against age, against rusting knees, against pedestrian traffic, she steamed home. Certainly I, with mobile knees and half her age, could do the same. I got to the station just as the train I needed to take pulled in, and I sat in the rackety subway car converted for the rest of the day into light and patience.

## *EROS ON THE ESCALATOR*

At the Port Authority bus station on 42nd Street, you get from the bus drop-offs to street level (or vice versa) down somewhat long, rickety escalator rides. During the morning rush hour, most arrivers (including myself) don't really "ride" the escalator but instead diligently scurry down it, impatient to get to the bottom so that we can scuttle to the subway station in the Port Authority's bowels and jam ourselves into the train when it clatters to a halt and the doors open and close like scissors cutting us into strings of bland silhouettes. We herd along like nervous little drones.

But occasionally, just to defy the morning's careen, I actually ride the escalator down, and it's then that I sometimes receive one of those gratuities that make life in the city worthwhile: I fall in love — briefly, safely, tinged with the sharp cocaine of innocence and a full license for dreaming. Because as I ride I take the time to watch the contra-flow of people coming up, and often among them is a person who makes my heart yammer and my skin squeeze. The person may not be classically lovely, may not always be a woman — but something about this person sweetens the eye the way excellent chocolate or the acid sugar burr of a balanced lemonade suddenly turns taste into rapture.

Usually our eyes don't connect, which is fine — the visual gift of the person's person, given and taken away by the opposite flow of the escalator, shakes color out of the bland usual, which is gift enough on most days. But sometimes we do connect, and one of two things happens — either the person looks away, genuinely uninterested or slightly embarrassed or dulled by preoccupation, or a flirt blossoms, an ephemeral slip of lightly tinged erotic permission, where the eyes connect like kite and wind and the face relaxes, caught in the bowl of the lips curving upward in a smile. The flirt never lasts longer than the time it take to pass each other by — any longer, and it would require action, decision,

commitment, detail. But in that convective moment boundaries get erased, pleasure engaged, fantasy revved, and the mundane clank of the metal stairs is the sound of the ship's retracting anchor freeing the vessel into the wind.

Haven't you ever felt this momentary pang which is both sexual and something other than sexual, where the fair face or hard body on some slant path that crosses yours makes your nerve endings fizz, makes you breathe in sharply enough to bring your skin to red-alert?

It's sexual because the physical response to the person coming my way is the purest distillate of lust. I don't want to know names and histories and things that would require discrimination and therefore etiquette. Instead, I want to shuck off all rules and restraints with my clothes, paying homage to nothing but sensation — and then leave, carrying nothing more with me than sensation's aftermath, selfish and sated. Union without an address and phone number.

But that something other than sexual — much more complicated. When that face accosts me and my body flushes and my mouth runs dry and I imagine flesh rubbing the sulfur of flesh into flame, something else also gets added, like copper filings that turn a fireplace flame green, straightforward carnality distracted into beauty. The sexual makes the flesh magnetic, the slap and dash of coupling, but the erotic restrains the gluttony, wants to extend the pleasure of the pleasure. If the sexual involves the high arc of climax with the inevitable little death that comes afterwards, then the erotic meets a full hunger with a full meal several courses long, each sense simmered open along a gentler curve.

This erotic is difficult to put into words because it works best wordless. In a book written many years ago about eroticism and property, the author talked about how economics treats objects as things composed of material physics and only good for exchange. But when that same object becomes the focus of erotic appreciation, becomes a thing of love rather than lucre, the owner infuses the object with self, as if the body's capillary system extended itself to the object, feeding it oxygen, bringing it into orbit. Making property erotic meant bringing it out of the anonymity of physics and naming it, making it domestic.

In fact, as Norman O. Brown pointed out, the whole basis for what we would call "life" (not just biology but everything we mean when we name ourselves human) is built on a substrate of eros, of love, play, pleasure, that childish permeability of boundaries which Freud called "polymorphously perverse." Only as the ego and superego take over their conservative roles does the original free-wheeling eros get whittled down into the reality-principle, into economics

and exchange, the sobriety of reason, the genitalia of sex, and the dronish little scuttle from the bus arrival to the train platform.

So, what does this mean for the flirt on the escalator? A satisfying flirt has both qualities to it, the sexual jump-the-bones desire and the erotic linger, materiality and spirit, haggle and invitation, attraction and beauty. With only the sexual, the flirt becomes lechery; with only the erotic, it becomes just ghostly appreciation, like museum-going. With both, the flirt pushes the blood to high tide and gives the mind ballast. So when that singular face or body reaches out of the flow and hooks me, as I pass by and feel that double flush, I carry away the little bit more of life that the flirt gives me, no sure antidote against the ravages but enough to lighten and lift, to erase any of the routine growing its scales on me. Such flirts widen the moments and help me wear my mortality with something like comfort.

And the day will tender endless opportunities: as I move through this city of strangers, I will meet scores on the sly, my heart saluting them, my eyes dancing, rarefied for a moment by the dark hair framing a face or the tight swash of denim across solid legs. Flirt alert, flirt alert! The day makes promises it can keep.

## *JUMP, PASS, SHOOT: PLAYING HOOP*

The pass is just at my fingertips, looped crosscourt by the guy racing down the right wing. It's not the right pass for a fast break — the classic pass is a bounce pass, timed perfectly to match the stride of the man cutting down the lane so that it eases into his hands just as he launches himself for the lay-up.

But I have to stretch for this one, and the winch of muscle up from my ankles through my thighs across my abdomen along the length of my arm seems to create a magnetism just beyond the fanned tips of my fingers that draws the ball down into my palm. My left palm. I can't shoot left-handed. So I land with a chunky slap of rubber on wood, pivot, and fire a short fade-away jumper, the hand of the defender just a microsecond and millimeter late and under. It totters on the rim, then silks through the net. We win, 7 to 6.

This is pick-up basketball as it's played twice a week in what I call the "Over-50 Lunchtime Basketball League," a bunch of guys who get together on Tuesdays and Thursdays to run reasonable facsimiles of fast breaks, three-pointers from "down town," and post-ups down low. We play not only for the exercise and camaraderie, but because basketball is such a sweet, musical, and jazzy game,

an occasion for even slightly balding, paunch-building men to pirouette, practice grace, and receive a brief flash of glory and commendation.

We all played pick-up basketball, in one form or another, as we grew up, and we can all walk onto this court from our different lives and know instantly how to mesh and blend. In this way basketball is like rhythm-and-blues. If you know certain chord patterns, guitar riffs, and harmonica slides, you can sit down with anyone from anywhere and jam. Basketball has the same portability, the same universal lingo. Bring a basketball to a playground hoop, ask a few total strangers if they'd like to play, and within minutes the group will be weaving and picking as if they'd been playing together since peach baskets and medicine balls.

This occasional and fluid comradeship might appear effortless, but it's learned in an apprenticeship that carries its share of knives and insult. I saw a good example of it not long ago at the playground just down the street from my house. At one end of the court were four black college-freshmen-aged kids singing the basketball back forth among themselves, showing off, mock-insulting each other. At the other end were two white kids, about seventeen, doing the usual get-a-jump-shot-in-get-another-shot routine. Occasionally they would look at the quartet wheeling and smart-cracking as if they expected a request from that end for a three-on-three game. None came.

Finally, after three or four longing stares, one of the white kids walked the length of the court and asked if they wanted to get a game started. A short pause as the four looked at each other, then a round of nods. They played for an hour.

Meanwhile, a few other kids had wandered up to the court and watched the game. It was obvious to me that they wanted to play, but as the sextet finished one game, then another, and then another, and no emissary came bearing a summons, they gradually stopped their aimless dribbling and melted away.

The apprenticeship for pick-up basketball really has only one short and clear rule: you don't get anything unless you ask because no one will ask you. But you have to ask in a way that makes it clear that you assume you're going to play unless someone tells you differently. You don't walk up to a game in progress, especially if the guys on the court all know each other from the neighborhood, and say, politely, "May I have the next game?" Such civility is akin to Oliver asking for more gruel, with about as much chance for success.

Instead, you have to say, “Whose got winners?” If someone is sitting out the game and says, “I do,” then you say, “Okay” and pick up a ball to warm up. You don’t say, “Need anybody?”; you just assume that you’re going to play in the next game and you put yourself in the presence. If no one’s got winners, then you declare that winners is yours, with the same assurance that you own the designation until someone tells you differently.

The etiquette is simple and basic: ask, and you usually get. A few other rules apply as well. Everyone calls his own fouls, and the call is always honored, even if it seems stupid, unjust, or bogus. Games are short so that no one has to sit for long, and everyone who sits out gets to play the next game, even if it means the winning team has to shoot for players. Such democracy works for an hour or so because it’s full of quid pro quo, and while there are hotdogs and whiners in every game, no one ever tries to lord it over because what you do will get done back to you if you’re not careful. It’s the game that regulates the ego, the brio and craft of the game that reins in pettiness.

The game: patterned and fluid, risky and deliberate, full of scoops, dish offs, alley oops, and body-bending picks. It offers the body grace and power, flight and strategy, attack and dance. Some of my friends don’t like basketball; they see it as chaotic, or at least formless, a bunch of guys running up and down the court, and usually they prefer the more sedate pleasures of baseball or the designed violence of football. But the “formlessness” of basketball is only surface, only apparent; underneath are elegant patterns that govern flow and weave, patterns that can suddenly spring a player free from a forest of bodies for an arcing jump shot, or end in a slicing slam-dunk as three players at full tilt fill the lanes on a fast break.

The beauty of basketball also comes from how it brokers a few simple fundamentals — jump shot, lay-up, pass, dribble — into continual variation. Each time a team comes down the court using these fundamentals it creates something that didn’t exist before. There’s an endless menu of ways five players can get the ball into the basket. Because conditions on each possession can’t always be predicted, so much of the game’s energy depends on intuition, on a “court sense” that lets the mind see more than the eye registers. There is constant calibration and re-calibration, constant amendment of intention and expectation — which means constant surprise without wrench, innovation without decay.

And each of these fundamentals has its own delicacies. On the dribble, player and ball have to move as if there's no divorce between skin and leather; each exerts control over the other, animate and inanimate briefly wedded. The shot is most prominent because it produces the final tally, the game's end. But it has beauties of its own beyond utility: a long high parabolic 23-foot jump shot hitting an opening no larger than a fair-sized trout is a marvel of physics and symmetry, as golden as any mean devised by ancient philosophers.

But where the shot finishes and the dribble prepares, it's the pass that, like a shuttle, carries the knit of the game. In a basketball game the swirl of bodies opens and closes like branches in a high wind, and a good pass finds that caesura in the action where, for a breath, there are no hands or legs or sprint. But it's not just vectors and geometry. A player must wait for a good pass, wait for the flow to eddy in the right way, and this patience is zen. A good pass seems to navigate of its own accord, to find that sweet gap that, a breath later, snaps shut.

Basketball is a lot like quantum mechanics. It's a game composed of probabilities. Each trip down the court is unique in its form and entropy, and while the general positions of all the players can be known, place and velocity keep changing. But out of this continual mixing and kneading of variables comes the slashing dribble, the gentle touch of the fade-away jumper, the pass finessed through the vortex, the solidified game.

None of us in the lunch-time league are extraordinarily good, but that doesn't matter. We like to be in touch, no matter how imperfectly, with the energy and companionship of basketball, and so we run for an hour and a half twice a week to clean out our hearts and lungs and fill our bodies with delight. And every once in a while one of us under incredible pressure shoots the game-winner with nonchalant grace, or throws a pass that smacks of greatness. We talk about it afterwards in the locker room, and then go on to our outside lives. But we'll be back soon.

# Necro-Political Theater

(October 2007)

On Tuesday, September 11, Brian Stack, the doggedly self-promoting mayor of Union City, NJ, where I live, held an unveiling ceremony for a 9/11 memorial planted on a triangle of inhospitable public real estate dubbed "Liberty Plaza," bordered by two major urban roadways that are dangerous to cross to get to the site. The memorial itself is a fairly generic slab of polished dark-grey stone etched with a picture of the twin towers and the usual boilerplate about "we honor" and "we will never forget." At the bottom of the stone, in letters as prominent as the eulogy to the dead, is a citation that this memorial was commissioned by Mayor Brian Stack, etcetera, etcetera. Call it a lithic form of campaign advertising.

To the right of the slab is a slice of a grey-painted angled steel I-beam jammed into a granite base incised with the phrase "World Trade Center." (I don't know if the I-beam is an actual piece of either tower, but observers are clearly encouraged to believe that it is.) All of this necro-political sculpture is surrounded by a sternum-high wrought-iron fence placed just far enough back to keep any human hand from actually having a tactile connection to the memorialized dead. The artifact is meant to be observed, not cherished, to be official rather than personal, and what is meant to be observed, as is true of most of the memorial sculpture in this genre, is the political power of the living to define the memories that become the exclusive (and excluding) record of the historical event.

This scramble to (re)direct the peoples' gaze toward the meaning of 9/11 reaches something of a frenzy each year in New York on the actual date because, ironically enough, no one can agree on what the six-year old event means. That is, no one person or group has been able to gather the powers -- moral, political, financial -- to emboss the event with an official profile (the way, for instance, World War II is now completely encased in the armor of the "good war" and the "greatest generation," thanks to Ken Burns and Tom Brokaw).

So, in the interim, those who can appropriate it for their own purposes: the President to legitimize an illegitimate war, the governor and mayor to show the world New York's "resilience," Giuliani to promote the myth of his (non-existent) competence, the families of those who died to impose an endless regime of grief and shame. Each of these, and many others, have, by now, dramaturged the event to their own specifications, honed the stage business to a razor-sharp

timing, and produced a long and successful run promoting a managed message of doom and uplift. Just like our intrepid and insipid Mayor Stack, they have turned a day of tragedy into cultural and political kitsch.

The fact is that six years out from that day, no one really knows what that day means. Apart from engineering studies that document the physics of the collapse (and all of those are challenged by purveyors of various conspiracies), and the studies that will continue to show how incompetent and blindered was our vaunted expensive intelligence apparatus, September 11, 2001, has deliquesced into a memory, and as with all memories suffers from the intermittent amnesia and selective breeding for message that afflicts all human memory-making.

And what does "means" mean anyway? In one way, 9/11 has no meaning at all, that is, it is not a term in a dictionary that one can look up and get its denotation and connotation. 9/11 is more like a Rorschach print, an arbitrary fractal image upon which people project whatever happens to be roiling around inside of them. This is the only definition of "means" that makes sense in this case.

But this projection of what is inside to the outside is not without some cultural and political discipline and instruction. To be sure, part of the projected package may include completely private fears and hatreds, but these are shined through the larger lens of the indoctrinations and tutorings we have all sculpted, and had sculpted for us, into that thing we call a "self" and an "I." Thus, the importance of creating a "Theatre of 9/11," as did our savvy Mayor Stack, in order to capture what attention-spans, and thus political influence, is out there to be snared.

To be sure, this is cynical manipulation, but it is on a continuum of theatre-making, not its antithesis. All theatre, as does all art, seeks to manipulate a response out of an audience -- otherwise, why go to the bother of making it? (Even if artists make art for themselves alone, I assume that they, the audience of one, want to be moved by what they make.) That continuum can run from what I call "journalistic theatre" (using a current event to teach the audience about that current event) to the absurdist wing, where the audience is meant to be challenged, even chastised, by bafflement. "Necro-political theatre" obviously falls somewhere in-between, though it borrows elements from both extremes: it grounds itself in a current event in order to instruct us about that event (even if that "current" event is six years old -- part of necro-political dramaturgy is to try to

immortalize something that is, in itself, time-specific) but also (though probably unintentionally, since necro-political theatre has no irony in it) absurdizes the situation by grafting onto it all sorts of ersatz mythology and religiosity that tip it into the realm of the fantastical.

All of this might be consigned to the academic world (fodder for Ph.D. dissertations) if it didn't have such ramifying repercussions in the "real" world. Necro-political theatre got us into 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. And the "enemy" deploys its own necro-political theatre as well, doing a far better job at it than Bush's clumsy apparatchiks.

One cost for living in a virtualized world like ours, where image and a kind of pre-literary, infantile narrative model prevails over nuance and close reading, is an increase in gullibility and destruction. An antidote? Some form of theatrical criticism that peels away the excrescences and shows the nakedness of the Emperor and his empire. And it needs to be a *theatrical* criticism, using a theatre vocabulary and a dramaturgical logic to lance the boil. Frank Rich is an expert at this (in part because he has been a theatre critic for a long time), as are writers like Alexander Cockburn and Katha Pollitt. But we can't leave it to them since they will never have the reach of a William Kristol or a Rush Limbaugh. Each of us needs 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.

# What Is/What If

(November 2007)

Consider these blurbs from a recent listing of shows here in New York City (I've de-listed the names of the shows and the actors):

> In _____, _____ portrays warlords, militants, oil workers, prostitutes and the American Ambassador to Nigeria, among many others. In this, his third solo show, _____ continues to develop his unique form of journalistic theater.
>
> Taking place during one alcohol laced rehearsal, _____ rocks hard and breaks hearts. This downtown NYC garage band is on the edge of breaking-up as the lead singer and his boyfriend (also in the band) are, er, breaking-up. With each year that passes that they aren't rock stars the incessant pull of adulthood becomes harder to ignore.
>
> In _____, the Broadway and film actress whimsically traces the highlights of her life though the music that has carried and nurtured her, both professionally and personally.... A devoted wife and mother, _____ shares the challenges and rewards of balancing a life in music with real life. The result is an entertainment that offers some comfortable memories and more than a few surprises, all delivered with the intimacy and joy of a seasoned performer.
>
> Kiah is an out-of-work actor who uses his savings to produce his dream show: a production of Hamlet where the roles change every night, determined by a drawing of names at random....By the opening of the show-within-a-show, Kiah learns who can be trusted and who can't — but the greatest betrayal won't come from without: it'll come from within.
>
> A famous musician, discovering that he is dying of an incurable illness, has to come to terms simultaneously with his present and past....In the process, Zelman discovers that he can "atone" both in his relationship with a long-dead father who was a victim of Nazi prosecution and a very-much-alive son, through his own understanding of his life and art.

Good news and bad news here. The good news: Each of these theater pieces seems to honor Aristotle's "how-to" about dramatic writing, with reversals, revelations, characters eliciting fear and pity, etc. The bad news: Each of these theater pieces seems to honor Aristotle's "how-to" about dramatic writing....

I state the situation this way because many people hold the mistaken understanding that Aristotle's *Poetics* describes the compositional methods of the great Greek tragedians, such as Aeschylus and company, and that if we adhere to them, we then borrow from their greatness.

However, the *Poetics* doesn't do this because Aristotle composed his notes long after these writers had finished. Instead, the *Poetics* describes the state of theatre in his day, which was closer in style, effort, and intention to modern domestic drama and comedy (in fact, the best fulfillment of Aristotle's dictates was not the fifth-century BC tragedies but the upcoming Roman comedies and an entire evening's menu of television dramas and sit-coms).

Aristotle was and is an excellent guide to what I call "what-is" theatre, echoed in the first blurb above as "journalistic theatre." As is often the case in these matters, Howard Barker, the British playwright, pins the condition wriggling to the wall. What follows is an excerpt from an earlier essay I wrote on Barker's *Arguments for a Theatre*:

> Barker's theory 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 kind of "market" theatre is aligned with an authoritarian culture (masked as a democracy) dedicated to making every secret of its populace open and transparent in order to better police them, what he calls "light as a regime." A theatre that seeks to "throw light" on the subjects it engages is, in Barker's analysis, complicit in this social control.

Complicit 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 in conception and production. 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 by means of "the realist discourse," which Barker identifies with naturalism or realism in the theatre (he does not make distinctions between the two). 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 of these devices and more must be used in order to make sure the audience does not get lost in imagination and comes to the "consensus of conscience and critique" embedded in the drama as required by the regime of light.

When all of these elements are combined, the "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 accord and downplaying or destroying (through criticism and the market) any use of the theatre for moral speculation outside the "consensus."

The mission of "what-is" theatre, then, is replication of the status quo, a way to keep us (and thus our thoughts and emotions) in the places to which we have been taught how to become accustomed to place them. (This makes sense in a such a highly commodified and fetish-making culture like our own.) Each of the story-lines quoted above borrows from the same narrative-telling playbook in order to achieve the same end: resolution, redemption, a complaisant harmony, a comfortable humanity.

But Barker goes on to describe a different approach, what I call "what-if" theatre (and he called the Theatre of Catastrophe — admittedly, a more piquant descriptor). "What-if" is more transgressive than "what-is", not only in the outlaw sense of that word (Barker describes "what-if" as the place where "the imagination is wild and tragic,...its criminality unfettered [and] the unspeakable is spoken") but also simply in the root-sense of that word, to "step across": boundaries, frontiers, expectations, the whole set of corporate-made templates

that discipline us to enskin ourselves in a "human nature" acceptable to cultural and political demands.

Of course, given the economic, political, and cultural regimes under which theatre-makers have to make theatre in this country, "what-if" theatre will never gain much of a mass audience, for several reasons. One is its call for "think-good" as opposed to "feel-good" productions. Barker talks about "deliver[ing] the wound" of greater insight where the audience "will endure the wound as a man drawn from a swamp endures the pain of the rope." Clearly, the audience for wound-enduring will be small, given Americans' native desire to avoid pain and to/in order to maximize pleasure as well as a resistance to being "learned" by their entertainment choices. (Not to mention the standing truth about humans that, more often than not, when they think they're thinking, they're simply rearranging their prejudices — having a theatrical "wound" take them out of that practice will not be welcomed or pursued.)

Another reason is the sheer technical difficulty of the challenge: how to compose a theatre that grinds against the grain of every established maxim of the "right" way to "wright" a play. It means inventing new forms, new soundscapes, new choreographies, new topographies — and most of all, a new self, or at least a refurbished way of "selfing," that is, the re-composition of the theatrical creation known as "oneself."

A third reason is that there is no demand from the culture to create a theatre like this. Long gone are the days (if they ever existed) when Americans looked to art and artists for a compass that encompasses what is right and provides a contra-diction to the common diction. We pay lip-service to this desire, of course — every grant request to an arts organization states, small or large, some homage to the outsider and truth-telling role of the artist. But no one really believes it, or at least believes it has any traction in our culture's aesthetic arrangements. So we get, yet once again, confessional monologues and theatricalized journalism and paeans to the healing powers of art, none of it calculated to wound, all of it calculated to please and assuage.

Sour grapes in this? Perhaps a tad, but they're low down on the list. These thoughts come more from a hard-to-articulate but strong disheartenment with the quality of life in the country where I live. Everything feels, and is, coarse and coarsened. The intellectual and emotional thinness of most contemporary entertainment is of a piece with this country's slide into self-pleasuring, historical amnesia, and rejection of the common good as its top three cultural pursuits.

Both "what-is" and "what-if" theatre can do little to reverse this — that would require a wholesale re-enchantment of the American populace by qualities it has given up and forgotten: a spirit of disobedience, a remembering of the collective origins of individual freedoms, the virtues of things having a "local habitation" — the list is long. A revitalizing of theatre cannot happen without a revitalizing of everything else — and there seems no chance that this will happen without some disaster greater than Katrina (which seemed to do nothing to shock us out of our facile corruption) that exposes the rot and opens up possibilities to cauterize it.

But, in the meantime (and all of our lives take place in the "meantime"), one has to do something, and creating theatre is as good as anything (though probably less pertinent than building affordable housing and fighting for universal health care). The thing to do is create enough "what-is" theatre to buy some space and time to create the "what-if" theatre that is much more interesting to create, if harder to roll out. And hope the revolution comes soon.

# By Design

(December 2007)

I work for the Salvadori Center, an educational not-for-profit that uses the design of the built environment for an interdisciplinary project-based study of math, science, social studies, language, art, and technology. By "built environment," we mean not only tunnels, bridges, and skyscrapers but also the systems — cultural, political, economic — that build the built environment. We do this K through 12 in the New York City public schools.

I'm not a "design professional" by trade or training, but one can't hang around the Salvadori staff for long — trained as they are as architects, engineers, mathematicians, and artists — without acquiring a "design point of view" about the world. In fact, I've come to the conclusion that the best way for me to make sense of the fractalcality of human life — its fractal, loose-bordered nature — is to see it as a built environment designed by deliberated choices to make things one way rather than another. "Deliberated" does not always mean rational, orderly, just, or sensical — it only means that some humans somewhere at some time set in motion processes based on whatever they thought made sense at the time. It also means that that "sense" does not have an intrinsic moral character to it — "sense" can mean fair-minded or foul, equitable or exploitative, intelligent or stupid. The "sense" only needs to be coherent, as in "cohere," to stick together.

What does this have to do with theatre — the making of theatre, the understanding created by 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 something in the people invited to populate the space during a time called "performance."

To go even further, each play performed in the designed space re-designs this space — in other words, each play creates a new built environment (usually called "the world" of the play) that, in its presentation, determines to bring the audience to someplace other than the world that careens just outside the exits.

As I pointed out in my last essay, *What Is/What If*, most theatre-making has a bias towards the production of accessible "sense," usually governed by a story-telling mechanism that aims to produce light and, if possible, something like redemption, and it makes conservative use of the built environment to do this, mostly by giving a priority to "reality" through stage setting and lighting.

But the wonderful thing about the built environment of the theatre, as opposed to the built environment of the "real world," is that it need not be constrained by the needs of that real world — any world can be built on the stage, even worlds that try to dissolve any concept of world itself, of coherence itself. Anything placed on the stage immediately acquires the power of metaphor. And furthermore, that theatre world can dispense with the constrictions of morality and politics — it need not achieve light or order or redemption or anything "feel good."

In short, used well, the designed world of the theatre can help us penetrate and navigate the built environment we call a "self." Because each human being is a designed creature, designed from the outside and the inside, and what we might call "organic" or "whole" is simply a design that meshes our inside and outside in a workable synchronicity. What better way to investigate our devised selves than through an art like theatre that thrives on "devision"?

Many other elements about this notion of the designed self please me. First, I think it's immensely liberating. I am completely responsible for who I am because, whether I've done it badly or well, I have made every decision that has fed my design. I am also freed from ghosts, that is, from beliefs that my self-roots are anchored in extra-material origins, such as the supernatural or the divine, or in past trauma or in solipsistic regrets — only I have made me who I am, not gods or spirits or past monsters.

Second, being thus liberated, nothing human alienates me, which leads to a much diminished need to judge the rightness or wrongness of anything, which in turn frees me from smugness and sanctimony. There is no eternal right and wrong, only contingency and interpretation, and while such existential looseness may terrify people and convince them to take up ideologies and principles as blockades and stop-gaps, it is also the source of the freedom to re-conceive the self as the time-driven re-design of the self requires (otherwise known as "life").

For me, then, my career as a playwright (and I mean "career" as a mash-up of both its meanings: a "course of continued progress" in "a headlong manner") 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 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” is what “being” is about.

2006

# The Aesthetic Response

(January 2006)

Two recent viewings: the world premiere of *The Little Dog Laughed* by Douglas Carter Beane (of *As Bees in Honey Drown* fame) and *Sweeney Todd* by Stephen Sondheim and Hugh Wheeler in the newly refurbished production by John Doyle. And two completely different aesthetic responses to an evening in the theatre.

This essay is my spade, so to speak, to dig inside a long-standing puzzle for me about how and what I see and feel when I watch the art that I profess to love — or, in other words, what things make me feel I'm actually in the presence of "theatre" and what things make me feel that I am not.

First, the Beane.

This new play (a "world premiere"— a pretentious term, really, crafted for grant applications — why not call it a "cosmic premiere," since I assume it's not being shown on Alpha Centauri — but this is a kvetch for another time), a four-hander, takes its beat from the movie world, concerning an on-the-move male screen actor with homosexual identity problems and his (only slightly figurative) penis-eating medusa-ish agent/manager on her own make for the powerful and the tawdry.

They get a "property" that guarantees the two of them success if only the male actor will give over his desire for a "friend"— in this case, a male prostitute who falls in love with the male actor and with whom the male actor wishes to make a life. The fourth character is a woman who is a gold-digger recently dumped by her most recent gold-diggeree and who also happens to be the off-and-on girlfriend of the male prostitute, who, by the end of the play, is pregnant with his child. (Can't you just feel that New York vibe about gender slipping as so up-to-the-minute up to the minute?)

What happens is that the agent/manager, faced with the crash-and-burn of her one chance to make her way to the top and gnaw on a few hearts and testicles along the way, carves out a deal: the male actor will marry the pregnant girlfriend, thereby preserving his hetero appearance, and the male prostitute will be able to have "access" to the male actor through the back door, so to speak. The male prostitute, who by all counts is really in love, refuses, instead taking a nice fat send-off check from the agent/manager as payment for his "integrity."

Nudge-nudge, wink-wink, and the play ends with everyone walking away from the table "happy."

Now, putting aside the fact that the play rips off at least two other plays and movies that I can think of — *The Player* and *Swimming with Sharks* for the movies and *Speed the Plow* by David Mamet and *The Road to Nirvana* by Arthur Kopit (I am sure there are more). No, actually, let's not put that to the "aside" because while Beane may have borrowed, he didn't do better than borrow because there is no heart at risk at the heart of his play as there is in these other works. The two movies employ, respectively, murder and torture, and in *Nirvana*, the supplicants partake, literally, of blood and shit. *Plow* lacks this kind of blatant symbolism but is no less caustic about "the business" and the ways it eats out the soul (often with the merry connivance of those whose souls are masticated).

*Dog*, on the other hand, has none of this venom and drive — and how could it, given the anemic stories that Beane chooses to tell and the anemic ways he chooses to tell them? First of all, the stories: A male actor worried about coming out in 2005 — really? A prostitute with a heart of gold (shades of a male *Sweet Charity*)? Two conniving, self-centered, harpyish women (three, if you include the pregnant girlfriend's unseen mother, Screecher, who has the temerity to comment upon her daughter's wastrel life)? Beane never gives any of these characters anything vital to lose, and what he gives them to gain never seems worth the candle. Shallow-made characters accepting shallow gifts from their creator.

But even given this, what really kills the play's momentum for me is its constant self-referentiality, a "nudge-nudge, wink-wink" attitude that erodes the play's vitality because, while Beane has his characters talk about themselves, and then talk about how they've talked about themselves, he forgets to invite the audience in to the play-making process, preferring to treat them as laugh-deliverers at the proper cues and applausers at the end. By the end of the play, I was more than ready to exit because I felt like I'd never been asked to attend (to) the work at hand in the first place.

Okay, Beane to one side, *Sweeny Todd* on the other.

I cannot over-praise this production. I've seen the what will now be called "traditional" staging of it, seen a video of Len Cariou and Angela Lansbury — and never much cared for the visual aspect of the production because it simply embodies the music's suggestions about time, place, and character. And the "traditional" staging's efforts to blend music-hall and Grand Guignol sensibilities

always felt like something veneered onto the piece to make it "stagy" and "Broadway-y" (sorry for the coinages), at odds with the dark heart of dark characters.

Doyle's re-staging not only brings that dark heart out (figuratively, to be sure, but also literally, given Todd's razor and Mrs. Lovett's butchering) but does it by using the artifices of the theatre so that the audience knows all the time that it is in a theatre, watching a work of theatrical artifice. Doyle dispenses with realism in order to get down to the work's reality: Todd's desire for revenge and the havoc it wreaks on everyone it touches.

The central prop is a coffin, which by turns also becomes a counter, a judge's bench, the barber's establishment. The stage set mimics the coffin's rough construction. The floor and the back wall (which rises up into the fly-space) are built from thick wooden planks separated by about an inch or so that lights can be cast through these slats. Stacked on shelving screwed in to the back wall that itself ascends into the fly-space are loads of Victorian detritus from some disordered attic. The actors are also the musicians, which means that everyone onstage (including Patty Lupone and Michael Cerveris) must play several instruments and sing and act. The throat-slittings are not done in that Rube Goldberg-contrapted chair that slides them out and down into Mrs. Lovett's basement, as is usually the case. Instead, when the throat is slit, Cerveris' hand sweeps the blade across the throat, and the lighting goes to red while a character (it varies) pours blood from one white bucket into another, each killing adding more blood to each pouring. The dead don white lab coats painted in red Corita-like streaks until everyone onstage, except Todd, wears the sign of their death.

And there are many more touches like this that constantly force the audience to re-see the piece and re-hear the music. And these touches (or "gimmicks," as some reviewers have called them) are always clearly "artificial" — that is, we can see the machinery that never once lets us think that what we are seeing is "real life" but constantly reminds us that we are seeing "theatre life." The "gimmicks" make the familiar piece new and strange and "unreal" and "untruthful," which allows us, paradoxically, to feel the reality of the piece's truths more deeply.

So this is what I have learned.

What is "real" in the theatre is not what is happening on the stage but what is happening in the mind and spirit of the audience members as they watch the stage. What happens on the stage is simply the mechanics of story telling, and

these mechanics can range from "realist" and "linear" to their complete and utter opposites.

What creates a sense of "real" in the theatrical audience is when they can sense that the story being told to them has enough weight to it for the story to create a gravitational pull that draws them in—so that they can be in the "world of the dream"—and—and—that the mechanics of the story-telling increase that gravitational pull rather than defuse or diffuse its power. And, for my money, the best way to power-up a theatrical work's gravity is to keep the audience off-balance by making them realize, through clever and surprising strangenesses, that they really don't know this story that they thought they knew (such as with *Todd*) or that they thought they knew where the story was going but it didn't go that way (such as with new work).

Beane's work doesn't do this, despite the production's own gimmickry of sliding set pieces, arch lighting design, and tight sound design. Never once does the story have much gravitational pull, and the mechanics of the story telling, with such things as stop-the-action-dead-for-personal-monologues, do nothing to make the story attractive. And we know where this story is going to go — some deal will have to be made so that all the sharks get fed, and so it simply becomes, for the audience member, a matter of waiting to see if he or she has figured out the deal before it gets revealed on the stage. We are not in the dream, we are outside it (all right, I am not in the dream), distanced by the play's hipness, not engaged in any deep way with the story.

With *Todd*, all of what doesn't happen in Beane's play happens here. True, we already know the story, but because of the way Doyle has re-jiggered the story telling, we don't know how the familiar story is going to be told — in other words, "anticipation" as one vector of gravitational pull. And many more vectors, as I've described above. Throughout the work, we have to give up settled understandings, and this makes for more engagement and thus more pleasure.

There are limits to all of this, of course. Not everything will lend itself to what the Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky called "enstrangement" — though that depends more on the audience than it does on the work. For example, in the recent museum-like recreation of *Whose Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, the production crew failed to ask a very simple question: what was it that made this play so barbed when it premiered on Broadway in 1962, and how can we recapture that in 2005, even if it means un-doing everyone's picture of what the play is "really about"? A kind of *Sweeny Todd*-like re-rigging of *Woolf* may

not play on Broadway, but that is due more to audience expectations than the play's resistance to being re-thought (a German production retitled it *Whose Afraid of Franz Kafka?*" — now, that opens up some interesting possibilities). And certainly not all enstrangements lead to deep aesthetic pleasures — for instance, watching a Wooster Group production can be intellectually satisfying (sort of) but mightily tedious.

But the core idea still stands, I think. For me, "traditional" theatre, with its characters, rising arc, etc. does not actually need to be done on a stage because it is not primarily a visual effort, even if money is lavished on set and lighting. Beane's play could be done on radio (and, as I often do during performances, I will close my eyes and simply listen, and if the play moves along just as well with eyes closed as with eyes open, then it's a radio play). This *Sweeny Todd* could not be done on radio because it relied so heavily on visual mechanics to tell its tale, mechanics that challenged settled opinions by freshening up the story.

When I go to the theatre, I want theatre, and this means more than words, more than blocking, more than the usual production suspects. If a play simply remains a play, more often than not I feel outside the process, though there are always bits and pieces to enjoy. But when it chooses to make thing strange through cleverness or re-imaginings or surprises — when it decides to be theatre — I am willing to give it my all because it's trying to give something back to me.

# The Rights of the Playwright

(March 2006)

A January 29, 2005, New York *Times* article titled "Exit, Pursued by a Lawyer," detailed a coming lawsuit about the right of a director (in this case, Edward Einhorn) to copyright his direction of a play. (Full disclosure: Mr. Einhorn once directed a staged reading of a play of mine.)

Here are the facts, taken from the article:

> FAIRYLAND was in turmoil. During a tech rehearsal for the October 2004 Off Off Broadway production of "Tam Lin" — a play about a clash between mortal and immortal worlds — a real-life clash threatened to derail the show. Exactly what happened has become, literally, a federal case, and the sides agree on very few details. Did the playwright, Nancy McClernan, insist that the director's staging was incompetent? Did the director, Edward Einhorn, refuse to alter it? Did the producer, Jonathan X. Flagg, smash some furniture on the set? One thing's clear: the morning after the tech rehearsal, after two months of unpaid work, Mr. Einhorn was fired.

In the time-honored way of the theater, Ms. McClernan and Mr. Flagg figured the show must go on. With the help of an assistant (who eventually received the program credit for direction), they supervised the remaining rehearsals, either largely restaging the play or retaining most of Mr. Einhorn's contributions, depending on whose side you believe. In any case, *Tam Lin* opened, ran for its scheduled 10 performances, and closed. But the drama was not over. Soon playwright and producer were embroiled in a lawsuit that could ruin them personally and has huge implications for directors and playwrights everywhere.

The main interest of that suit, which Judge Lewis A. Kaplan of Federal District Court in Manhattan has scheduled for trial in April, is not whether an artist deserves to be paid for work his employers deem unsatisfactory. What's really at stake is something much larger, because Mr. Einhorn claims in his complaint that his staging contributions to *Tam Lin* — contributions that his former collaborators say they excised — constitute a copyrighted work of intellectual property, owned by him, and that the defendants must therefore pay for infringing the copyright.

When the lawsuit was filed, in October 2005, a new run of the play was already in rehearsal, this time directed by Ms. McClernan herself, who had always intended to make *Tam Lin* an annual Halloween event. Because Mr. Einhorn says that even these new performances represented unauthorized use of his work, the potential tab, based on the maximum allowable statutory damage of

$150,000 per infringement, is now up around $3 million, not including several other remedies he is requesting — along with his original $1,000 director's fee.

The also article gives some historical background to the controversy. The author, Jesse Green, details Gerald Gutierrez's battle over what he considered an unauthorized reproduction of his 1992 Broadway production of *The Most Happy Fella* and Joe Mantello's similar battle over his staging of Terrence McNally's play *Love! Valour! Compassion!* in 1994 and 1995. However, neither of these legal pissing contests produced definitive case law regarding a director's copyright, so the question remains open.

And that question is: should a director be allowed to copyright his or her work and thus make the director's copyright co-equal to the playwright's?

And my answer: This is a bad idea.

I say that knowing full well how important a director can be to making the inert words on a page turn into a full-breathing theatrical event. I say that having heard myself say many times to the talented directors with whom I've worked that they made the piece come alive, even helped me understand better what it was I was trying to accomplish with script. But none of that rises to the level of a copyright and its protections.

Here's my take on the real issues in play here. It's all about power and money.

Theatre is the last place where the dramatic writer is the center of the action. Respect is paid to the words and the writer that wrote them, and the play is the pivot around which all else revolves -- unlike in film, where the writer is one part of the industrial event called a movie and ranks low-down on the hierarchy of worker bees.

As a playwright, I don't want the director to have a copyright on his or her work because it dilutes my centrality in the theatrical process. If I have the ghost of a past director always lurking in the rehearsal hall, then the creative possibilities for putting on the play get shortened, and I don't want any restrictions on what can be done with my script. If a director says to me, "You know, in this other production I saw, they did this," I want to be able to say, "Go ahead, use it" without having to fear the lawyer's knock.

And money. There are so few opportunities for making money in the theatre that I can't fault a director for coming up with a creative scheme to put a little more of it into his or her pocket, even if I disagree with, and will fight against,

the approach. But it seems to me that there are contractual work-arounds here that avoid the copyright tar-pit -- percentages of the gate, bold typeface on the program, etc. -- and leave the playwright's centrality intact.

But in a society like ours, under the relentless capitalist pressure to commodify everything so that it can be parsed and distributed as profit, it's inevitable that "artistic contribution" will be fed into the grinder, and theatre may come to resemble the conglomerate activity of film-making, where writers' credits don't always adhere to the initial writer and the director's name comes last and most prominently in the opening credits.

So, there, I've given my litigious American answer to what appears to be poaching on the preserve of the playwright.

But something needles me about it, discomforts me, and I think it has to do with our American idea of property ownership, which is pretty militaristic: combat to preserve borders, defense of rights, and so on. I know for a fact that my sense of ownership of my work changes the moment it gets into the bodies of actors and directors. I know I wrote it -- I can bring up the images of sitting at the desk and so on -- but handing it off to others to shape and present alchemizes it so that, in some way, the work also becomes theirs, that is, they contribute to its growth, transmute its nature, and thus become attached to it (and it to them). It becomes the artistic equivalent of "the commons," a place owned by no one in particular but the responsibility of everyone as a community.

We can't deny that this transformation happens -- in fact, it's why we do theatre in the first place -- and these Zen moments of letting go that, paradoxically, bind us more closely together as artists are completely alien to the copyright-mentality that seeks to section-off and contractualize the creative process. The two have nothing in common, which in our society inevitably means having to using the legalistic half-measures for satisfaction that Mr. Einhorn and his adversaries have resorted to, which in their turn lead to everything but the satisfaction and understanding each side desires.

I'm not quite sure where this musing leads me. But it is worth noting the grind that happens when these different concepts of property and ownership come up against each other because the lack of fit between "property as mine" and "property as ours" in Einhorn v. et. al. signals a larger imbalance in our culture where "property as mine" ("mine" increasingly being defined by corporate imperatives) threatens to destroy any concept of "property as ours,"

that is, property in common, public property, property that no one owns but everyone needs.

(Ironically, copyright was initially intended to increase knowledge in the public domain. Inventors would get a short amount of time to profit from their inventions, and then these works would move into the public domain so that everyone could enjoy their benefits. Now, copyright law essentially guarantees a stranglehold in perpetuity -- witness the Disney Corporation's successful campaigns over the years to extend the copyright on Mickey Mouse well past the rodent's due date. Copyright law is now all about impoverishing the public domain, not enriching it.)

We need new models and new behaviors. I don't know what those are or will be. But I'm going to find out.

# ThomPain

(May 2006)

I recently went to see *ThomPain (based on nothing)*, Will Eno's piece on life, the universe, and everything.

I think it's a marvelous piece — deft, painfully inquisitive, elliptical — not your usual theatre with linearity and psychology neatly laid out and emotions pre-emoted for the audience.

But my appreciation was distinctly in the minority the day I went. First, I went to a Sunday matinee, which had attracted a very senior crowd, many of them walker'd and caned. (It was also mostly a Theatermania crowd, I think, many of us trolling for bargains late in the weekend.) So I think people came not-committed to the show — not necessarily uncommitted, just not with a hanker to see it driving them to come.

There was a fair amount of free-floating complaint going on before the show as well — about this happening during shopping, that bodily ailment, a little too much air-conditioning, how hard it was to get up the steps (remember: senior Sunday), nyah, nyah, nyah.

What I'm trying to parse out is why many in the audience had such a "throw the bums out" reaction to the piece, which is, after all, one man's search to find some meaning in a meaningless world that has given him a fair amount of pain and embarrassment to endure — in other words, subject matter not that far out of the mainstream.

But someone stormed out about half-way through. The elderly woman sitting one seat over from me (between us sat a kindly young man), who pre-show wanted to kvetch to me about something, which I put off my reading the boilerplate Playbill, started audibly commenting that "this was ridiculous" and "I can't believe how bad this is" until I leaned across the kindly young man to ask her to please keep her comments to herself and the kindly young man chimed in that she could always leave if she found in unendurable. She stayed, and stayed quiet — but still...

Behind me, post-show, two women and a man, who pre-show had been one of the free-floating complainers-in-residence, fired up the grievance machines as soon as the houselights came up. The man, who pre-show had announced to the other two that he had undergone 9 hours of back surgery

and that this was the first theater production he had been to since then, picked up the thread as he made his way down the aisle and out of the theatre. I don't think I heard anyone praise the show or the performance — and was befuddled by the vitriol of the responses. I just couldn't see what would make anyone turn so hostile to this work of theater — after all, there was a lot of crap out there that got off with barely a slap or a shrug.

I waited in the lobby to speak with the actor, just to tell him how much I liked the piece and liked his performance. Waiting in the lobby with me was the back-surgeried one — he was taking a rest before trekking out into the streets. We introduced ourselves. His name was Peter, and he worked as an ophthalmologist. We started a chat, and he asked me my thoughts about the play — what did it mean to me. And I said to him that it was all about the pain he was feeling in his back. And that started us off on this wonderful conversation about pain and suffering in the world and our constant human (and failed) attempt to explain its purpose, meaning, source — in short, a spiritual interrogation.

And suddenly he looked away from me, into that middle distance that signals a pause for thinking, and said, "Now I understand it a lot better." (It didn't help him that he came into the theatre thinking that the play was going to be about Tom Paine, the Revolutionary war pamphleteer, and what his take was on the world today, a stage version of something like a colonial Williamsburg re-enactor.)

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

What happened on that stage was real theatre, conventionally speaking. What happened in the lobby was also real theatre — not so much about the play itself as about the connection made through a serendipitous sharing, the isolating role of "audience member" discarded in exchange for two humans trying to figure out something they can carry away from the place that makes the time spent there well-spent, some nugget of comprehension that pacifies the shadows.

I would say that what happened in the lobby was Act II to the conventional play's Act I and that perhaps what separates good plays from weak plays is not how well the work plays on the stage but whether it can prompt, whether it's got tucked away inside it, that extra act for the lobby. Most scripts don't, which is why

they're forgettable and forgotten. But on this day the small extended post-show run gave us all our ticket's worth, and the take-away felt very good indeed.

# Digitizing Theater

(June 2006)

The May 15, 2006, issue of the New York *Times* magazine has a fascinating article (billed as a manifesto) by Kevin Kelley. He writes about the coming digitization of all books and their interlinked availability to anyone on the planet with an Internet connection. He details how the era and notion of "the copy" of something as being the primary article of trade in the market will soon be bowled over by the technology of "the search," which connects all items with all other items through hyperlinks. In terms of books, Google's effort to digitize the library collections of five major cultural institutions (and Google is not the only player in the "digitizing books" game) will lead, in Kelley's words, not to 10 million digitized books but to one massive book all linked and searchable.

I, for one, cannot wait for this to happen. Yes, yes, all the nostalgia about handling a book, etcetera, etcetera — but if all human knowledge in any form can be collated, bound, and made available to me as I sit at my desk, I can only see this as enormous expansion of human imagination and creativity. And I also fully believe that the ancillary technology for reading and annotating these works will improve through such creations as electronic paper through nanotechnology.

So what does this have to do with live theatre?

I often think of the relationship of theatre to other cultural entertainment choices (and, let's face it, "culture" in a 21st-century corporate capitalist society is all about entertainment) as similar to the relationship of vinyl records to CDs or MP3s. It is something of an antique medium, with its insistence on its "liveness" as a certificate of something authentic about being human. Also, there is a perverse pride taken in its evanescence, its ghostliness -- one performance will never be exactly the same as another, and once the performance is gone, it can never be re-materialized, etcetera, etcetera.

These kinds of attitudes, along with the wacky economics of producing live theatre and the limited audience any single production will reach (even the most wildly successful Broadway run, stretching for years, will, in its totality, reach an audience that is a fraction of the opening two weekends of a Tom Cruise blockbuster), to me means that we need to re-think how theatre gets done in a digital, and digitizing, age. Otherwise, it will become (as in many respects it already is) a niche art form with an aging audience and nothing much to say to the rest of the world.

I confess I don't really have a clue (yet) about what the products of this "re-thinking" would look like. One notion I've played with for several years is radio theatre done online with accompanying podcasts (a form that would bleed boundaries with shows like This American Life or Selected Shorts, which in many of their production aspects are often like small scripts well-acted).

Another is to "film" a stage performance — not just set up a camera but shoot it with multiple cameras and edit it tightly — and make this available for viewing. This is not new — think of PBS' "Great Performances" series — but it would then make the piece available for those who can't make it to the theatre. In fact, there wouldn't be any impediment (except legal in terms of copyright and actor contracts, but these could be worked out) to have the DVD version on sale at the live performance Thursday through Saturday at 8 p.m. so that someone could actually watch the performance again if desired.

I am certain that people more imaginative and fanciful than I can figure out other ways to do this, but whatever forms digitized theatre takes, they will move beyond the "copy" factor of a play: that it exists on a page, that the process of production is to take it from "the page to the stage," that it appears on the boards as a unitary production, that when it is done it is done (except for its residue in a printed script which may, or may not, bring in some income through royalties -- that is, the sale of discrete copies on the market).

I agree that the "liveness" of theatre is its special hook, but that "liveness" does not necessarily come out of the fact that live bodies occupy the same darkened space at the same time. (Any of us can recall "live" performances that felt dead and inert.) "Liveness" inheres in the synaptic connections made between audience and performers by the machinery of the production—and as long as the machinery enables those connections to be made, then it doesn't matter what the machinery is: stage lights and memorized lines or digitized bits in a computer workstation or some combination of both (or many other things). The important thing is the "connect"— it's the connect that makes us feel the "live."

Finding ways to get outside the usual parameters of theatre would also liberate playwrights from the tyranny of having to depend on the kindnesses of strangers to get a production. In a sense, playwrights have always had this option: save some money, rent a theatre, send out the invites, rehearse the piece, open the doors, pay off the debts, start saving money again. But finding new ways to digitize themselves as playwrights gives them more power to define

for themselves how they can get their names and works out there. After all, it is about getting seen and heard, and if the usual route of petitioning the gatekeepers of artistic directors and festival managers fails to shake the fruit from the tree, then it's time to find new trees to shake.

These thoughts are very raw and ragged because, at the moment, I don't really know what I'm talking about. And some of this thinking comes out of my own frustrations with trying to pry something loose for myself as a playwright. But I think there is a kernel of possibility here that needs exploration. Musicians have been able to make it work to their advantage, as have photographers, filmmakers, visual artists, and so on. So why not playwrights? Why not?

# The Thrall of the Authentic

(July 2006)

I recently saw *columbinus* at the New York Theatre Workshop, a "Living Newspaper"-style examination of the shootings at Columbine High School on April 20, 1999. One of the first things the actors do as they come onstage is to remind the audience (actually, re-remind, since the program had already made this point) that what they are about to see is based on transcripts, interviews, etcetera, etcetera. In other words, it's based on a true story.

And I think: So what?

I think this partly out of a reflex of resistance to being told how I should respond to what I am going to be shown. Because the phrase "based on a true story" is a protocol about how I should respond -- otherwise, why foreground it? And an essential element of a response-protocol based on the "authentic" (assuming we know what that word means) is "You cannot disbelieve." 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....."

But not only does "based on a true story" strait-jacket the imagination, it also lays down a claim that what is true is also, by virtue of its trueness, inherently dramatic. There is, however, no correlation between a true story and dramatic truth. The true story of Columbine -- that is, the story laid down according to its facts -- is surely filled with enterprises of great pitch and moment. And *columbinus* lays them out by using a structure and approach that employs all sorts of what the reviews call "theatrical devices": streaming video from a hand-held camera, a subtitled audio tape of the 911 call from the school library, choreographed movements based on a popular songs, and so on.

However, these "devices" are just story-telling aids, variations on the textbook and the talking head. Their use does not automatically create a dramatic narrative. And even if they could create real drama, they aren't allowed to because everything happening on the stage is in service to "the true story," which means that the stage-action is pre-determined in its narration and destination, and such predetermination poisons dramatic truth.

A name exists for what *columbinus* does: documentary theatre. One book, *Documentary Theatre in the United States: An Historical Survey and Analysis of Its Content, Form, and Stagecraft* by Gary Fisher Dawson, defines

documentary theatre as a "dramatic representation of societal forces using a close reexamination of events, individuals, or situations" and that in America documentary theatre has often been used as "an alternative to conventional journalism." And that's the rub for me, this confusion of mediums: if one wants to do journalism, then do journalism. If one wants to do documentaries, make a documentary film. Theatre is not the medium for the documentary/journalistic impulse.

And why not? The answer to this question takes into account my own evolution as a playwright. I first began writing plays from a documentary impulse. I agreed with Emma Goldman that modern drama was a powerful vehicle for bringing radical social and political ideas to audiences -- in short, that the playwright acted as an instructor. Which implied that there are people who need instruction, i.e., the audience. Which also implied an arrogant assumption on the playwright's part about the audience, i.e., that they were under-informed.

I no longer think like this, or at least not a lot like this. Because I've come to see that theatre's province, theatre's theatre, so to speak, is actually quite small and specific: it is to examine the state of the human heart under the pressure of knowing that death lurks just around the corner. And this examination uses an equally small and specific set of tools, actually only one tool: protagonists must fall apart in order to find out what glues their parts together, and the audience must experience this change as a visceral change (i.e., a shift in the viscera) without being lessoned by the playwright as to the change's meaning, purpose, direction, or usefulness.

This doesn't mean that the playwright mimics reality (assuming that we can even define "mimic" and "reality") but shapes it through conflict, reversal, restoration, reoccurrence -- in short, by using all the usual "devices," the playwright creates a staged reality, resembling "real" reality but not its cognate.

Documentary theatre pretends to "stage" its story, but it doesn't, really. The staging is a masque for a lesson, and it's the lesson -- and its attached assumption that knowledge somehow makes people better people -- that matters most to the documentary theatre-maker: "You should know this, for we believe you will be better for knowing it. We believe you have an emptiness, and we are here to fill it." This is not to say that documentary theatre is a pleasureless grind -- it can be affecting in cognitive and emotional ways. But in the end, documentary theatre is quite static, the complete opposite of good theatre's being dynamic.

One last point, related to documentary theatre's static nature, and this answers the question (if someone were to ask me this question), "Well, how would you tell this story?" Documentary theatre, in its lesson-giving to the audience, resists implicating that audience in the moral disasters it seeks to explore and explain. We learn about them, but we don't become part of the equation that the documentary sets out to clarify why they occur. Yes, in *columbinus*, there were nods to the notion that somehow "we" failed the two young butchers, but that was just platitudinizing -- nothing in the performance asked the audience to really believe that, sacrifice themselves to that idea.

In short, the documentary theatre piece really leaves the audience in the same moral and spiritual place in which it entered the theatre, despite the fact that it aims, through its lesson, to get people to amend themselves. But this is as it has to be if you're telling a true story: the strictures of the true story won't allow too much play of the fictive imagination, and without that, there is no imaginative way to pollinate an audience with what it's observing.

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 undefined place. Then I would examine the moral lesson that I wouldn't want people to put into practice: that 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 because if the facts get in the way of the story, then it's time to jettison the facts in favor of taking a journey through the inconvenient lifescape called the human being. There are more useful and interesting truths than the facts.

# Dear Mr. Beckett

(August 2006)

The *Wall Street Journal* recently had two articles dealing with copyright, arising out of an attempt by the estate of Samuel Beckett to stop an Italian production of *Waiting for Godot* performed with twin female actors in the lead roles. An Italian court issued an injunction against the estate, allowing the performance to go forward, to the consternation of Edward Beckett, the estate's executor. One article was about the controversy itself, the second was an interview with a smug Edward Albee who defended the estate's action and described with pride his own vigilant shepherding of his work (right to refuse a director's casting of a production, etc.).

The Beckett estate is notorious for its rigorous work in keeping Beckett's work "pure," that is, performed exactly as he put it down, every jot and tittle treated as holy writ, from which deviation will not be allowed. The most celebrated of these offenses was Jo Anne Akalaitis' production of *Endgame* in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1984, for the American Repertory Theater (which was settled out of court). Then Deborah Warner and Fiona Shaw in 1994, in *Footfalls*, made the mistake of having the heroine wander over the stage rather than along a narrow path as defined in the script. The estate prevented the production touring to Paris. And now we can add the Italian job.

This put me in mind of Stephen Joyce, grandson of James Joyce, whose authoritarian behavior and belligerent dislike of academics was recently described in the *New Yorker*. And I am struggling with a literary executor of the papers of a poet who I want to study in preparation for a play I'm putting together. She rarely allows access, will not let one who gets access take notes, and requires that she be cited as the authorized source even for information gathered by other means.

What is with these people?

The Beckett affair and Albee's defense of it represents, I think, two "camps" about how and why theatre gets made (and this may be a generational split as well). One camp, which includes Beckett and Albee, are what I call the "amberists," from the notion of a once living form now forever trapped and suffocated in amber. The amberist mentality is preservationist, seeing the written word as The Word, single-meaninged and inerrant and unquestionable. And the effort to keep the words as The Word is a noble enterprise, maintaining

the truth against entropy, against faddishness, against lesser intelligences. It has affinities with certain strains of religious fundamentalism.

The amberists are in direct opposition to the "rough draftists," who see theatre as a process of evolving understandings about a text, about how a text lives within actors, about how the actors and the text conjoin with the world outside (including audience), and so on. The text is an opportunity to make theatre, to re-mix the ingredients in order to re-mix our understandings.

But as interesting as this dichotomy may be (and I think its interest is pretty limited, as is true of most dichotomies), what really seems to drive these debates is copyright: the rights of the holders of, the money to be made from, the control afforded by. Albee revealed this in his interview. The interviewer asked him why, if it were wrong to reinterpret Beckett, it is okay to reinterpret Shakespeare, and Albee's cranky response: Because Shakespeare isn't under copyright.

And that is the rub. Copyright began under the Constitution as a way to balance the right of inventors to profit from their inventions with the benefits of knowledge spread throughout a democratic populace. Therefore, inventors were given a limited, protected time to get what they could for what they had created, and then their creations were supposed to become part of the public domain, the commonwealth of common knowledge. And if they wanted to get more money for inventing, then they would have to invent new stuff rather than live off the fat of their old stuff, thereby enriching themselves and everyone else in the process.

Nowadays, copyright is a protection racket, serving the exact opposite of its original purpose. Copyright law now is about figuring out how to keep knowledge out of the public domain and milking it for cash-back for as long as possible.

The most recent copyright insult happened in 1998. The Copyright Term Extension Act of 1998 was alternatively known as the Sonny Bono Copyright Term Extension Act or pejoratively as the Mickey Mouse Protection Act, since Disney lobbied hard to keep Steamboat Willie and Mickey Mouse under copyright wraps (both were due to go into public domain -- imagine that!).

Before the act (under the Copyright Act of 1976), copyright would last for the life of the author plus 50 years, or 75 years for a work of corporate authorship; the act extended these terms to life of the author plus 70 years and 95 years respectively. The act also affected copyright terms for copyrighted works published prior to January 1, 1978, increasing their term of protection

by 20 years as well. This effectively "froze" the advancement date of the public domain in the United States for works covered by the older fixed term copyright rules. Under this act, no additional works made in 1923 or afterwards that were still copyrighted in 1998 will enter the public domain until 2019.

California congresswoman Mary Bono (Sonny Bono's widow and Congressional successor) and the estate of composer George Gershwin supported the act. Mary Bono, speaking on the floor of the United States House of Representatives, noted that "Sonny wanted the term of copyright protection to last forever," but that since she was "informed by staff that such a change would violate the Constitution," Congress might consider Motion Pictures Association of America (MPAA) then-president Jack Valenti's proposal of a copyright term of "forever less one day."

So there you have it. Copyright has been officially legislated as the means by which those who possess shall never have to give over to the public that has afforded them these protections one iota of what they possess. 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, we need to address the abuses of copyright. Mr. Beckett has had a good run with this work; it is now time to pry the dead hand of the past off it so that the rest of us, who made whatever fame he achieved possible anyway, can have whatever go at it we want. Copyright, as it now exists, is a poison -- the only antidote is some equivalent to what the open-source people in the computer programming world have done to create such collectively annotated intellectual properties such as Linux.

And to Mr. Albee I would say, Good luck with your micromanaging, but I will always prefer the smell of a good collaboration to the must of the wax museum.

# Original Sin

(September 2006)

When I get off at 145th Street and St. Nicholas and walk up 145th to Convent on my way to work, I pass one of those New York City omnipresent coffee-and-bagel coaches, just large enough for one person, a gross of bread products, and a coffee urn as large in circumference as a water main.

I stop there occasionally to snag a cinnamon-and-raisin bagel, without anything ("con nada" to Edgar, the Ecuadorian server), to flex my jaws on before getting in to work. (Some may sing the praises of "New York bagels," but a bagel, no matter whether authentically boiled or pumped out corporation-style is still just a discus of dense dental-gumming carbohydrate, less a food source than a kind of mortar for plugging up the hole of hunger. One does not eat a bagel but gnaws it.)

This day, as I approach the coach, I pass by a man sitting on a stoop, to my left. He wears a dull cranberry-colored sweater, tattered and raveled, and an equally ragged and reddish knit cap. He sits on the stone steps with his arms wrapped around himself in an embrace that looks like it's both for warmth and for company.

His face, chocolate, splits into a smile that shows the vibrant absence of any front teeth, upper and lower, so that even as he smiles his lips curl inward over the gums. It's a good smile, really, a touch crazed but open, the eyes smiling along with the face, and one I can't resist matching. So I don't. I smile back at him and approach the young Spanish-speaking man encased with the coffee.

Out of my left eye I catch the man join me, sidle up to me, still smiling, still self-wrapped tightly, so I face him, wondering what he wants. "Could you buy me a cup of coffee?" he asks, the words aspirated and slurry because of his missing teeth. Now, I get dunned all the time in New York – I don't know if I have some sign Cain-like bossed on my forehead that marks me out as an easy mark, but whatever it is, grifters and drifters sense it immediately – and I usually make good with whatever change I have hanging around in my pockets.

So I wasn't surprised to suddenly find myself companioned, didn't feel threatened by the sudden friendliness or the request for subsidy. And, to be honest, it felt good to be accosted in an honest manner, if that makes any sense to say, on the way to doing my economic duty for the day and playing my role

as responsible adult. Here was an offer for exchange with another human who seemed harmless and in a bit of a need that I could satisfy without any real sacrifice. Why not? I feel good, he feels good, the coffee man makes a little extra money, and the loneliness gets a momentary defeat.

I say to him, "Of course I'll buy you a coffee." And then, smile still there, he comes in with the real request: "Could you make that a large coffee?" Pleased by his skill -- hook me, then reel me in – I say, "Of course I'll buy you a large coffee. Milk? Sugar?" "Regular," he says, "two sugars."

By this time we're at the counter, and I toss the order up to the young man: "Un café grande, con leche y dos azucáres." Edgar smiles at my bad Spanish (I should have said "dos cucharaditas de azúcar," but I remembered too late) and begins the ladling and pouring and lid-snapping-on, and I add "one bagel, cinnamon-raisin, con nada." He puts the coffee on the counter and the smiling man snatches it to him in a gesture that says, first, I need this coffee and, two, I better get it before he changes his mind and takes it away. As I'm paying and taking back the 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 away, back to his stoop. I turn and walk the other way.

I walk past the people who, every morning, look damaged to me, or lost, or stunned, or bewildered, or grim with finding purpose in life. But now I look at them with his words in my ears, and I have to admit that he has some rightness on his side -- we rocket past each other like those chariots in the Charleton Heston version of *Ben Hur* that had the knives fixed to the hubcaps, cutting each other to ribbons if we get too close, our blades of separation honed sharp by manufactured distrust and dislike and mind-phantoms of reality and rightness.

I know he's glad I bought him the coffee. I'm glad I bought him the coffee. Nothing's changed. Well, not "nothing" – 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 gnaw my way through my sustenance as I walk away.

This is my definition of real theatre.

# Art vs. Commerce

(November 2006)

Apparently, the directors of the O'Neill Playwrights Conference put out the proposition that the Conference might want a share of a play's future earnings (I read that the phrase "in perpetuity" was used) if that play goes on to have future earnings. Christopher Durang and Marsha Norman sent out a letter asking that people boycott the Conference and protest against such a proposition. And then the Conference apparently backed down from the floated notion of sharing in a play's subsidiary rights.

Blistering language appeared on several of the listserves I've joined, almost everyone in high dudgeon about such a blatant attempt to make money that would go to support the Conference's work (which is, despite any protestations about not mixing art and commerce, all about getting a play in shape so that it can go out have an audience — hopefully a paying one — in the world).

I didn't add my notes to the chorus, but I didn't feel that what the Conference broached was an entirely bad idea: making money off the work that it does? What's wrong with that? Being "nonprofit" doesn't mean that one doesn't care about profit, about building up stable revenue, reserves, savings — it only means that one has to go about the money-making in a way that's different than Google's way.

The "debate" about art versus commerce has always felt tortured to me. The sides are drawn much too restrictively — art is this, commerce is anti-art, end of discussion. But, of course, any artist wouldn't mind at least a little commerce connected with his or her work, at least enough to make the proverbial ends meet — and I suspect amounts above the ends-meeting level would not be rejected. In short, every artist toiling away in whatever shade of darkness would not mind being rewarded by the sweet smell of monetary success.

And just as for individual artists, so for arts organizations. The Museum of Modern Art and Brooklyn Museum can offer free admission because certain days of the week are covered by Target — that blend of art and commerce allows me to see things I normally couldn't afford. Signature Theatre is offering $15 tickets to its shows this season because of corporate underwriting; ergo, I get to see August Wilson's plays. In short, without some blend of art and commerce, we would have all commerce and mostly no art.

Whatever our personal opinions about the matter, art is a commodity, just as everything eventually gets commoditized in a capitalist system. On the most blatant level, it is a commodity for buying and selling, as with paintings that fetch enormous sums at auction. But on more metaphorical levels, artists have always treated art as a commodity. They "produce" it in order to "sell" it to an audience — perhaps not primarily for money, perhaps primarily for fame or notoriety, but certainly for some return on the investment of time and effort to produce it. Very few artists want to toil in obscurity producing stuff that no one sees, and so, inherent in the very act of artistic creation is the imperative to have some sort of commerce with the world.

And this is not just semantic playing-around — artists need this commerce, need this struggle of resistance and acceptance, need the worry about whether the art can support not only their soul but also their rent and food budgets. In short, artists need all sorts of commerce to fund their art spiritually and materially.

So, the issue on the table should not be framed antipathetically — art versus commerce — but dialectically — how commerce feeds arts feeds commerce feeds art and so on. All artists need to think and act more entrepreneurially anyway, and especially theatre artists, since the world of theatre is most infected with this notion that the lack of large commercial appeal is an anointment of authenticity.

So I hope the O'Neill can find a way to make some money off the promotion of the work it does with playwrights, and playwrights should not resent being asked to contribute to the organization that may help them rise out of obscurity and into the light of recognition. In fact, they should take the lesson to heart and find healthy ways to commoditize themselves so that they do not have to march to someone else's drummer all of their writing lives. A good case in point here 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?

# Politics is an Egg the Theater Cannot Hatch

(December 2006)

I am in a state of dismal about theatre. It is called *The Coast of Utopia*. Part I.

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" — he hath endured in a business notoriously stingy with pecuniary success.

But, my gawd — so deadly dull most of the time, this artistic bloviation of a dead politics. (And really, who cares about the Russian Revolution any more? Or even about the word "revolution," as a descriptor of people taking control of their historic situations and changing them? Or even the word "change," since most people these days accept the commercial regime and earbud their iPods as compensation for their political submissiveness.

It's not clear to me what Stoppard wants to accomplish with his theatricalized homework, what passion he hopes will spill over the edge of the stage into the hearts of the audience. But one thing is clear that this play will not achieve, ever ever ever: the political renewal of its observers, the "push" that gets them to re-think what they think about things, re-organize how they've organized the narratives they call their "selves."

This is because (as much as I hate to say this) theatre, at least in our era, is not built to make this happen.

In the last issue of this journal, Bill Ballantyne wrote a deft summary of a play's gestation, *Writing A Play."* In his concept of what drives a play's writing, Ballantyne foregrounds the power of imagination over rationality so that the play "[reminds us] of our humanity. We are all frail. We are all weak. We all have faults. Let us unbottle them, heart to heart, and celebrate our common lot." Humanistic in its celebration of shared imperfections, but also a prescription for political quiescence. The audience leaves the theatre musing on its collective frailties, reminded of mortality and, in that reminder, finding some measure of individualized solace for life's inevitable entropy.

If Ballantyne's analysis is right (and I think it is), then the theatre is no place for politics because the theatre's frail humanitarian box cannot really contain the explosive polarities of politics, which is really about how the holders of

power want to keep holding onto it. Documentaries and novels and histories and biographies can dissect this better than theatre.

Theatre may be able to examine the effects of politics' explosions, but it is always an examination 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 these characters reflect back to them about themselves, how much "identity" knits up the space between stage and seat. "Tell the truth but tell it slant" as Emily Dickinson says. Theatre as Rorschach.

This makes theatre closer to poetry than anything else since poetry's ambit is always closer to the inner organs than to the outer storms of the political world. But theatre is always lesser than poetry because audiences can tolerate less strangeness, less disjunction in form and delivery. Distance in other art forms, like poetry or sculpture or (post)modernist painting, can actually work to make us feel closer to the art because it makes us re-work ourselves, the effort to make the strange less strange 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). And all of this makes me re-think my own commitment to the theatrical arts: if I wish to have my writing have more effect on those it reaches, is it time to seek out some other way of getting my work done? Well, 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?

2005

# Argentine Picada

(January 2005)

The Marvelous Maria Beatriz and I spent Christmas with our family in Buenos Aires, freed for a moment from the gravity of American madnesses, with sunny skies and 90-degree lazy afternoons. Some thoughts, some observations, a little picada.

*La Nena at the Teatro Colon*

The Teatro Colon, built at the turn of the 20th century, displays its ornamented bulk between Avenida Cerrito and Avenida Libertad, fueled primarily by funding from the government of Buenos Aires. (Imagine that -- a government-supported arts organization that produces high art for its citizens -- what a radical concept!) A good friend of ours slipped us a pair of tickets to *El Cascanueces* (*The Nutcracker*), and on the eve of New Year's Eve we sat in the seventh row center watching the definitely weird story of Drosselmeyer's infatuation for Clara surrounded by gilt, brocade, sculpted plaster, five tiers of seating above the orchestra (the last of which, ironically, is named Paraiso, or Paradise -- the cheap seats), and a packed house. Of which next to us sat La Nena.

Perhaps two years old, curly-haired and chubby-cheeked, La Nena had brought her grandmother along as a chaperon because in these parlous times in Buenos Aires, it makes sense to pack a little protection. Also, the abuela's lap formed a nice soft platform for getting high enough to see the action.

And watch it she did. Maria Beatriz and I divided our attention between the action on stage and the action on her face. Focused, open, uncritical, she absorbed everything. She "ooh'd" when something opulent on stage unfolded, she "aah'd" when the dancers sliced the air, she clapped when the moment called for clapping. No suspension of disbelief for her, no arranging of critical faculties -- her whole being believed, without restraints or boundaries. The stage did not mimic magic -- magic simply reigned, as common as air, and only a stupid person or an adult would believe any differently.

After the performance, she escorted her abuela home, foregoing a review of the performance in exchange for toddling through the air of a soft summer evening limned by a half-moon rising.

Ah, we thought, if only we could -- but then we stopped ourselves, reverting to critical mode, ruing that one could not return to such a state of innocence, that a more refined appreciation allowed for -- then we unstopped ourselves and let the gift we had just witnessed gift itself fully to our spirits: a clean sweet direct love of what the performers had tendered which reflected back to the performers the clean sweet direct love that had moved them at some placental moment to devote themselves to an art and to art itself (no matter how frayed that first love had become because of necessity, age, or regret).

Therefore, not to go back to innocence but forward to it, to move past sorrow, frustration, decline (the sediments of adulthood) to what fuels the heart with the heat it needs to beat and hunger and nourish and cleanse against all odds, which has to be love no matter how Hallmark'd or treacly or naïve or dangerous that sounds. How to begin to remember how to get there when we have spent so much time forgetting how to get there -- a good a beginning as any, I suppose: the face of (and the memory of) La Nena.

### *Felices Fiestas*

A faux-controversy swirled its muck around just before we left for Argentina: whether "Christians" should boycott stores that say "happy holidays" instead of "Merry Christmas," as if "Christians" (that is, the noun form of the adjective that describes about 90% of all religious denominations in the United States) lay under siege and Christianity gasped for its last breath on the dissecting table of secular humanism. No matter what curmudgeon'd liars like Bill O'Reilly say, an overwhelming religious majority cannot also be an endangered and embattled minority -- but, then again, truth has never had much luck against the illogic of O'Reilly, Dobson, Robertson, and their slimy ilk.

In Argentina, an overwhelmingly Christian country, guess what gets exchanged as the dominant holiday-wishing phrase: "Felices Fiestas," or, roughly, "Happy Holidays." No one there mutters in conspiratorial tones about secular poisons, no outrage pours from the pages of *La Nacion* or *Clarín* -- people know what's what and they go about their gift-buying and exchanging with the sweetness and warmth that Argentines trade whenever they meet one another.

From outside its borders, the United States comes across as a very disconnected country -- part Oz, but also part Ozymandias, part Xanadu, but

also part xenophobe, a large unruly child running around who, for the most part, could be tolerated except for the fully loaded automatic assault rifle in its grip.

At a time of war, with our fellow citizen-soldiers being chewed up by policies made by liars, cheats, and theocrats, we choose to worry about whether "happy holidays" and the tolerance embedded in the phrase signals the end of Christianity. This kind of disconnect results in such savage stupidities as the Christian emperors in Washington inaugurating themselves for $40 million while the soldiers continue to die in unarmored vehicles for a blighted unChristian imperialism. We live in a heart-sick country -- and silence only compounds the disease, whether that silence comes from the liars keeping mum about their complicities or the stupid distractions of a Bill O'Reilly.

### *Petards*

On Christmas Eve ("Noche Buena"), and again on New Year's Eve, when the clock ticks from 11:59 to midnight, fireworks erupt everywhere. For days beforehand, people buy their "fuegos artificiales" from stores in cities right down to temporary kiosks set up by the side of the road, and when the minute hand slips to fully vertical, the sky cracks and spits.

I saw two things I had never seen before:

On Christmas Eve, at Maria Beatriz's brother's house for an asado with all the family, we all stood on the street watching the display when I saw an orange glow cross the sky -- and then another, and another, and still another, ginger fire tracking low across the sky like carroty UFOs -- "fire globes," paper balloons heated by a fire that lifted and carried them on the wind.

Yes, I know, the safety considerations -- where did they land, which roofs or fields did they set on fire (Argentines can sometimes be lax about safety, such as commuter trains or busses running with open doors and bicyclists using the break-down lane of major highways for training purposes) -- but with those to one side for moment, the long horizontal traverse of the dusky balloons made a soft, almost Zen counterpoint to the vertical brevity of sparks and whistles and artillery booms: to burn a little bit slower and shine a little less brightly, but also to travel a little bit farther and at an approachable altitude before disappearing into the darkness. How very mature.

And then, in Sao Paolo, on New Year's Eve, where we had a two-hour stopover on the way back to New York. The plane lifted off at midnight, and as we climbed over the city, we could see the multiple explosions of fireworks from every direction, these spurts of light that looked like ambitious fireflies or the punctuation of camera flashes in a sports stadium. Light after light burning itself out in color and sound and brilliant illumination. How very brash and bold.

Are there lessons here? Yes.

# Dogville

(January 2005)

Don't harass me about seeing my movies too late -- I'm a step ahead of you on that one. I never get to things on time. My latest much-too-late viewing was Lars Von Trier's *Dogville*. The movie has stuck with me, not only because of its content but the fresh and bruising way it used theatrical techniques to tell its story.

In fact, the thought that came immediately to mind as I saw the chalked outlines of Dogville's geography on Von Trier's soundstage, and then plunged into the skulking corruption of the townspeople as they trash the grace offered to them by the arrival of a stranger into their midst, is Thorton Wilder's *Our Town*. Or, more precisely, *Dogville* was the *Our Town* that Wilder wanted to write but didn't (or didn't know that he wanted to write).

I say this after also having watched, johnny-come-lately, the Spalding Grey/ Eric Stoltz 1988 production of *Our Town* (also produced for television in 1989). The way that production was done made me hear the play unencrusted, made me hear it without the Paul Newman-esque Americana rotundities, made me hear the bare toleration Wilder had for the banalities and clichés that people willfully took up and misshaped into something they called "beliefs" and "principles" but which were nothing more than re-arranged prejudices and peeves. If he had been bolder in following the sounds in his ear and his heart, following the Brechtian principles that he found important and fundamental, he might have ended up with *Dogville*.

I know Von Trier was trashed by many critics for a supposed anti-American slant marbled into this work (from what I have heard, he has never visited this country), but the piece did not need such a slant to still dress down the self-serving righteousness that current American leaders and their sycophants and quislings use to gut progressive principles and ideals in service to a banal theocracy and an unchristian Christianity. All Von Trier did was take the platitudes that Wilder's denizens of Grover's Corners use to justify themselves and stretch their logic forward until conformity and "right-thinking" led to scapegoating and exploitation.

We need overtly political theatre in these times, and here in New York, we've gotten a lot of it lately, including a new piece out by International WOW called *The Expense of Spirit*, about the toll taken on a family by the suicide of a soldier in

Iraq. But the strictly political needs to also morph into the existential and moral, sail upon the broader seas of justice and injustice and the corruption of the soul when that soul can exercise unearned power with impunity (such as President Bush and his cohorts feel they have the right to do in these dark days). 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 exposes it all.

As we fight our political battles, of course we need to keep in clear sight the strategies and tactics of our local habitation, the issues that we can leverage into progress and redress. But we also need to have underneath these local and daily concerns 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. Theatre can do this 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, all 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 because the more we remain unfinished, the truer the truth that someone somewhere will have to pay dearly for it. *Dogville* hurt, but it hurt so good, as most growing pains do.

# Scripts deRead

(February 2005)

There they sit. The scripts. The entrants to festivals for three different theatres. Each resembles a rampike, the remains of a standing dead tree, a stump.

I look at them. I try to imagine the writers actually composing them, sitting at typewriter or computer or jackhammer, lovingly setting down the words (typos and misspellings so lovingly preserved) in funky mutations of the standard playwriting form (surely a sign of independence and outside-the-boxness, yes?), highlighted by food leavings and orbital rings of coffee and -- I'm not sure -- line after line drilling into the mysteries of relationships, and dysfunctional families, and -- relationships and -- dysfunctional families, and -- ah, here's one on -- dysfunctional relationships within a family --

All right, all right, put them to one side, get another cup of coffee, huff and puff, raise a clemency appeal to Sophocles et. al., and drop myself back into the chair. And as I finish, I am finished. Coffee can only fortify so much. I crawl away humbled, hobbled, hamstrung, brought low. Reamed out.

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, something pulled from what they consider their depths and dreams. How can that not have honor?

But mein Gott in Himmel! What gets loosed on the page! And before long I'm thrumming my internal rant about the emptyheadness of the writing and the blandness of the thinking and the thinness of the language, and the -- and the -- and the --  And I realize (though I also always knew this) -- just as a luffa sponge salesman can hang out a shingle without having the least knowledge about gourds and compost, so can anyone write what looks like a play and dub himself or herself a playwright.

Not all playwrights who call themselves playwrights should call themselves playwrights.

Is that an elitist thing to say? I don't know. But based on what's come over the transom into my hands, I keep wondering if, say, the Dramatists Guild should develop an entrance exam, and only if you pass that and then go through a rigorous boot-camp purging you of all melodrama and confection do you get a

certificate that allows you to append "playwright" to your name. (And I am not talking about MFA programs in dramatic writing acting as gatekeepers -- they have a vested interest in keeping the "quo" as "status" as possible.) Something like a Royal Academy of Playwrights -- until, of course, that becomes sclerotic and the Bastille needs to be stormed again, but at least, for now, a sieve that would sieve out the big chunks.

Sigh. I find no comfort in a royalist rant like this. But, like Lenin, I can't help asking the question, "What is to be done?" and for similar revolutionary purposes. I don't know the ages of the writers I read, but many of them feel young because of the forms they choose in which to cast their material. Lots of "black-out-sketch" stuff, where things pop and fizz and then disappear -- and whatever positive reactions evaporate along with them so that nothing sticks to the ribs. Their material exudes the odor of 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 fusion stew of advertising priorities, corporate profits, and narrowed human psychologies called, in the trade, "mental real estate."

But, on the other hand, so what? Theater is a minor art form anyway in this culture -- no one looks to theatre for guidance or wisdom -- so why worry about upgrading its quality, especially when hardly anyone really looks to art for guidance and wisdom, since in our capitalist culture, art has become anodyne because solace sells better than the discomfort many say they want from art but never really seek out for themselves. 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 content of its character.

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.

# Let Us Now Praise Smaller Theaters

(May 2005)

Over the last several years I have had the luck of being connected with a truly wonderful theatre in Brooklyn, the Gallery Players. Located on 14th Street, just off 4th Avenue in Park Slope, Gallery Players (which has been around for almost 40 years) is a truly community theatre, in the best sense of that phrase, being a theatre supported by, and in turn promoting, the community in which it lives. As Matt Schicker, director, public relations guru, and long-time theatre member, says, Gallery Players is "a little theater family," and like all families, while it can have its frictions, it has also nurtured a healthy and diverse history of successful productions.

My involvement came as a playwright produced in one of what they call their Black Box productions -- four weeks in June when the theatre runs a short-play festival that involves dozens of actors, playwrights, directors, and design people. It's a playwright's god-send -- not only do you get a production, but you also get to do talkbacks with the audience and to work with new actors and directors. The Black Box series also does readings throughout the year, and I have had several of those as well, courtesy of artistic director Heather Siobhan Curran. For a playwright, then, the Gallery Players is a haven because they truly believe in nurturing relationships with playwrights, and back that belief with the resources every playwright needs: actors, directors, space, time.

This June I will have two pieces in the Black Box series that have never been produced: *Only The Dead Know Brooklyn*, an adaptation of the Thomas Wolfe story (part of a suite of plays about Brooklyn), and *Sporting Goods* (in the week dedicated to gender issues), where a high school wrestler revels in the chance to touch "sports-approved flesh" in ways that would get him hurt or worse off the wrestling mat. We just finished auditions and call-backs, all of which went smoothly, and start rehearsals at the beginning of May.

To be sure, it will be nice to have two more "notches" on the resume. But much more gratifying is being in the company of like-minded lovers of doing theatre that may put little in the wallet but feeds the soul for the continuing long-haul. Kudos and thanks to the Gallery Players.

# Knock on Wood

(June 2005)

New York has seen a number of war-related plays over the past year, such as *Pugilist Specialist* and *Guantánamo: Honor Bound to Defend Freedom*. *Knock on Wood* falls into the broad category of "war theatre" but does so with a quieter approach and a more personal story.

Samuel Calderon wrote and performs *Knock on Wood*, which he has done in Israel for over 1000 performances and now premieres in the United States. Calderon tells how, in 1973, he was a 22-year old actor playing a solider named Jonathan in a production of A.B. Joshua's *Final Treatment*. At the climactic moment of each performance, Jonathan is supposed to let loose a scream of lamentation, which the young Calderon was more than willing to do, except that he did not know why his character was doing such a thing. When he asked the playwright, Joshua told him that Jonathan's scream signified the anguish of a generation over the brutalities of its existence. He took in the information but still felt something was missing both in himself and his performance, some essential component about the life of a fighting soldier that he could not summon into being simply by acting techniques.

He soon had his chance to remedy the lack. That same year saw the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War, when Egypt and Syria launched an attack on Israel. Calderon was called up for duty and, mistakenly or not, was assigned to a combat unit. (His training, as he keeps telling his handlers, was in "intelligence," not "combat intelligence.") He is totally unprepared for this role, a most unsoldierly soldier. For instance, when asked what weapon he wants, he refuses to take the larger rifle and instead takes an Uzi because it has a wooden gunstock that he can rap with his knuckles for good luck if he gets caught in a jam (thus the title, "knock on wood"). Because of an equipment accident, he cuts his toe, which he bandages successfully, but because of the dressing he can't fit his foot back into his boot. Luckily, when he left home, his mother had packed a pair of civilian shoes in his duffel bag, and he slipped one of them on his foot, proceeding to go through the war with, literally, one foot in his former world and one foot in the world of war.

Finally, his unit is deployed, and he runs into his Virgil, an enlisted soldier who, by happenstance, also bears the name "Jonathan." When Calderon tells him that he plays a Jonathan in *Final Treatment*, they become fast friends,

with the more experienced Jonathan covering Calderon's back and guiding him through the hellishness of combat.

Though Calderon doesn't mention it, one cannot help but hear in his story echoes of other hapless faux-warriors, such as the "good soldier" Schweik, Galy Gay in Brecht's *A Man's A Man*, even Yossarian in *Catch-22*. What the young actor missed in his preparation for his "stage Jonathan" he gets too much of on the sands of Sinai until his soul and innocence are scorched.

And this is just what happens to Calderon. Just as the war is winding down and victory assured, Jonathan is wounded, and he loses his eyesight. Calderon, left intact, is so shocked by the brutal and senseless suffering of his friend -- and beyond that, the unasked for suffering of his fellow soldiers and his country -- that he closes down his soul and refuses to remember anything. He does return to *Final Treatment*, but the inside information he now has makes it close to impossible for him to perform; in fact, during his first performance after returning to the theatre, he goes through his lines mechanically and, when it comes to the scream, nothing comes out of his mouth except a low groan. He no longer has any distance between himself and his character.

And he abandons Jonathan. For a while he keeps checking in at the hospital about Jonathan's condition -- never in person, always by phone. But then that tails off, and for 20 years he says nothing to any one about his war experiences or about Jonathan. As he says, "Curtain closed -- I closed myself."

By the mid-90s he's a successful business man -- running here and there, two cell phones going, and so on -- but the emptiness still lives inside him, and he decides to take some courses, one of which is about using art as therapy. One of the first exercises he had to do was to partner with someone in the class and act as a guide for that partner who, in turn, pretended to be blind. This activity, which immediately brings to mind the deserted Jonathan, and a chance meeting with someone in the class connected to A.B. Joshua (which then meant a connection to *Final Treatment*), triggers the restoration of his memory and, through art, the restoration of his soul. As Calderon puts it, "I didn't want to be in the war anymore." He finally visits Jonathan and re-establishes that friendship and, with the Joshua's permission, re-stages *Final Treatment*, which Jonathan attends.

The performance runs about an hour and a half and consists of Calderon dressed in black sitting in a black chair, a glass of water on a small table next to him, in the rather scruffy confines of the 13th Street Theatre, and talking to the

audience. The performance is simply staged, Calderon's delivery is competent, and by the end of the evening the audience has been told a simple affecting story about the journey of one man through hell and back. As Calderon said in a recent interview, "The show is about friendship [and the] irrationality of war, which exposes us to the blindness of fate, in the face of which we have nothing to do but knock on wood." With this addendum: Seeing theatre like this is also a way of knocking on wood.

Written and Performed by Samuel Calderon/Directed by Ruth Dytches

# Interview with Playwright Leslie Lee

(June 2005)

On May 17, 2005, in the pleasant environs of Caffe Pane e Cioccolato near the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University, I had the pleasure of a couple of hours of intelligent conversation with Leslie Lee, award-winning playwright, screenwriter, novelist, documentarian, director, and teacher (currently in the NYU Department of Dramatic Writing and the MFA Program at Goddard College in Vermont).

I met Leslie Lee in 2003 when I was in the Graduate Dramatic Writing Program at NYU. He was my supervisor on an independent screenwriting study (from which I produced *Ain't Ethiopia*). I liked working with Leslie because of his theatrical and personal background. As an African American dramatic writer who often incorporated the history of African Americans into his plays (such as with *Black Eagles*, about the Tuskegee airmen), he had a working knowledge of how to do this well that I needed in my script about an African American man from Mississippi who went to Spain in 1937 to fight against Franco.

And he has had extensive experience in the business, working on such diverse projects as being a scriptwriter for the soap opera *Another World*, creating a new version of the musical *Golden Boy*, doing documentaries on people like Langston Hughes and Ralph Bunche, adapting works by Richard Wright and James Baldwin, and writing the screenplay for *The Killing Floor*, about the labor movement in the Chicago stockyards during World War I (which received a special mention at Sundance and was presented at Cannes).

The occasion for our get-together was a new play Lee had written that had been produced by the Alumni of the Negro Ensemble Company, titled *Blues in a Broken Tongue*, from March 4 - 19, 2005, at Primary Stages. The story centers on a family of African Americans who went to Russia in the 1930s to escape American racism. The daughters in the family grow up, as Lee says, "Russian to the core," but one of them, Irina, found old LPs of Billie Holliday, Bessie Smith, Paul Robeson, Sarah Vaughan -- and she would sing along with the records in her faulty English (which is the source of the play's title).

Irina's sister commits suicide in Russia, and Irina sets out on a quest to find someone who would "host" her sister's lost soul so that the sister could find peace. Irina becomes a wig mistress at the Metropolitan Opera, where she meets a temperamental opera singer from Martinique and a young actress from

Philadelphia, both of whom might serve as the "host" for her dead sister's spirit. In this search, these women realize that they are all connected by a common spiritual thread that they share beyond and past all of their cultural and age differences.

Lee says he wrote the play as part of his on-going effort to present the African American experience in as many different ways as possible and to include sensibilities and cultures that are not normally included in the category called "African American." That category, he believes, has been too narrowly circumscribed. "I believe in universality," he said, and a source of his purpose for writing is to show that "we can carry on the spirit of people...[and] embrace that soul and carry it with us." This is Art what does, as far as he is concerned, and Art should not be restricted by categories. If it is, it is up to the writer to break them, and for Lee the best way to break them is to explore the multiple universalities that make up our lives on this planet.

*Blues in a Broken Tongue* is being remounted in June at the Producers' Club to see if it can gather enough investors to give it a longer run at another venue.

This mention of a search for universality led us into a discussion about the ongoing debate between August Wilson and Robert Brustein (among others) about "black theatre" versus "theatre," or, as one article titled it, "On Cultural Power: The August Wilson / Robert Brustein Discussion."

Lee walks a divided path on this question, as do many African American artists. On the one hand, as Lee points out, the African American experience is, above all, an "American experience," no different from the history of any other people in this country, and he often feels tired having to "beg to have it done -- tired of tokenism." It is a rich experience, very much unexplored, and should not have to have a special pleading on its behalf to be recognized and deeply mined.

On the other hand, Lee agrees with the idea of what he calls an "African American theatre," if for no other reason so that works by African American artists get done. But he also notes that within that community, changes need to happen: a greater sharing of vision and resources, more African-American administrators in universities, more African-American critics who can evaluate theatrical works for a still largely white audience.

His solution? For a teacher, it is not hard to predict it: education. We need, Lee says, a "new wave" of writers and artists who, at one and the same time, can acknowledge in their works the "multidimensionality" of the African American

experience and become better writers than August Wilson and Leslie Lee. Again, Lee emphasizes that there are "so many levels not yet explored," and only through exploring them can there be created that tensile balance between the "African" and the "American" elements of being African American.

Thus, it is no surprise that teaching writers is essential to Lee's sense of himself as an artist engaged in an on-going project of defining and dimensioning black culture. His students "are like my kids," and for Lee, teaching is another form of caring, much like Irina's search in *Blues in a Broken Tongue* for a host to carry her sister's spirit.

However, Lee is also aware of the inhospitable world out there for dramatic writers of any ethnicity or culture. The "state of the theatre," to Lee, is diminished because the economics of theatre seem now to require small casts (and thus, to Lee, small ideas) and are driven by producers without taste who feel that all they have to do is raise money regardless of the worth of the project. Broadway "is not the place for straight-forward dramatic writers" and dramatic writers who love the stage will have to venture into television and the movies to make a living.

Lee says many times during this interview that "I like being black" and that he can't imagine being anything else. He also concedes that the navigation of American culture by a black person is sometimes angering and demeaning. But he also chooses to see himself as one of his own students, which helps him remember that the struggle to "bring [this experience] to people" is part of what makes the artistic struggle worth the candle.

"I have no regrets for who I am," he states, and as a writer Lee sees himself as someone continually pushing outward. He is currently working on two new pieces, a screenplay about German POWs and black soldiers and a play about a couple of kneecappers who have an affinity for Frank Sinatra. He continues to look for those undiscovered dimensions of the African American experience that are both particular and universal so that we can all become a host for the spirit that will carry us as we carry it.

# Good Art Slaps Us in the Face

(June 2005)

Once more: good art slaps us in the face.

Good art puts a thumb in our eye, a spike in our ear, a knife 'twixt ribs five and six.

Good art does not ease our pain but makes us see that that pain comes to us a gift, one that scrapes off the crud of the sob stuff we've been told by our lords of trade to call "life" and puts in its place in our mouths the clear, clean bite of death.

We can feel its sting on our tongues and this makes us fear a thing that can feel so sharp and cold and seems to not have a care for who we are or what we dream.

All this time we have taught our hearts that gifts should be sweet, gifts should raise us up and soothe us and blunt what we know is true in life -- how short life is, how dense life is with fog and craze and foul-up and pain.

We have not let our hearts know in full what they know in full: that death gives life its "life." We do want this truth -- we kick and scream when it sits down with us and we work hard, hard, hard to dull its edge, but we know -- we know --

So we chew, we gulp down -- and at once suck up like roots the sleek sap that will feed us for the long run, so starved are we (more starved than we knew) for what does not lie to us, does not numb us, and lets us live shorn of the balms of hope, God, "saved," sense.

This is hard to do.

What else is there to do?

* * * * *

These reflections come out of another round of volunteer script-reading for a theatre, this time for full-lengths submitted for a competition. (I go for the *long stuff* -- none of that weenie ten-minute crap!)

So regulated are the plots that drive these scripts that, by page 10 or so, one can pretty much guess where the script will end emotionally if not in exact plot detail: lovers overcome obstacles to unite in frolic, death comes and rids us of egotism, all confusions are resolved, all opacities are made clear, and so on.

These scripts become wish-fulfillments, a kind of magical thinking that has little or no connection to the lives people (not stage characters) lead from sun-up to sun-up. They follow a playwriting formula that I found hammered into us when I worked in the NYU Dramatic Writing Program: the hook needed at the end of Act I, the reveals/reversals that constantly need to ratchet up "the stakes," the crisis/climax where all comes to a head and either explodes or implodes, the aftermath, and so on.

So strong is The Formula, especially in the movies, and so saturated have we become with it over the past century or so that we fault life for not following The Formula and will rewrite life to make it "fit." I see this happen, oddly enough, on the local news channels, where the "facts" of a story are shoe-horned into mini-parables about redemption, "good guys" versus "bad guys," and a world where the heart is always available to do good if it can just be "reached." This even comes into the weather reports, where days are rated as good or bad based on sunshine or rain, as if the weather should accommodate us as opposed to the truth which is that we always have to fit ourselves into the weather.

This constant Procrustean revising gets tedious.

I don't have an antidote. I don't have a manifesto. I just have three suggestions to writers. First, cut against the grain of your expectations about characters. The first way to do this is to stop writing character descriptions in the script. Don't do this. I have read scripts that have given me lengthy "biographies" of the characters, and I always ignore them, preferring to get a name and an age and maybe a skin color (and usually a name is just fine). I ignore them because, first, I won't remember them as I read the script, and, second, those traits better be in the words and actions of the script. I would prefer it if a playwright simply gave me the name of the character and, perhaps, a one-phrase description of the role: "GRIG, a clown." If Grig has a club-foot and likes to say "Quark" whenever anybody uses the letter "W" followed by a hissing sound, then that better come out in the script. No need to lard it in at the beginning.

Why do I suggest this? Because it keeps the playwright from "locking in" and thus flattening the characters, because once they've been locked in (that is, given their marching orders or had their moral map coordinates logged), there's little room for the playwright to fold, bend , staple, and mutilate them, and thus make them surprising and less-than-predictable and perhaps even interestingly unmanageable.

Second, just as characters should not get distilled into a biography (after all, a stage character is not a person -- it's an artifact, a tool , means to an end), the plot/action should not be hard-mapped along the cartography of The Formula because The Formula is not life, it is only a series of narrow principles about crafting stories -- or, to say it another way, it is a method of torquing reality to fit the deep-rooted romanticized story prejudices of the masses (i.e., all of us). Or, to say it yet another way, "reality" (however defined) has a lot more weirdness and wildness in it than we allow in to our neatened narratives.

This means not lashing the horses of the narrative to get to where the story "needs" to go -- the narrative never "needs" to go anywhere, it just needs to spin itself out according the energies of the characters pursuing whatever they are pursuing (which may also change as the characters either do or don't accomplish what they've set out to get).

Third, and to me most important, bring back death. We know that everything in our lives happens with death as the ground and backdrop of our being -- it is the great underliner, the thing that gives life any emphasis it has. But we've pretty much taken death out of the theatre, which means that we've taken out tragedy as well, and once tragedy is rejected for sentimentality and bathos, we've lost a way to be honest with ourselves about ourselves.

All right -- 'nuff said. Back to the pages and summary sheets -- still sifting, waiting for surprise to dawn. I am sure it will happen. Turn the page -- onward.

# Playwrights' Forum: A Real Forum for Playwrights

(July 2005)

Four years ago, I spent a wonderful weekend in Memphis, Tennessee, with Playwrights' Forum, a producing organization putting on *Dancing At The Revolution*, about Emma Goldman's two years in federal prison. Not an easy script to do, technically, and it opened on August 16, the anniversary of Elvis' death and the start of what locals call "Dead Elvis Weekend." But we managed to survive and sell out the run.

Over this recent Father's Day weekend I had another chance to spend time with Playwrights' Forum, who had elected to do *A Question of Color*, about an illegal interracial marriage in North Carolina in 1907 (based on the memoir of the same name by Sara Smith Beattie). And again I want to use this space, as I did then, to thank Playwrights' Forum for being the gutsy, tenacious, and gracious organization it is. Special applause for producer Mark Rutledge, director Tony Horne, musical director Lemondra Hamilton, the entire cast, and all the volunteer staff and board members of Playwrights' Forum for bravely carrying on an incredibly risky enterprise in the "theatre community": producing entire seasons of unknown work by unknown playwrights.

That is correct: producing. Not an offer of self-producing (you get everybody and everything, we'll let you use our space and we'll do some marketing), not the starved offer of a script-in-hand reading, not the almost-there-I-can-taste-it breadcrumb of a workshop -- but full production: "overture, hit the lights, this is it, the night of nights / no more rehearsing and nursing a part...."

They have taken chances with me because it is their reason for being to take chances, and I wish I had more than kudos to use to repay them for their generosity and faith. But kudos I can offer, so hats off again to Playwrights' Forum for their courageous mission to give unknown playwrights and their unknown but eager-to-be-seen plays what they really need: three dimensions embedded in the fourth dimension of time and the fifth dimension of camaraderie and bravery.

# Fee'd to Death

(August 2005)

Like a bazillion or so other playwrights, I subscribe to *Insight for Playwrights*, a monthly publication that lists theatres and contests/festivals. The following comments should not be taken as a criticism of *Insight* but of the theatres listed in it -- at least for the July edition.

In general I refuse to pay reading fees when I submit a play to a contest or a festival. I do this because if a theatre puts out a call that invites me and the other bazillion or so playwrights to submit pieces for their consideration, they have a responsibility for bearing the costs of the invitation. Just by sending a script, I have already paid a fee -- to the copy shop and the post office, at least, and certainly to the universe for the hours I've put in writing the damn thing. I find it insulting for a theatre, who will benefit in some way or another off my script if it's selected for their event, to gain a further unearned benefit by charging me for the honor of submitting it to them and, on top of that, to ask for money from playwrights who have no hope of every making a living off their stage writing.

In the July issue of *Insight*, of the ten theatres running a competition/festival, eight of them ask for a fee, ranging from $5 to $20. They are:

- The Acting Company of Greenwich - $10
- Arts Council of Rock Hill and YorkCounty - $10 per script
- Curtain Players Theater - $20/play
- Media Darlings Literature, Art & Sound - $10 for one-acts, $20 for full-lengths
- Mercury Players - No fee for the first play submitted, $5 for each additional play (up to six)
- St. Tammany Parish National One-Act Play Festival in Honor of Walker Percy - $10
- Stage 3 Theatre - $10
- The Wells International One Minute Play festival - $5

Some theatres I've contacted in the past counter that the money sometimes goes toward cash prizes offered to the winners of the event. I find cash prizes not only ridiculous (they're hardly ever enough to make a dent in anything) but also subversive of the artistic process. As much as possible art should not get

reduced to the capitalist practices of competition and the cash nexus. Yes, judgments are made; yes, some script or scripts will "win" because the readers chose those and not others. But this notion that I would submit a script along with a fee so that, maybe, I could win $50 if I win "first prize" is pathetic and sophomoric because it assumes it can buy me off with trinkets and make me forget, in my small moment of victory, that it is the rare playwright who can cobble together a living off his or her work.

Other theatres have told me it helps defray their costs, which may be true, but they provided no evidence of how much of the actual cost of the event the fee defrays nor that any of that money reaches the people who are actually reading and judging the plays (which thus adds one more level of exploitation to this process).

Some theatrical competitions I will pay for because it's worth my while to ante up, e.g., O'Neill or Sundance, because the potential payback is worth the gamble. But most theatres are not at that level or provide that kind of bounce, and they shouldn't be asking the playwrights to subsidize their own participation in that theatre's mosh-pit.

I see fees allied to another growing "gatekeeper" problem for playwrights: theatres that will accept full-scripts only through agent submissions or professional recommendations while the rest of the hoi polloi are allowed to send in a letter and 10 pages (if, agentless, they are allowed to send anything). Again, being a volunteer script reader myself for four theatres, I understand the pressure on theatres when the pieces start pouring in over the transom. But the agent requirement, when it is almost impossible to get an agent except through an act of God (or the divinity of one's choice), adds another bottleneck to an already constricted process.

So, what's the solution? I offer none. If theatres want to add fees (and since I have no right to tell them not to or prevent them from doing so), then I have to decide whether I want to pay-to-play. If theatres want the bogus imprimatur of an agent, then I will have to beat the bushes to whack an agent into submission. It adds another level of effort to an already tedious process -- but if that's the case, then that's the case.

But I would urge theatres to reconsider at least the fees. See if there is some other way to make the process work that doesn't require people to kick in a buck to be part of something they love to do. Otherwise, the fee just becomes another bruise in an already bruising process.

# The Fount of Melancholy

(September 2005)

Dr. Peter Kramer, the chronicler of Prozac in an earlier book, has a new tome out titled *Against Depression*, in which he argues that we don't take depression seriously enough and should treat it as we would any other debilitating disease, that is, pharmacologically, that is, through the capitalist enterprise.

Kramer may be right, but the book has a reductive feel to it. Being prone to mildly depressive sloughs myself, I would agree with him that we should not romanticize the utter bottomlessness that such a state of being inflicts on a human being. But neither is medicating it into evenness the sole antidote. Like all human experience, depression is serrated -- the important thing is to investigate which way the edges cut.

I say all of this because I have just come through a recent dysthemic wrestling match, and those demons of melancholia have just quit the premises (though their stink still sticks to everything), and only now does this wriggly thing dubbed the spirit do something like rise, like carbonate, behave without spitting and slashing and a surly taste for blood.

I call it melancholia rather than depression because that states its proper name. Nothing like William Styron's darkness guts me and craps me to my knees. Instead of the black night I have a grey dusk. Instead of paralysis I move forward on reluctant bones. Instead of making my quietus I just hunger for unpeopled quiet. Even the simplest act of courtesy feels like swimming through asphalt -- though I must do the act since it is easier to hold open the door, even grudgingly, than muster enough passion and focus to either execute the one who moves in front of me or collapse into an unaidable heap of jello'd plasm. Depression enforces a kind of terrifying emancipation from the ordinary. Melancholia keeps one -- keeps me -- squarely in the human family, whether I want to be there or not. Even if I am at the end of my tether, I am still tethered. Even if I move in a viscous funk, I still move.

And yet -- And yet -- As much as I dread it when it flows in, I miss it when it ebbs because when the grey tide buries everything, the writing -- assuming I can drag myself to the desk to get it started -- the writing becomes charged in a way that rarely happens when God is in his heaven and all's right (more or less) with the world.

Charged. With what? First, a recalling, a refreshing. When more buoyant and panglossian, I tend to think that my writing has purpose, that I have purpose, that purpose, in fact, suffuses and drives all my efforts. In fact, that purpose drives the world, the universe, which the Tao governs all, and balance and harmony are there, right there, reachable with just the right breathing technique and empty mindfulness.

But the demons hacksaw me free of those philosophical blinders, and their rasp reminds me of what I have chosen to forget, have avoided remembering: we are mostly a torturing and silly species, fragile bags of meat in a constant state of decay, dumped into a space and time that, as far as I can tell, has no ultimate meaning and that regards us with indifference. We may choose to build all sorts of cushions against the facts, and may even lead exemplary lives because of them. But the demons remind me to give that self-deluding up. Unlike Camus, who believes that Sisyphus feels a liberation as he walks down the mountain to begin his next up-push of the stone, I believe that the rough stone gouging out Sisyphus' shoulder and the utter uselessness of his struggle upward -- regardless of how he thinks about it -- is the truer case.

One might think there would be little inspiration in such a dry landscape, but when the melancholia strips away any comforts, I feel comforted by the bare I-am-not-being-lied-to minimalism of it all. I feel released from the demands to find balance in an existence that seems to find imbalance and mayhem much more to its liking. I am dispossessed of all urges to make the senseless make sense, to be "up beat" and "affirmative" and "to make a joyful noise." In the end, by being so scoured, I am in debt to nothing but my own need to find and pitch my voice, and the writing comes out sharper and less ingratiating, with more punk in it and less genuflection to ordinary success.

It is not easy to stay in this desert landscape for long -- even Christ found forty days the limit of his endurance, and the prophets wandered in the desert not by choice but command. And the body has its own habits toward comfort -- it needs a buffer against too much knowledge of its own mortality. (And, in full disclosure, I also have my sweet Maria Beatriz, whose patience is umbilical, feeding and breathing me while I float in amniotic dismay.) So inevitably the fog lifts, the smile returns, and I find myself moving again through space and time making gestures that look like purpose and progress and that convince everybody, including myself, that I am a man with straight-forward eyes.

And the return from the desert does not ruin the writing at all, since the release from in extremis is also a release into the energy and lightness that can come from moderation and humor. Things that came out sand-smeared and savage can lose some discourtesy without losing grit. And things ride smoothly until the next visitation.

I find this melancholia as essential to my well-being as some people find prayer or others some personal food vice because in it I find an unharmonized balance that keeps me tied to the only feeling of truth and solidity that makes sense to me. Some believe harmony/balance a sweet thing, and finding it something like finding a state of original grace (that Eastern Tao thing), but I cannot wholly buy that: the assertion feels too much to me like whistling past the graveyard, too static and conservative and defensive.

To me, harmony is that checkpoint on a dark pendulum rush where the border of the desert and the border of our compiled illusions grind tectonically against each other. Too deep into the desert for too long, and despair boils everything away. Too deep into the cultural dreamtime, and the mind becomes embalmed. Harmony is that moment on the pendulum's arc when the desert's arson burns off the residue of anesthesia, and the normal offers the desert some respite against its own heat. Great human things can come out of that moment, great acts of tenderness and incision, works of art filled with a savage grace, with both reprieve and sting. It can be a moment of rest, oasis, even that rare bird happiness.

But then the pendulum continues, one way or the other, not always continuous in its arc (its physics are not Newton's). My melancholia is the counter-weight when the dreamtime becomes too thick, when its greeds and details and endless thug-like "shoulds" threaten me with "this is as real as it gets." Rip off the caul in the rush for the desert, feel the searing heat cauterize the ragged skin-edges -- and then wait for the pendulum's tug to carry me to the border once again, eager for the arrival, eager not too arrive too soon.

This pitch and yaw is harmony and balance to me, this toss and turn gives me the only usable sense of proportion I know. In the small shack that is that checkpoint on the border is a brief desk made of cheap wood, an indifferent chair, a ream of cream paper, a fascine of my favorite pens, and steady light through two windows. I sit, the sere desert out one window, the blue glitter out of the other, pick up a pen. And wait. This, for me, is as closed to blessed as I think I will ever come as a writer. Pen suspended. Page one.

# Interview with Adina Tal, Director of Nalaga'at

(October 2005)

In late 2002, Adina Tal did not plan on founding a theatre company and a non-profit organization named Nalaga'at (Hebrew for "Do Touch") or to populate that theatre company with a dozen blind/deaf actors suffering from Usher's Syndrome who can only communicate with each other and the rest of the world through touch. She was already running a successful theatre company, busy writing, directing, and even acting, and felt that she had reached a point in life where "I understood what life was about."

But underneath the satisfaction with her accomplishments buzzed a small desire to do something new, and when members of a non-profit organization that had just received a grant asked her if she would do theatre workshops with a group of deaf/blind people, to her surprise she found herself saying "yes."

The surprise was genuine. "No one in my family suffers from blindness or deafness," she said, and while she had seen her share of theatre done by disabled people, going to see it felt like "doing a good deed," and she never felt any need to go beyond that level. Yet there she was, driving from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv for her first meeting, partly hoping that something would happen to postpone or cancel this commitment about which she was having second thoughts.

When she walked into the room she noticed that none of the dozen people there noticed her because they had no way of knowing she had entered the room, "and this was my introduction into what being deaf/blind means." It also marked the beginning of a phenomenal story about theatre-making, human inventiveness, and the power of personal narrative.

Not that this beginning was easy or clear. A primary problem involved how to communicate with her participants. Each of them had an assigned interpreter/social worker, and the interpreter would talk to his or her charge by signing into that person's hands. Shouting, gesturing, demonstrating, conversational interplay, the usual tools of a theatre director -- Ms. Tal could not use them. So on that first day she formed them into a circle and simply began with physical movements -- hand-waving, foot-stomping, and so on -- to get them to feel their bodies in space and in relation to one another.

On the drive back to Jerusalem, the initial sense of surprise had morphed into something else: she found that she had fallen in love with them, which made her think back to Carl Jung's ideas about the human spirit and "how that spirit really has no limit except for the limits we place upon it."

After three months, events took a funny but decisive shift. Yuri Tevordovsky, from the Soviet Union, stated categorically that everything they were doing was "stupid." "Why are we doing all this pantomime?' he complained. Ms. Tal asked him what he wanted to do. "Gorky," he replied immediately. And how are we going to that? she persisted. "That's your problem," Yuri shot back, "you're the director." She answered that the problem was his, too, since he was blind and deaf. "Okay," he agreed, in a tone of voice that said, "Well, let's do something together about this." This "something" became Nalaga'at.

During those three months, in talking with their interpreters before, during, and after their weekly meetings, Ms. Tal got the sense that while they genuinely cared about these people, these caregivers were often cautious -- perhaps too cautious -- in letting them engage with the world. When Yuri spoke out, and the others concurred that they would like to do something more than what they were doing, Ms. Tal realized that they felt good in being pushed and not just accommodated. Just as any other artist would. Including herself.

But as the idea of making theatre with them began to crystallize, she thought that while she wanted to do serious work, she didn't want to do Shakespeare or Brecht, or have them resemble a deaf/blind version of a hearing/seeing company. The source of their theatre would have to come from themselves, from their lives and their dreams. And that was the spark that led to gathering material, writing, rehearsing, and eventually performing their signature piece known as *Light Is Heard In Zig Zag*.

Along the way, Ms. Tal and the others who worked with the troupe learned and unlearned a great deal about the (dis)abilities of their actors. For one, "I had always had this fantasy," she states, "that deaf/blind people were more sensitive to the world" and thus had greater insights and intuitions. But she found that, at least with sufferers of Usher's Syndrome, who are not born deaf and/or blind but whose hearing and seeing decay over time, they were not entirely used to their own afflictions and were often still learning after many years how to cope with the world. In other words, they had their own "blind spots" just like the rest of us.

But their sensory deficits did not make them feel like victims or pawns, or even necessarily handicapped. One of the actors, Gadi Ouliel, has the desire

to one day drive a bus. When Ms. Tal learned this, she asked everyone else to board Gadi's bus in a way that showed something about themselves. When Yuri Tevordovsky got on, he did so with a limp. When she asked him why he did that, he said he did it so that he could get the fare-reduction given out to disabled people. Obviously he didn't consider being deaf/blind a proper "disability"; it was so much a fact of his life that he felt he had to add something on it to make himself appear more eligible for the rebate -- something even a crafty sighted/hearing person might do.

Another lesson, more pertinent to the making of theatre, came from Ms. Tal's realization that they lack an essential actorly skill: mimicry. In one exercise, she had each person take an actual grape and eat it. Then, using that sense memory, she wanted them to eat a pretend grape -- and she was astonished to see one dozen different ways of eating a grape. Since none of them could see each other, they also could not copy each other -- so each had to invent wholesale his or her singular grape-eating style. This excited the director in her because it made the act of acting fresh and innovative. Unlike with seeing/hearing actors, who can rely upon past gesture-memories (and thus become lazy or derivative), Ms. Tal saw that they had to "re-invent the world all the time," and in re-inventing it, see it anew. "There is an energy," she explains, "that I have never felt with any professional actor. I was discovering a whole new world."

She also realized something new about noise, that is, the noise that usually accompanies any kind of theatrical process. "I'm sensitive to noise," she confesses, "and even though I myself always talk loudly, my concentration can get thrown off if there is too much of it in the room." In working with the company members, noise was obviously not a problem since communication had to be by touch. Thus, everybody could become much more concentrated on the work at hand, leading to a level of focus and deliberateness rarely achieved in more "normal" rehearsals.

But perhaps the greatest challenge came with trying to find a way to establish with deaf/blind actors what is taken for granted in more usual theatrical circumstances: the umbilical relationship between actors and audience. "Theatre," she explains, "is about creating a moment of meeting between actors and audience." But with deaf/blind people, "their sense of stage-presence is completely different." Until there is a touch of some kind -- actor to actor or interpreter to actor -- they exist in something of a limbo because they do not have access to any visual or auditory cues that place them in time and space.

Only touch puts them in the present moment. The challenge, then, was to create some form of virtual touch that linked the present momentness of the actors on stage with the being-in-the-present-moment of the audience.

The problem solved itself in an unexpected and unforced way. For the actors, the more they worked and performed, the more able they were able to build a sense of audience responses (which Ms. Tal labels as nothing short of "magical"). After performances, they would tell her that they felt that the audience that night was "dry" or "non-responsive" or "warm." She didn't know how they knew this, but she knew their assessments usually hit the mark.

In turn, the force of their confidence on stage spilled into the audience, which prompted the audience to react to the stage-action differently. Normally, the audience looking through the "fourth wall" of a play is an eavesdropper, a voyeur, at something of a distance. But watching and responding to a troupe of deaf/blind actors who cannot, in turn, respond to the audience's responding to them, forces the audience to rely less on the "outer" and to move more inside themselves, and this inward journey, in some "primary" way (to use Ms. Tal's word), blends with the actors' energies coming off the stage to create that umbilical so unique and essential to the act of theatre. "I am not a mystical person," she avers, "but I also can't deny what I've seen -- it is magical."

(And another small but important discovery about applause. Ms. Tal realized that the actors would have no way to know when the audience applauded them. So she devised a way of having the interpreters taps the actors' knees to indicate when the audience was clapping, and each actor would pass this tap down the line, hand to knee, hand to knee, until everyone got the message.)

It took about a year to create the first performance of *Light Is Heard In Zig Zag*, which puts the actors on stage with their interpreters as guides. Since then the production has changed a great deal without losing its core focus on the personal dreams of the actors. And these dreams, as Ms. Tal points out, are no different than the dreams "normal" people have about what they would like to accomplish in their lives. There is Gadi Ouliel's desire to drive a bus. Yuri Tevordovsky "dreams that one morning he will wake up and take a look at the sky, and if the sky is blue, he will go fishing." Bat Sheva Ravenseri wants to become a famous actress and singer, Shoshana Segal would like someone to make her a birthday party, Zipora Malks wants to be a chief-of-staff in the army ("a particularly Israeli dream," Ms. Tal notes dryly), Marc Yarosky dreams of walking into a local pub, ordering a drink, "and being treated like a king."

After each show, actors and audience have a chance to mingle and talk, and on a promotional DVD about the show, an audience member, during one of these post-show meetings, states that "I'm bewildered by the capabilities, how far humans can reach." And this sentiment of wonder and respect is echoed without exception by the audience members. As Ms. Tal says, "A lot of people are coming to see and hear us and want to be part of the group because they want to be near these people who had the courage to get up and do something."

But current realities press in on these moments of revelation and acceptance. "We are working on a new production," she points out, "that will use drumming extensively." Drums, she has found, have been an excellent way to build communication in the group because the actors respond well to the vibrations as cues for action. And this new production will risk more than *Light Is Heard In Zig Zag* because there will be no interpreters on the stage with the actors, as there are now. "Only drums," she says, "and cooking." During the performance, the actors will prepare and bake bread; the show's length will be the time it takes to complete that process. And, of course, at the end of the show, everyone will break bread with everyone else.

Ms. Tal is also deeply involved in building a center in Tel Aviv to further the work of Nalaga'at. At the moment, the center will work with sufferers of Usher's Syndrome to improve their physical independence and integrate them into the community and the arts. The center will also function as a performance venue, and in the future, it is hoped the center will generate profits that will allow more deaf/blind people to find gainful roles in society. "We have a building, in Gaffo, in Tel Aviv," she explains, "which we are in the process of renovating." They have about $150,000 to start the work but will need about $500,000 more to fully complete it. On the drawing board is, of course, a fully equipped theatre, but the center will also boast something quite unique: a restaurant, staffed by deaf/blind people, where diners will eat in complete darkness. And as a way to further the center's mission of integration and acceptance, Ms. Tal explains that they will also establish a new group of actors, made up of Jews and Arabs.

### *The Performance*

The stage in darkness. A double row of chairs. A voice -- male, reverberant -- speaks to the audience. Stage right a young man steps into the light, and his hands carve the air with signing. The stage brightens, and from stage left, in double single-file, the dozen actors enter, the one behind with a hand on the left

shoulder of the one in front, guided in by the interpreters. They take their chairs. The performance begins.

It is a great performance, by turns madcap and touching, always committed and clean and direct. Each actor gets to tell his or her story -- simple stories about simple wants and desires -- and the staging of the stories, like the actors themselves, uses broad strokes to convey meaning: balloons, bubbles, blond wigs, blue cloth for the surface of a lake, over-sized foam-board cut-outs of flower bouquets, a pair of drums, and, at the end of the show, a sing-along. All of this is good the way good theatre is good: vaudevillian, unmawkish, inviting, unheady, clued-in -- the jadedness cleansed away, critical distance cracked.

The most powerful pieces, to me at least, came when, at various times, one of the actors, stepping forward on the stage, the person signing to his or her left, the interpreter to the right at a microphone voicing a translation for us, "spoke" directly about being blind and deaf in a world not built for the sightless and soundless. We "able-bodied" in the audience, in an interstice between the rush-rush of our important day and how we have to get home after the show lets out to prepare for the next important day, are allowed to enter the space of "the other" and both forget about ourselves and remember ourselves, that is, drop the armor of ego and recover the power of a primary human-to-human connection by way of a shared frailty of being. We are all alike, like it or not, when it comes down to the struggle to make it all make sense.

This performance also has a second show just as spectacular as the first: when the actors and audience mingle afterwards. The lobby is jam-packed. The interpreters, umbilicaled to their actors, sign furiously into the actors' hands as person after person comes up to offer praise and congratulations. Many in the crowd sign themselves, so while the usual post-show verbal buzz fills the air, pockets of gesturing humans create a kind of post-show physical buzz as well, the audience member singing to the interpreter who signs to the actor who signs back to the interpreter who passes it on to the audience member, all of this speeding along the way flocks of startled starlings wheel and spin through a cloudless sky.

We should support theatre like this -- not because it's "feel-good" or because we want to soothe ourselves as "do-gooders" but because it is good theatre, that is, theatre that not only satisfies our aesthetic demands for craft and pleasure but also is enmeshed in, and drawing sustainable inspiration from, the world that faces it. Nalaga'at is embodied theatre, theatre from the body -- not just

from the bodies of the actors and their shepherding interpreters but from our bodies as well, a call to us to bind ourselves each to each, since that is the only salvation we have as humans, and the only salvation worth having.

# Interview with Elfin Vogel, Director

(October 2005)

Elfin Vogel is currently a Ph.D. candidate in theatre at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York and is now in the process of completing a dissertation on sound design. He has had a long career in the theatre as a director, producer, writer, translator, designer, and musician. As a director, his work has ranged from classical theatre to new play development to opera and cabaret, and he worked as an artistic director and producer for River City Shakespeare Festival in Memphis (which he co-founded); Music, Theatre and Opera Company; Third Step Theatre Company; Knickerbocker Theatre Festival; and Wildbird Productions (all in New York City). He has written screenplays, adaptations, theater reviews, and, most recently, two cabaret shows.

**M:** What do you understand is the meaning of the phrase "state of the art"? Does it apply to theatre, and if it does, in what way? We can consider theatre in the United States or your experience of theatre in other countries.

**E:** All my recent experience is in the United States, so while I follow by reading in magazines and journals what is going on in Europe, especially Germany, I haven't seen a lot over there, not much that is really recent. "State of the art," in the most common usage, means that which is most up-to-date, the last level of achievement, and of course it's often used in relationship to technology. Of course there is a large technological aspect to theatre, but technology isnot what makes theatre "state of the art."

**M:** You made an interesting distinction there between "state of the art" and "is something the state of the art." Is that distinction applicable to theatre?

**E:** When you use "state of the art" as in "what condition are the arts in," that would be the more applicable reading, but I think it's not entirely off – for example, I'm thinking of a production of the Wooster Group's *To You The Birdie*. There was a lot of video – video was a very prominent element of the presentation, very specific sound, a mix of performing with or against technological events. And so you could say in that case that this theatre company, or this director, is exploring the "state of the art" as in exploring what current technologies can contribute to the art of theatre. I also just read an advertisement for a play that this play is going to appear on a website, as a "pod cast." Is it still theatre? Is it comparable to a live broadcast of a concert, where the performers might be influenced by the presence of the audience, they might be inspired by the presence of the audience in the way that live performers are? But when you broadcast it and essentially record it, the relationship between the listeners and the players no longer has that feedback relationship of the audience and performers.

**M:** Does this make the performance something other than theatre?

**E:** I think that's true. The most minimal formula, of A watches B while B impersonates C, which comes from Eric Bentley, that's still the formula for a performance. And while there are differences of opinion about whether there actually is communication between audience and performers, every performer knows the difference between a warm room and a cold room, or an enthusiastic room versus a quiet room, or a restless room, in a negative sense. This can impact the quality of a performance and bring in unexpected or unpredictable elements. This, of course, keeps defying the intentions of the performers and theatre makers, who do things that they feel will be understood a certain way or heard a certain way or seen a certain way and there's just no predicting if the audience will be receptive to it….All of this may still be preamble because we haven't quite gotten to the state of the theatre.

**M:** Well, let's get to that. This is the kind of question that gets asked at the end of the year, it has an inventory sense to it, knowing full well that whatever you say can be negated by any number of examples, but in general what would say is the state of the art of theatre in the United States?

**E:** I see only a small fraction of what is presented, as does any of us. Within the last year, at one point, I counted how many new theatrical events are offered every month and there are more new events than days in the month, so I would have to go two or three times a day to see everything that's offered in New York, which to me says that theatre is doing well….There's just an enormous amount of activity. And I don't know the total attendance for these events, but I'm going on the assumption that everything that is done below the Off-Broadway level is losing money. It cannot carry itself – well, partly by donations and a little bit of help from ticket prices – but clearly large numbers of theatre-makers do theatre because they are passionate about it and don't care if it costs them money or is done without pay or for marginal pay that doesn't have anything to do with living needs. So, in other words, there is an enormous amount of activity that happens for reasons other than financial remuneration….

**M:** So there's a lot of activity. But what about quality, about what the theatre "says"? Does that feed into the state of the art?

**E:** Absolutely. Let's take *Chicago*, which is an interesting show because it dramatizes a certain trend that we are facing in our culture in general, which is the excessive use of private experience as public entertainment. I think there is a "de-privatization" going on in the last 8 to 10 years, which is happening on all kinds of levels….It starts with confessional novels, then it's all-revealing biographies, then bio-pics on television, and it's in theatre also.

I think there are two sides to theatre, as far as I'm concerned. Theatre is, in some respects, very conservative. The larger institutional theatres that address the broadest possible audience are conservative because they

couldn't capture the broadest audience otherwise. But I also think that an element in what makes theatre pleasurable is the enjoyment of memory, so that the fact that some large percent of what you see on Broadway is revivals is not only because we don't come up with really good new stuff, or really new ways of presenting the old stuff. I think it is really that that conservative element in the audience wants to find something in the tried-and-true form, in a reminiscent form…It's not only a comfort. I think the memory factor provides us with a profound confirmation of who we are.

Then there's the theatre that tries to explore the taboo areas ….Recently, since 9/11, we have seen, in reference to the "state of the art," an upsurge in political theatre, or in theatre that addresses social and political concerns in some way – it's become "acceptable" or in the mix again. It hadn't been for quite a long time. But this is even in things like *The Vagina Monologues* – though it's not such a new idea to explore certain sexual areas….

**M:** In terms of that second type of theatre, is there really anything that can be done that will shock audiences? Or is there an audience that's conservative and an audience that's not conservative and they don't meet?

**E:** There's an interesting story concerning Loren Maazel, the conductor. He recently said in Germany, where he does a fair amount of work, that you can tell "director's theatre" by the fact that someone is taking a dump on stage and that directors are exploring their personal anxieties, and he's disgusted and fed up with it, and thinks that it belongs, like that dump, in the toilet. You don't see a lot of people taking a dump on a stage in New York – but in German theatre there is an exploration of the body that has gone much further. But it is also because it is so much more removed from the interest in psychological realism in American theatre. We are very addicted to psychological realism, even in non-realistic plays. We want to understand the behavior. We want to believe that theatre reveals hidden psychological motivations – the revelation. Maybe it's a kind of perverted or transmogrified religious need. We're very much driven by the hope for revelation, and ultimately for epiphany and redemption. In a superficial way we can say it's the old Hollywood "it has to have a happy ending," but it's not just a happy end. It's that the happy end is a secular redemption. On an even more sublimated level, perhaps, it is this expectation that the behavior we see from moment-to-moment on the stage should be psychologically comprehensible. And German theatre has long left that behind, which doesn't mean that you won't find it in German theatre. There's a lot of theatre going on where you see behavior that has nothing to do with a psychological text that takes you from here to there….

That doesn't mean it doesn't happen here as well. When Elizabeth LeCompte has a character take an enema on stage [in *To You The Birdie*], that's kind of going in the direction of German theatre. Or take Lee Breuer. He started years ago miking his actors so that they could talk as softly as they wanted – he found that different kinds of communication could be accessed,

different kinds of expressions could be accessed, by eliminating the need for the actor to fill a room with his voice.

David Savran, a professor at the CUNY Graduate Center and a noted author on theatre, wrote an article in *Theatre Drama Review* entitled "The Death of the Avant Garde."…He says that the theatrical avant garde has run its course. And that may very well be true. If you look at the people in the United States that represented the avant garde, most of them are dead or have stopped doing things or are just very old or, like Claude van Italie, seems mostly concerned with his yoga retreats up at his place in the country. The Becks are gone, the Bread and Puppet Theater only has occasional performances. Politically, there would be as much reason to do protest street theatre now as ever. Cindy Sheehan does street theatre, that's what her protest in Texas really is, and it's just appropriate that she performs for an audience that consists of new cameras.

**M:** But why isn't that kind of theatre happening now? As you said, there's more than enough materials, there was a resurgence of politically motivated theatre – but why isn't theatre being harnessed in the way it was thirty or forty years ago?

**E:** I think that as far as the formalistic structures of theatre are concerned – a lot has been experimented with and played out and played through. For a hundred years now, we've done abstract sets, anti-illusionistic theatre, Brechtian theatre, street theatre, absurd theatre, Dadaistic theatre – every element that you can take apart and by overemphasizing a particular aspect by isolating something and making that the focus of the performance – all of that has been done in some form or other. I think that it has become very difficult to offend anyone anymore, and short of literally killing – the "snuff" play – or flaying somebody or torturing them…

**M:** But the purpose for shocking is not just shock. If you shock people, or if you offend them in a particular way, they won't come back – they need to feel that there is a pursuit on their part, that they are looking for something for new. But perhaps people are not looking for something new, either.

**E:** In high-school I had this sculpting teacher – I did a lot of wood sculpture then. When you do wood sculpture, you hit your thumb or some part of your hand because you use a big mallet and hit a small carving tool with it. He would say, "Pain makes conscious." And so, shock theatre as theatre that in some way raises consciousness [is hard to do well because] a lot of political theatre, protest theatre, ends up preaching to the converted…and that is one of the problems, to do theatre that is consciousness-raising in the sense of how in the 60s and 70s people wanted to do events that were consciousness-raising. Yoko Ono sitting on a stage and letting people cut off pieces of her dress…even though she didn't allow them to cut everything off – there was something involved in the formal act that was going on that was shocking to the people who saw it. This refers back to my earlier point about "deprivatization." It was shocking when she did it back then, it was an

act of defiance to say, "So you want to look at me? I'll not only let you look at me, but in order to look at the way you want to look at me, you have to cut off pieces of my dress. You have been doing it with your eyes for long enough, so let me show you how it feels to actually do it." So, it is difficult to do – or to find – theatre that raises consciousness through pain.

**M:** Your point about Yoko Ono is an interesting one because there it's shocking because it's about revealing certain relationships about power between men and women that have not been acknowledged. It's the shock of recognition of something that had not been recognized, which is certain kind of shock – it's not the only kind of shock – whereas there could be other kinds of shock which is "I just want to throw something in your face and make you so angry you'll walk out." Which tends to counteract what you really want to achieve.

**E:** I think of the Living Theatre and some of the things they did, particularly in Europe, especially Switzerland and Germany, where they were just as controversial as in the US, or *Dionysus 69*, where the epiphany of the show was reached when a female audience member stripped naked and actually copulated with the actor playing Dionysus on stage. After that happened, the need for this performance became superfluous. You couldn't ever expected to replicate that. But an interesting thing about this is that a lot of these group efforts depended on charismatic leaders and the willingness of performers to subject themselves to group therapy sessions. Now we have people who go on Oprah or Dr. Phil and talk about everything in large forums and it's become a national spectator sport. Or Jerry Springer, who reveals the more brutal sides of how people treat each other and behave toward each other. You couldn't possibly motivate, after Jerry Springer, bringing a group of actors together and let them do primal scream until they were willing to bear everything. It's hard now to find the set-up that would give any kind of formal challenge or novelty in presenting the performance, this kind of radical or "this shakes me up" experience.

**M:** And shakes me up in a way that leads to me understand something about myself –

**E:** Yes – be it political, be it psychological or whatever.

**M:** Is there, in the state of the art, a need for, a place for, an avant garde, but not necessarily in this form so that the conservative/repetition/memory track doesn't take over? I mean, that could lead to kind of sclerosis of theatre, in the sense that everything becomes a revival, even a new play, because of its feel, because of what it does. So is there a need for an avant garde to leaven the other side? And if so, how would we do that now? Or can it not be done?

**E:** A difficult question to answer. I think the globalization today of everything has made this more difficult to do…We did a color-blind production in Memphis many years ago, in the early 1990s, of *The Winter's Tale*, and the

70-something-year-old mother of the actress who played Hermione (who was a white actress) said that when she saw her daughter as the wife of a black king, it kind of made her stomach turn – but it affected her. And look at what's happening in New Orleans right now. We can see that there's an ingrained racism, and so if we do theatre that challenges racism or addresses questions of racism, you could still find an audience that you might wake up with what you do. And it may be a production of the least political of Shakespeare's late romances but done with a color-blind casting that could raise consciousness. And the fact that in this town that was more than 50% black, we drew a 50% black audience, which none of the other theatres at that time did, and that was something noted by people.

**M:** So perhaps there's a path to follow in "de-deprivatizing" things, in the sense of a larger picture to draw from, something that's not just the palette of the self, because clearly racism is personal but it's also a large public elephant in the middle of the room. So maybe in the sense that if theatre-makers became more impersonal they could actually discover more shocking things to talk about than in digging deeper into themselves – perhaps because after Jerry Springer, there is not a lot more that can be mined from the self.

**E:** I think that we are headed for a time when this badly hidden secret of America being a highly stratified class society, this terrible myth that America is a classless society, has to be dealt with and we have to re-discover a humanism that breaks through class....And in this pseudo-democracy that we live in, we are very very strongly moving toward a society with a moneyed aristocracy that is so rich that they are no longer concerned about "earning" or "consumption" but the exertion of power and of influence. By calling our society "consumerist," that's a really clever way to create a false equality among consumers – it makes sense to import everything from China and sell it through Wal-Mart because it allows the non-wealthy person a level of consumption at their depressed earnings, which creates a quiescence of sorts. I can buy a lot of shit for this little amount of money I have, and as long as gas prices don't prevent us from driving over to Wal-Mart – I'm veering a little from theatre, but it's a question of where do the themes come from that we deal with in theatre….I think this country is in a precarious state, which this recent catastrophe showed, where the fragility of this covenant – that somehow we can contain poverty, we can keep the poor from looting the rich – it was very revealing that one of the first acts was to send in troops ready to shoot to kill, to protect property – the moment they were getting a restive and destabilized by this weather catastrophe, we have to send in 50,000 heavily armed soldiers to contain 10,000 potential looters....The covenant is that we will create the illusion of taking care of the poor – we keep them enough in fear through fear-mongering in regards to terrorism, scare them enough and offer them enough anodynes to palliate them, and in the meantime you rip them off as best you can. These things, it seems to me, can be thematized again in theatre. It is not necessarily that you have to come up with an incredibly different way of making theatre – all the techniques are there and have been tested.

**M:** There's ready-made material there – so maybe if there is a lessening of focus on self, on self-revelation or epiphany or redemption and accessing these kinds of themes – that could bring even more vitality to the vitality of theatre that is already happening.

**E:** It was an interesting experience to see the recent revival of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* The reason why it was shocking in the early 60s was that it bared a level of aggressively battling for each other's souls, or soul against soul, portraying the basic family unit as a place for violence and aggression and mean-spirited manipulation….Now when you see this play, it's almost lame. The production, which has no intention of emphasizing any present-time relevance, is outmoded like the many opera productions are outmoded. In opera, they save the old sets because opera is a very expensive art, and producers will bring them back for decades. And that's what they did with *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* You could smell the mothballs.

**M:** Which allows the audience not to focus on what the play was about in the earlier context that you were talking about, but "Was Kathleen Turner great? Was Bill Irwin okay?" It becomes about all that.

**E:** It's also that what was once jarring and problematic about it is now common, and it's on the daily news. This is not to take away from the talent of the people on the stage, especially the actors playing the secondary characters – it's a pleasure to watch them act. On that level I had very good time in the theatre. But the whole enterprise is utterly irrelevant. You don't go away thinking that I have to re-think the way I talk to my wife. Even on that primitive "did I learn a little something?" level, it doesn't really offer anything.

**M:** It seems that part of the on-going state of the art is moving – I think Howard Barker said it one time, that shocking theatre is not about shocking people, it's about making them realize that they knew something they didn't know they knew. It's the shock of the realization that something you didn't know is there, or something that you wanted hidden, in now undone.

**E:** Luckily, the education in this country is so bad that from generation to generation you keep getting audiences that are utterly ignorant of almost everything, and if you just get them to come to the theatre, you could do some good.

**M:** And on that note –

**E:** Not completely. I recently saw a production of *Pericles* that was very well-done because it told the basic story of loss and self-recovery and was very moving.

**M:** In part because it's not "personal" in the way that we understand "personal," but it still has personality to it because it speaks to larger themes in our lives.

**E:** Yes. I think it's about moving towards a truly existential understanding of what it means to be human – that's the most radical thing you can talk about, and not enough people do that.

**M:** A much better note to end on.

# The Art of the State

(October 2005)

When our fearless editor suggested the topic "The State of the Art," I balked. What, really, could I say about the state of the art of playwrights and playwriting? Of the universe of plays written and submitted in the course of a year, I get to read only a small slice for a few small theatres, and I've detailed what I've gleaned from that task in other essays for *Scene4*. It's not been a bright gleaning. Most of the scripts I've read lack a flair for finding and sifting the story lode in such a way that an audience will become rapt enough to forget their bladders and daily head-chatter. Most of the scripts ground themselves on the narrow sandbar of domestic drama/comedy, re-hashing re-hashes of dysfunctional families, limping-along relationships, sentimentalized good-personism, and so on. Very few of the scripts adventure anything, test anything – they seem content to reflect and repeat.

As for the state of "the theatre" – one can read the surveys by Theatre Communications Group to flesh out what one knows by intuition: theatre is a struggling business, as it usually is; artistic directors are constantly geeing and hawing between commercial and artistic choices, as they usually have to; the "theater-going public" is mostly white and aging, yet a profusion of "fringe" festivals draws in that cherished "younger crowd" with the hope that they'll replace the graying cohort. Which is to say: theatre is dead, long live the theatre, as is usually the case.

The art-form of theatre, in the list of today's "entertainment options," does not rise very high on that list because it is not a mass-form of art, like movies or music downloads. A play does not open on multiple stages on a certain date, it does not get airplay, it is not lateraled from computer to computer through file-sharing, and so on. In the cultural ecology, it occupies a specialized niche, like some form of a Darwinian finch that can only eat seeds of a certain oval shape that are colored ochre – and the habitat that produces those unique seeds steadily dwindles.

But then I had another thought.

We live in a time of military war and assaults on logic and the mendacity of religion, and the reason these enterprises succeed is that they have successfully employed the techniques of theatrical production to make their cases stick. Now, some may consider it a secular form of blasphemy to say that theatre

forwards propaganda, that an art-form often self-described and self-missioned as wanting to explore the ambiguities of the human condition would become the engine for the persuasions of propaganda.

But take a look at Brecht.

Brecht wanted to re-formulate the algorithms of the theatre of his day because he wanted his audiences to understand the world in particular ways. He was artist enough not to frog-march his attendees to his conclusions (well, at least most of the time), but in the end he wanted his ticket-buyers to go away with something about themselves changed – mostly bettered along certain socio-politico-cultural lines, but at least (re)moved and (re)armed – and thus fashioned his productions to get done what he wanted to get done.

He did this (and to some degree every artist does this) because he 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 because theatre and propaganda ("propaganda" in both our modern sense of manipulation and the Catholic sense of "propagating" the faith) are not opposites but terms that describe different locations on a continuum of persuasion. And because a continuum is all about slurred shades and not sharp points, we can glide through the continuum from, say, a Beckett play consisting of a single human exhalation (in which no one is forced to think of anything except the constancy of his or her own mortality) to the blatant political and social (re)arrangements of a Living Theatre or a Wooster Group or a Mabou Mines.

There is nothing insulting in naming artists as propagandists – artists self-name as "artists" because they believe they have something to say/offer/sow and reap, and learn their craft to do just that (and hopefully make a living at it).

But if "artists as propagandists" is allowed, then it is also true that somewhere on this continuum propagandists can be artists. And it is here where theatre – the techniques of, the live energy of – exerts its greatest power – not on Broadway but in the megachurch of Rick Warren (author of the very hot *The Purpose-Driven Life*), the spin doctors, the advertising board rooms, the permanent campaigns of politicians.

This is not to say that the theatre these and other groups make is good theatre, if "good" is defined the way Edward Albee once described it in a lecture, as a catalyst for change, that it should be dangerous, that it should reveal all of our shortcomings and complacency, hopefully inspiring us to live our lives more fully. "The job of the arts," Albee said,"is to hold a mirror up to us and say: 'Look, this is how you really are. If you don't like it, change.'"

But, then again, most "theatre" theatre doesn't come anywhere near this gold standard (including Albee's plays). In fact, it goes in the opposite direction, re-playing for the care and comfort of the audience the lessons of our culture's dominant curriculum about the psychological, social, economic, and political make-up of its deni(citi)zens, those patterns of behavior most in line with the corporate capitalist regime that instructs and assesses our lives. Nobody today comes out of a performance of any 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. Far from seeking out something "dangerous" that will reveal one's "shortcoming and complacency" (i.e., one's insufficiency and failure as a human being), people go to the theatre to be entertained – moved, yes, engaged and intrigued, yes, but not, at the end, ready to re-form the very quick of their lives because they have now had the motes extracted from their eyes. To expect this to happen, to write this down as a caption under the picture of "good art," is to expect the blossom of religious conversion to burst forth – and this is just silly because we long ago jettisoned the Greekish notions of theatre as a religious communal event or that anything on a stage would offend us enough to lob rotten produce or storm out in protest (or solidarity, as in *Waiting for Lefty*). Audiences want to come out of the theatre no different than when they walked in — they just want to feel satisfied that their two hours haven't been wasted. If what they have seen is "dangerous" (whatever that word means), a threat to their souls, they are more than capable of distancing themselves from the information (like quarantining a virus) – and most likely, when word gets out on the street that this is a "dangerous" production that is "good for you," people will stay away in droves.

(As a digression: doesn't the bathroom mirror in the morning after a sleepless night due to the ever-running anxiety tapes that play through in our heads do a much better job of lessoning us about our "shortcomings and complacency" than the latest museum-like re-production of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*)

But you can come away from a daily onslaught of clever advertising ready to buy. You can come away from political campaigning ready to be a voter/non-voter. You can exit from Rick Warren's megachurch reaffirmed in your fight against the devil and his industrial output of sin. You can plan ahead to set aside time in January to make sure you catch the new commercials at the Super Bowl half-time show because, at that moment, they are the best show in town. You can be righteous and involved when it comes to arguing for the right to invite a landslide-download of pirated MP3s onto your hard drive. And this is because the theatre of the efforts behind all of these pitches to become involved in life are 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.

Is there a lesson here? People far smarter than I can answer that question, and the plain fact is that I don't know. Theatre is a minor art form in our culture, yet it still has the power to draw people into its orbit because the live, sweaty thing that happens on stage is unique for both audience and actor. That bond, that intimacy, has to become the source of any re-imagining of theatre as we move into the 21st century – not spectacle, not a solely commercial calculus, but that umbilical that makes being a living human being worth being a living human being. It is intimacy, not danger, that drives theatre's heart/art. That's what the propagandists can't really reproduce, though they can form pretty good fakes of it, enough to fool most people. This is what theatre needs to re-claim if it's going to continue saying that it should have a claim upon our fortunes and our lives.

# The Fallen Ice Cream

(November 2005)

He stood there the way a rock stands in the way of water – intrusive yet harmless, blatant but easily forgotten. Dark-skinned, wiry-tough, clad in blue nylon running pants, same-color sleeveless sports-top (maybe team-logo'd, but I can't remember). Sneakers, yes, but I can't remember if they were street-gnawed, or new/newish, or even laced versus velcro'd.

No, what I remember most (or at least first), aside from his flow-around blue clothes and chocolate skin was the angle. Facing me, his upper torso leaned to my left, with a slight twist at the waist, so that he seemed ready to fall over leading with his right shoulder but hadn't really gotten around to giving in to gravity yet – not hovering or suspended – nothing that dynamic – but more like hanging, like an unseen cable dangled him permanently lop-sided – not a cable very well anchored, either, since he swayed – no, lilted – from side to side.

Below the waist – the waist as a kind of hinge – his legs, knee-locked, were also torqued slightly to the right, the way the legs of someone palsied have their own cosine or tangent.

I didn't think it then but I thought it later – if his arms had been to the side, slightly Y'd upwards, it would've been a Christ-pose, the way the Christ figure, usually as he's being lowered, has that lean to him that signals deletion – the fatalistic crucifix-shrug.

I came to his attention because as I was salmoning my through the sidewalk crowd to Port Authority, I pulled my little rolling backpack over something that got tangled in its wheels – his jacket, as it turned out, laying right out there as if it were trash. He, for his part, had planted himself mostly in the crosswalk, just off the crippled ramp, and when he saw me struggling to unfix his coat from my wheels, he yelled at me – nothing intelligible, just something warningish, something in the vocabulary of territorial.

At this point no one wanted anything to do with us. Eyes up, feet forward, trajectory clamped – the New York pedestrian autopilot. But I couldn't ignore him – I had wheeled over his coat, for Christ's sake, was trying to disengage it and put it somewhere where it wouldn't get foot-rollered, all the while having him volley at me gargled curses spat sideways because of his lean. How could I ignore how his humanity leaned on me?

Finally, I got the coat free and hung it over a mail box bolted to the corner. Just as I did that, the cable let loose, and over he keeled. Did I mention he had something ice cream-ish in his left hand? How could I have forgotten that? In one sense it's the whole point of the whole story. In any case, he had something ice cream-ish in his left hand, which, following the laws of bum-physics, fell in synch with him.

The scenario: who is going to pick him up? Only one to answer the call. So I stashed the backpack to the side (wedging it out of the flow so that someone wouldn't nab it while I was doing my samaritan thing) and walked over to him. He was still gargling his curses, though from this nearer point I got dribs and drabs of actually words, of actual whining, grimy lamentation about his disrespected coat and toppled ice cream.

Now, about lying on a New York City Street in the month of boiling August. Imagine the DNA layering of spat gum, hawked spit, sweat-mist, in addition to the asphalt exude, the paste made of tire dust and leaked oil and pigeon pee – one does not lie on the sweltered August street unless all illusion has given you up and nothing means everything to you. Not to mention the juggernaut taxis making tread-meal out of your body parts.

I did what I had to do: I stuck down my right hand and told him to grab on. And before long he was upright/swaying again, refusing to meet my eyes and dribbling out his complaints against the universe.

And here is what went through my mind. First, my hand on his – what will it find, exchange – all right, be infected by. Second, the touch of skin against skin – I don't know what I expected to feel when I felt his hand, but I felt something – unique? no, not that – alive. Corded, tough, sandpaper'd, gripping – he clamped on my forearm, and I levered him. To help himself he also used the ice-cream hand, and smeared across the shirt-cuff and caked on the forearm hair: sticky used-ice-cream residue. Not unlike the gumbo on the street surface.

Got him vertical, got him to hear me ask if he was okay. (When he'd hit the pavement, he hit it solid – I felt the seismic vibration in my shoe soles). He let on he was okay – then started in again on the lost ice-cream (which had now become one with the street stew). So I snagged a buck out of my back pocket and told him to go around the corner and get a replacement.

I don't know what people saw when they saw us. All I knew was that he had taken me out of the moment – no, helping him had taken me out of the

moment. Before that, before reaching down, I still had the ability to virtualize him – turn him into an image, a stereotype, an icon of some peevishness of my own about the city – keep him two-dimensional and ignorable.

But once the live hand came to the live hand – no, I take that back, not then. When the impulse came to the shoulder to lever the arm down and scissor open the hand – that's when the distance collapsed into contact, and once contact is made, it's impossible to deny the shared liveness. You can deny it , of course – but that's all mouth-music. When contact is made, it's made – and in being made remakes everything.

Handing him a dollar, feeling his weight lean against my grip which pulled on my bicep and shoulder – that was some of the best evidence that day that I was actually alive and out of the endless loop of chatter and crankiness that passes for higher cerebral activity in my head.

Such moments snatched – they split the husk, they drown the bastard named ego, they smell of meaning.

Of course, I thought, as I got my bag and started up to the station, 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.

# The Catch-22 of Screenwriting

(December 2005)

*Prologue*

Okay. The Catch-22 is that in order to get a screenplay read and considered, you have to know someone in the business. But to know someone in the business, you sort of have to have a track record as a screenwriter – which is difficult to do if you haven't had anyone read your screenplay because you don't really know anyone....

Thus, festivals: the way in for people who don't have a way in.

*The Script*

To get some traction on a screenplay I really liked, I began submitting *Ain't Ethiopia*, which I had written during my final semester at NYU in 2004. It combines two of my enduring interests. The first is the continued rippling out of America's racial history in our culture. I use "rippling out" in this sense: scientists can still detect the corrugations in space-time caused by the Big Bang 13 billion years ago, and so it is with slavery, America's Big Bang.

A current canard concerns how Hurricane Katrina exposed the barely hidden underbelly of America's racial indifference, a comment often made and dismissed in the same breath by the punditocracy, as if to say, "Oh, that kind of attitude is so old-school! Get past it!" Yet those pictures of the Superdome and convention center exist – they mutely document, they accuse by simple demonstration. They are the photographic evidence of the scores gouged by that explosion. They cannot be planed down by cavalier dismissal.

The second is the Spanish Civil War, a conflict that has always fascinated me in how it hooked the minds and bodies of people whom one would think would have no interest in carnage and destruction – in the case of my script, a poor young barely educated black man from Mississippi escaping from the people who lynched his wife because they believed her a Communist for asking the government for poor relief during the Great Depression. (News clips I'd read from 1936 about lynchings cited several instances where Communism stood in as a proxy for race, as if hanging a black Communist killed off two infections for the price of one.)

I had read where about 100 African Americans had gone to Spain, and reading this immediately sparked a "why?" Why would these dispossessed men and women fight to protect freedoms in Spain that they couldn't enjoy at home? This type of choosing against the grain always hooks the writer in me.

Here is the 62-word kernel of the script:

> After local whites lynch his wife as a suspected Communist, African-American Jesse Colton flees his small Mississippi town and travels to Spain in 1937 to fight Franco. But there he finds that his real battle is with the fascists back home and that he must return to face them down if his life, and his wife's death, is to have any meaning.

Coming up with the return journey for Jesse turned *Ain't Ethiopia* into a dramatic script instead of just a historical narrative. Up to that point, I struggled with how to turn my admiration for the people who went to fight into a compelling dramatic story – in short, how to transform the documentary and educational into something personal and morally troubling. It is one thing for Jesse, in his new-found freedom as a freedom fighter, to face the gigantically repugnant figures of Franco, Hitler, and Mussolini; it is another, more harrowing, thing to face his wife's killers and face them squarely. And that could only be done at the original crime scene.

The script had had a good reception at the IFP Market & Conference in September 2004, being one of 200 selected projects (from over 1600 submitted). The script reader, who had recommended it for inclusion in the conference, told me that he felt that at the end of two hours he had been taken on a journey he never expected to make and that he thought script very fine indeed – honey for the ears. The IFP is not buy/sell kind of event, so even though I "pitched" it, I did it in the context of talking with fellow-hungry movie people, all of us looking for some crease in space-time that would allow us to leap forward past time and chance.

My next step (label it "naïve") I took, buoyed by these good responses, was to seek out directors/producers/actors of color who might be interested after reading my query to be interested enough to read the whole script. So I signed on for the free 14-day trial at IMDb that allowed some deeper spelunking on the site for contact information and extracted what I could. Then mail-merge, query letters out, waiting by the mailbox.

And bang against the next installment of Catch-22: we can't read your ideas because you may sue us if we ever come up with anything remotely similar, so

we must, unfortunately, remain agnostic about the contents of your missive. Only the agent of Denzel Washington took pity on me. He made me sign a form that forever and a day held them all blameless, and then took receipt of my scripts – and after a respectful interval (so that I didn't feel that they were immediately circular-filed but only gradually circular-filed) returned them to with his and Denzel's regrets. I pretended that Denzel had actually touched them, leafed through them, and shook his head at being unable to forward such a promising script and the promising writer who had birthed it. I kept the returns in very neat stacks until I couldn't bear their mock anymore and ditched them with the recycling (not before extracting the return envelope with the still-usable stamp – there would be others, I said defiantly, who would make good use of these SASEs).

What was a poor flicks-scribbler to do? And then – the siren call of the festivals. That was it! That was the ticket in!

*The One I Won*

I can't remember the most recent tally of film festivals/competitions in the United States – for some reason, 3,000 sticks in my head, but that's probably wrong. But there sure are "a lot" (however many that is). Not all of them take screenplays as well as films, but there is a subset chunk that do, and those had my bulls-eye painted on them. (Another constraining factor is, as always, money. Theatres may charge, at their most gouging, $25 for an entry fee – I've never seen one over that. But film competitions are usually double that for the early bird – more expensive later for the late bird. Limited means, limited choices.)

I submitted, of course, to Sundance and the Nicholls Fellowship (very complimentary rejections from both), Scriptopalooza (less soothing rejection notice), and Filmmakers.com

And lo. And behold. An email from Filmmakers.com: "The Top 400 Scripts" (subtitled "From the 1273 Scripts Submitted"). And lo. And behold. *Ain't Ethiopia* is listed. Right up near the top (thanks to alphabetical order). Hmmm....

A due date is posted for the next round: the top 200. Date comes: there it is again. The top 100: there it is yet again – it has dodged the bullets well, look quite spry and natty. The top 50. The top 20 (from which the winning 10 will be chosen). And then – and then – third place. Third place. It won something. I won something. I'm going to Los Angeles, to the Screenwriters Expo 4, to pitch the

piece and sit in the same room with William Goldman (well, within proximity of him) and suddenly be plunged into the world that a year ago had not been open for me to plunge into.

And the whole damn thing torqued me around. It wasn't joy or possibility that flooded in but the noun form of being unnerved, unmanned. I didn't want to go, compiled "reasons" why I couldn't (didn't want to lose time from work, couldn't afford the costs) – but the barricade of excuses pointed to something else, which I am now only beginning to unpack as I pack up for my west-flight: something to do with age, entitlement, and fear.

*What's This?*

Age

"At my age I shouldn't have to" – suddenly this phrase is popping into my head. Now, I'm 52 years old – not spry but not sclerotic. (The Marvelous Maria will attest that I have not lost my nerve endings.) But "at my age I shouldn't have to" begins to sound, well, positively geezerish.

But I had to admit that something about feeling "aged" fed into the intital feeling of reluctance when I got wind of the award. Movie-making is a younger person's game – at least that had been the scuttlebutt in my classes, through the articles I'd read. Many of my screenwriting teachers in the Dramatic Writing program at NYU were older gents who seemed tired out by the scrabbling for work and the quickness with which they could be discarded, no matter how pedigreed their résumés. I suppose I had soaked up enough of that jadedness so that the prospect of a ride on the movie carousel just pre-wearied me. I didn't want to muster, didn't want to gather, didn't want to exert – I would much prefer it if someone would just hand me the prize to which my age recommended me and spare me this unseemly sweating and anxiety.

With mild alarm I realized that I had slipped into....

Entitlement

Rather than being jazzed by the chance to go pitch a screenplay that I'd worked hard on and felt affection for, the California call, provoking the tiredness mentioned above, felt like a sentence to hard labor, yet one more slog toward a success that with each year feels less and less possible. "I have put my time into

the universe," I groused, "and it's about time the universe paid me back." Even as I said it I could hear the absurdity of it – there is no connect, there never has been a connect, between virtue and reward, between effort and profit. As The Preacher says, "luck and chance happeneth to them all."

But part of me hungered for "the visitation" – that event of luck when someone decides to champion the work and suddenly one is not alone in cutting through the static to be heard. And it is luck – the artistic director who happens to have the right cup of coffee in hand as he or she turns back the cover and begins to read, the spouse of a celebrity sitting in the audience who takes a shine to whatever is presented, the unexpected call saying you have won a MacArthur, and so on. We've all read about events like these, and each of us, I would guess, secretly hopes for a patron, or something patron-ish, to come along.

And the wish-ache that comes with such waiting also made me realize that – I had to admit that – I felt....

Fear

The fear I felt was not gut-emptying terror or the paralysis of overwhelm but the more pedestrian fear of looking and feeling the fool when I go to pitch my ideas. Okay, so I can write well, I can wield the word with slice or softness – but, damn, to get up there in front of strangers and, well – well – justify myself is just too much, too much indeed (sound effect: splutter, splutter in soft rage). The surface self-justifications for the fear are that the work should speak for itself, art should not bow to commerce, etcetera, etcetera.

But the sub-surface is more real: What if I suck at pitching? What I can't make the grade? What if everything I've tried to create melts into silence because I can't bring myself to speak brilliantly and sharply about what I love? The look-down-the-nose at the messiness of the marketplace is just a mask for cowardice. My high-toned reluctance was really a yellow-bellied kvetching.

This effort at selling does not come naturally to one who dubs himself a writer. Canards and stereotypes aside, writers do crave silence and solitude, the lone creative effort, worlds spun from nothing more substantial than synapses. They are in the world but not necessarily of it, and even that "in" can be a tendril-thin tether. To leap into the mud-wrestle of a pitch session is to be wrenched into full solidity, and the border-crossing from virtual to actual can callous-up the nerve-endings something fierce.

But writers – good writers – are experience-harvesters, and that's the attitude I've decided to take: to reap what I can with brio and a wry smile, train myself to be the best damn pitcher I can be, making sure it comes out of love and humor, and let's see which angels come to visit.

### *The Pitch: Part 1*

I have to admit that I had always heard about "pitching," and it was easy to enough to see it parodied on comedy shows like Saturday Night Live and movies like *The Player* – seen it enough to conclude that any breathing carbon-based life form that had an inkling of sentience and self-worth would never make it part of their life's work to go begging like that, to fillet life's plenty into such genre'd and salable strips of jerky. Art could not, should not be, boiled down to the duration of an elevator ride (to use one measure of a pitch's perfect length) – thus saith the aesthete.

But I had three of them as part of my winning package – three little eggs ready to be omleted as part of the tribute given to a winning writer. One cannot hold on to unbroken eggs forever – they will be opened, one way or another, so the questions become "how" and "with what grace." Hmmm.

And what was even stranger, at least to a playwright, was the concept that a writer could "buy" more pitches at the conference, for $25 a toss. It sounded like the discounted Catholic practice of buying indulgences, or the secular version of that, "pay to play." One carries the pitch around the way the old-style door-to-door salesmen used to heft their sample cases, throwing them out open for anyone to see, not a bit of reluctance to show off and tout the wares. A playwright would never do that. Or, more accurately, a playwright would never have the chance to do that kind of bidding and selling at a "pitchfest."

In the movie-world, it seems, if art is the Temple, then the producers are the money changers, and the two muck along just fine. In the theatre, however, the money-changers are elsewhere – the Temple is decentralized and the buying/selling takes place behind a veneer of gentility and "development" and inside some kind of black-box that is opaque to all the supplicants hoping for a slot in a season or even a script-in-hand barebones reading. At least at the pitchfest one can belly up to a table, look another human being in the eye, and say, "Here's what I got – what d'ya think?" Who could ever have a chance to do this with an artistic director of a theatre if one is not already one of the select, much less

walk around a large conference room and, like speed-dating, hang out what you own, and if it doesn't get a bite, go on to the next set of teeth?

I've talked about this before, in an earlier essay titled "Market," when I attended the IFP Market & Conference in September 2004. As I said there, "Given all this brazen commerce, why would I, self-proclaimed theatrophile and hater of commodification, be pleased to be so embedded with the money-changers? In part because they were so honest; in part because there are actual chances to make a living through my dramatic writing (slim, to be sure, but gargantuan when compared to the non-existence of such chances in the theatre world). And in part, and I feel surprised saying this, for the entrepreneurial spirit I sensed everywhere and in everyone. Here were people unabashed about selling themselves (and it is always the self that is sold – the product, the project, is just a calling card, a preliminary knock on the door). Here were people unafraid to push hard for what they believed in – not a noble 'believed in' because larded with all levels of self-interest and competitiveness but still a 'believed in' that got them up in the morning and forced them to move against gravity and ennui and defeat."

But then, there was actually writing the pitches I wanted to deliver – that proved harder than I thought.

### *The Pitch: Part 2*

The common perception of "the pitch," at least among theaterphiles, is that it takes the heart out of the art by reducing the complexity of the narrative to an easily and quickly digested form. But I would argue, having struggled for hours one evening to extract three "pitchable" pronouncements from my already-written screenplays (*Ain't Ethiopia* and two back-ups, *By The River* and *The Sunlight Dialogues*), that shaping a pitch, rather than pithing the heart out of a narrative, sharpens it. Or, more accurately, the time-, word-count-, and presentation-constraints of a pitch forced me to solidly map out the cardial nerves that made the story pump its narrative blood.

In fact, I would go so far as to say that crafting the pitch actually made me fully understand the story I had written. I mean that, as odd as it sounds. For instance, I "sort of" knew the flow of *Ain't Ethiopia*, knew the act structure and the turning points, and so on. But the press of having to make all of that clear in under two minutes to a stranger who, like David Spade for Capital One, is

primed to tell me "no" and move on, forced me to publish, in plain sight, the "architectural drawings" for the work's structure: this leads to this, and that then curls back to here, which then sets up this, where I bring back in this point that I had set up back at the beginning, and so on and so on, and in the end, this is the "take-away" for the audience (to use David Mamet's term), this is what they will port away with them as an understanding about the movie, what they will tell their friends when their friends say, "So, what movie did you see this weekend?"

So, rather than take the "heart out of the art," the pitch, like an X-ray, brings the bones to light, makes clear the structure (with all its struts, hinges, and pivots). The pitch, then, is part of the storyteller's art, not its antithesis or destroyer, the way an epigraph can thematically prepare an essay or (in a drier image) an abstract can distill a dissertation. And I would further argue that most of that plays I read as a reader for theatres suffer from not having gone through the pitch-process, where the writers would be forced to come up with a description of their work whose sole purpose is to convince a reader to want to read it. And I would go further than this "further" and say that many writers, if they did this, would find out that they have scripts that don't do anything dramatically, that they are static and "character-based" (i.e., static) and go narratively nowhere because the scripts have no forward momentum. If theatrical writing can learn anything from the movies, it is this: economy in words, thinking in visuals, and a narrative structure that constantly triggers new choices and never lingers unless it's necessary to the story-telling.

*Next up: the Expo!*

The way it works: everyone has a designated pitch time (done in five-minute increments). To get a feel for what it feels like to pitch one's golden moment in such a short time, try explaining anything, no matter how simple or mundane, to a perfect stranger in five minutes while simultaneously being spirited but not desperate, committed but not obsessive, confident but not arrogant, excited but not nervous, sincere but not sappy, economical but not terse – tongue-tied and dry-mouthed will be the least of your problems. Did I also mention that the future direction of your life may depend upon the outcome of your spiel? I didn't? Oh, well add that in, too.

The moderator/gatekeeper/three-headed Cerberus comes out and bellows "All the 10:15s in a line against this wall," and the 10:15s, obedient and puppy-eager, cleave themselves to the wall. Some chat, but most are running their

pitches through their brains and mouths. An alien observer, not knowing the context for the gathering, would conclude that something is physically wrong with these creatures, afflicted as they are with tics, whisperings, lip-movements, hand-jerks, darting eyes. Not to worry – it's just rehearsal. It's normal in this abnormal place.

Then the moderator/gatekeeper/three-headed Cerberus announces that the 10:15 meeting is now in session and begins punching tickets as the supplicants file past him. Inside the entryway to the pitching hall, the 10:15ers bunch up again in front of a one-headed moderator/gatekeeper, who with practiced sarcasm reads them the rules: no business cards left behind unless asked for, no lingering after the "all-clear" bell is rung, no falling to the floor in apoplexy if a producer does not ask for a copy of your script, and so on. They all nod without smiling – all humor has abandoned them, so tight with expectation are they. Laughter? Hah – no time for laughter! We're here on serious business!

Then out they go again to fit themselves into the cattle chute that will, when the doors are opened, spill them into the pitching hall, where they will spread across the room exactly like the pioneers in the Oklahoma land rush. Meanwhile, fidget time – a little chat and chatter, more rehearsing (mumble-mumble-mumble, gesture, grimace), milling about – they are cattle waiting for the slaughterhouse, the only difference being that they have chosen to stick their necks out and have them jugulared. No one forces their heads onto the chopping block – they put them there themselves.

And then – and then – and then – the door opens. Land rush time! People sprint to the their designated tables, ready like a rocket reaching zero to launch into their pitch.

And the five minutes are off!! Pitch pitch pitch pitch pitch – the whole universe is, for five minutes, all pitch, and (to use a sports metaphor – why not? it's a homonym) there are curveballs and knuckleballs and sliders and streamers and overhand and underhand and every possible manifestation of vocal physics to get that idea across the 18" of white-clothed table into the strike zone of the producer's ear, waiting to hear that "Steee-rike!!!! Send me a script! Send me everything you have!" Or not. More likely not. A ball – "Send me a synopsis." High and outside – "What else do you have?" In the dirt – "Thanks, it was nice talking with you." "Thanks, it was nice talking with you"? – oh, man, did it really suck that bad?

But no time for critique – "you have thirty seconds left" – gather papers, notes, pride, guts on the floor, stuff back into the bag and belly, get out, next crew in, get out, get out, get out – and get in line for the next pitch. Fall off the horse, get back on. Fall off the mountain, climb back up. "Yeah, so it didn't work for her – it'll work with someone else. Yeah, yeah it will, it will, I just know it will."

And you can always buy more pitches at $25 a pop. Next?

* * * * *

My first pitch went well pretty well. I lucked into someone who actually found the idea of African Americans fighting in the Spanish Civil War an interesting thing to learn about, and so I was able to converse with her about the story rather than run my flag up the pole to see how it waved – that is, a moment of human, as opposed to contractual, contact. I had gotten a helpful clue from a pitch-practice session the day before with Gary Freeman, who thought it would be good to note the strikes against the idea in terms of its marketability. (Note: a "marketable" script and a "good" script are not cognate – marketable scripts can be horrible from an aesthetic or artistic point of view but have the possibility of making money for its makers. Thus a good script is one that will get made – that is the only litmus test for "goodness.") It was historical, it was a drama, and it took place, in part, in a foreign land: foreground these so that the producer knows that you have thought about the obstacles and have found a way to make these apparent minuses into pluses for the pitch, which I was able to do.

So she wants to see a synopsis of the piece – not as good as a read but not bad given the lack of marketability of the script.

My second pitch took an unexpected turn, which taught me something about preparation and presentation.

I spoke my spiel, and they found it interesting but not useful to them. "What else do you have?" Now, I had prepared, in my head, a pitch for *By the River* but had not practiced it. (The screenplay is based on my friend's memoir *A Question of Color*). As their words registered, I could actually feel – like a tangible physical torque – my brainware shift gears – booting up a new program, the neuronal hard disk whipping through its file access table to get the right data, the words popping up on the screen, the text-to-speech software kicking in – all in the space of an "Um, well, I have this – ". And out came the story in a much less prepared – and because of that, a much less stilted – manner. They liked it. They asked me if I had ever seen it as a TV movie, on a channel like HBO, and I shot

back immediately, with sincerity (with completely sincere sincerity – completely sincere – did you get that I was truly sincere?), that I'd always thought that that would be best way to present the story. That clinched it – they want to see the full script. "You have 30 seconds to go! " the voice of the pitch-god blares out – just enough time for him to jot down his email address and for me to gather papers and self and shake hands and say "Thank you" and vacate in time for the next hungry artist.

In thinking this second pitch over later that day, I realized several things.

First, the eagerness with which I told that them an HBO production of the script would be the perfect medium for the story didn't feel false – the end-point, after all, of all this sweaty effort is to get someone interested enough so that they won't say no, since they all have more reasons to say "no" than "yes" to all the ideas coming down the pike. It also told me that, at least at this point in my "career," something like "artistic integrity" is mostly irrelevant because screenwriting is not really a medium for self-expression, like novels or poetry or even plays. Screenplays are commodities, they are "properties." They are meant to make people money, first and foremost, and if along the way an artistic thing happens, all the better. This doesn't mean that a screenplay is only about money. For the writer there still has to be an emotional and artistic connection to the material – otherwise, it's just hack work, no different than a butcher hacking out sirloins and rib roasts. And the audience still wants a story that will move them, perhaps even educate them (a little – not too much), at the very least make them feel that their money and their two hours haven't been wasted. But these elements are important only insofar as they end up creating a product that will, after all the money has been invested, returns all that money many times over (the more times, the better, especially in the overseas markets).

For me, then, if I am going to write screenplays, I need to embrace this monetary fact and shift myself accordingly. I need to come up with ideas that production companies will want to buy and people will want to go see and which will satisfy me as a writer (note the sequence of those considerations). It means that I have to "contemporize" myself, become more aware of what is flowing through the zeitgeist than I am now (meaning not only through the culture but also through the trade publications – the movie zeitgeist is a parallel universe that mimics, but is not the same as, the culture zeitgeist). I have to re-set my brain about how story gets told by seeing and hearing things in log-lines (as was said time and time again, Hollywood lives on log-lines). It means marketing myself

as a commodity (as one instructor put it, "You are the president of a business called [insert name here], and you own 100% of the product "). It means getting representation, manager or agent (still can't figure out the difference between the two – but both will take money from you for their services). It means, in short, re-equipping my life as a dramatic writer, configuring it into a business, the "business" part of it the means by which one gets the "end" that all this effort is being spent to reach: recognition, some satisfying level of monetary success, some happiness in doing well what one can do well.

How does all that feel? Let's say this: sitting on the cusp sounds painful, and it is.

This is not the world of theatre.

*The Final Day*

I had two pitches on Sunday. The first didn't really care for either of the ideas, though he did like *By The River* better. But he was a young guy (wore the baseball cap), and I'm not sure I would have had anything for him anyway – and he did have a point about the hero being killed off in the end – not the usual Hollywood formula for the hero). He said that that was not necessarily a drawback. He complimented me on the pitch even if he thought it was not going to be an idea he'd move on.

(Before going in, chatting in the line, I spoke with Nick, a young gothish-looking man, about his screenplay *Blood and Roses*, a zombie love story. Later, when I caught up with him, he had practically sold it to a number of companies and was ready to quit for the day. As said above, the best way in is a low-budget horror movie. He is in.)

The second pitch went better – and "better" in ways that were quite instructive. First, his name was Michael (Ades), so I had an immediate chance to make a quip about "Michael" being a great name. He was dressed casually but not sloppily: nicely cut white collarless shirt, black pants. Open face (no goatee) and short black hair brushed back, swarthy skin – perhaps Italian or Greek. So the pitch started off on a natural note. And I began the pitch session differently than I had before, as an experiment, because of how *By the River* had now come into play from the day before.

As I sat down, I told him that I had two ideas for him (fully expecting him to say something like "Well, let's hear your first one" and would go into the by-now

standard spiel for *Ain't Ethiopia*. But instead he stopped me and said, "Which one is most marketable?" I was not ready for that – which actually proved a good thing. I hesitated (dramatically, I must say) and said (with a practiced look of slight indecision), "Probably my second one – it's a love story." And he replied, "That's the one I want to hear." So I pitched him *By the River*, and it had several things going for it (a good lesson, this one): it was based on a published book, I had the rights to adapt the book, the story was a relevant story even though historical (we had a good conversation about how the multi-racial identity issues in the story still resonate today), and, above all, it was a love story. Love story. Hear that? Love story. We left it with his taking my email address and a promise to check out the book – if he thought it was good material, he would ask to see the script. Not as good as a "Send me" but better than a "Thanks for taking the time..." (translate: no, no, no, no, no!)

What I liked about the second pitch was that it felt very natural (or as natural as pitching can ever feel), and it also told me that you have to go in with a really solid product, fully thought out, fully "scripted" (though more improvisational than memorized – a riff rather than an audition piece). And one other thing, said by the pitch-wrangler, made the pitching more sensible: "Consider it like a job interview – they're buying you, not the script." And I always do well in job interviews.

So, did pretty well on all four, especially for a "rookie pitcher."

The rest of the day moved smoothly along. The lecture with William Goldman was delightful (he walked into the room and several hundred people stood to applaud him like a rock star). He was charming, caustic, grandfatherly. (Some jerk actually tried to hand him his screenplay on the way out!) I took a workshop on writing subtext (skillfully done by Karl Iglesias, mostly as a promotion for his book and DVDs). Then the closing ceremonies, with awards given and so on. (The awards for the screenplay contest – many thousands of dollars handed out – did not include one straight drama but instead awarded people in the genres of thriller, fantasy, horror, comedy, romantic comedy. Drama is a forgotten category – something Goldman talked about in his remarks. The studio execs, focused on the "first weekend" and scared about risking anything, including their own jobs – and not necessarily being film-lovers or "filmists" themselves – they have made themselves believe that dramas will not make money – that is, the kind of money they need to justify and maintain their jobs.)

And now home to mail out my thank-yous, send out what was requested, sift through the paperwork, and figure out what would make me "marketable" as a writer and still enjoy the process – and still be able to live in New York and not move to LA. "Marketable" – it's an interesting term because anything can be marketed, as was shown by the ideas being pitched at the Expo – it doesn't have to be good in the usual artsy sense of "good" to be good – "good" means "sellable," and I think I can do that, at least once or twice, and that's all it takes, that's all I want.

The adventure continues.

2004

# Beyond the Slice

(January 2004)

I have a "trick" when I'm writing that helps me get a character "unstuck": I give the character an accent, often Irish (though I find Spanglish, Cockney, Trainspotting Scottish, and certain North Carolina regional accents energizing as well). And more often than not, the moment I do, the character's throat unsticks and all sorts of interesting things stream out.

Not that what issues forth is particularly "Irish" in the sense of a native from, say, County Donegal or Dublin -- that is, it's not "authentic" in any cultural or linguistic sense. What comes out is Bettencourt's poetry dressed in something faux. In other words, tricked out in a cultural expropriation.

Because I'm an outsider to Spanish and to such accents as "Southern" and British/Scottish/Irish, there is always that danger of exoticizing what others see as perfectly culturally normal. Yet there is a music in them that strikes my ear as music -- as a lilt or a cadence or a syntactical rearranging that carries velocity and rhythm. This, then, has an effect on the sense/sensuality of the language (which to me is denotative meaning along with a "feel" that language gives, a feel of the denotations rippling out on deeper connotative or emotional/wordless levels). The music also affects body posture/spatial movements since the body, as an instrument, cannot help but respond to the rhythms of the music coming out of it and into it. (I've noticed this in actors -- for instance, in my short play *The Greed Gene*, when the doctor is encouraged to try a German accent, the whole posture/approach of the actor changes -- he or she finds a way to make the language work with comic effect.)

I don't feel guilty about this, but I am always aware of what I'm doing because, for better or worse (and I think it has been for the better), post-modern deconstructings have sensitized us all about issues of cultural ownership and annexation.

But I also ask myself why I need to do this -- that is, why does it happen then why I choose a tonality and rhythm outside my own experiences -- outside what is supposedly the "authentic" voice of my life -- more and interesting things happen in my writing, not only with characters' voices but also with choices of themes and ideas?

It's all about going beyond the "slice of life."

The concept of theatrical art presenting a "slice of life" is boring. The writing teacher's canard about "Write what you know" -- how boring. When a character of mine slips into an accent, then I am writing about what I don't know -- and that is infinitely more interesting to me because it forces me out of my cultural labyrinth and onto a more open road.

My accents speak literally about the diversity of the world around us. If we only hear reinforced in the theatre (as we do on television) a kind of flat standard American-speak (most prevalent in news media, but also in bureaucratese and corporate-speak), then we get flat standard American-speak plays and situations. (Dare I say "white"?)

For me, playing with these accents is a way to try to enter other worlds/ lives -- yes, to mine them for dramatic purposes (appropriate, exploit), to live inside lives I have not lived in, even to create from whole cloth "stage cultures" that have no basis in the reality of my life or in anybody's life. (But since when is the stage about "real life"? And what does that phrase mean anyway?) I realize that by doing this I am trying, through the power of imagination, to break myself out of the large misdirected American culture that has shaped me. By this imaginative power, this middle-class "privileged by whiteness" white male hopes to broaden himself by linking with other sparking multi-world diversities -- in short, to get away from being so "white bread" and into the vast expanse of an unsliced world at play.

I think our theatrical writers need to break themselves out of the mentality of theatre as a slice of life in order to create scripts that not only "work" (another boring theatrical concept) but vibrate and flex. I have been doing a lot of reading for theatres lately for various competitions and festivals -- plays of all lengths -- and I get tired of the sameness of the situations and ideas the writers choose. Yet again another play about an ad executive seeking fulfillment beyond the corporate world, yet again another play about a relationship that may or may not have communication issues, and so on -- stuff extruded from other stuff (video, television, movies), stuff based on narrow theatrical concepts of conflict and resolution and "arc," stuff that shows little imagination (though often great dollops of cleverness and craftiness). But the writers don't create "stage worlds," don't have an explosive sense of what theatre can do within the field of its own four walls. It's all about mimicking a narrow band of what has been privileged as real life, a band that has already been boiled down and re-molded by corporate entertainment entities.

Good writing of any kind doesn't come from writing about what you know but writing about what you ache to know, need to know -- writing that comes from a hunger that must be filled. 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 of this.

# The Mysteries

(February 2004)

A rare find -- a theatrical production that moves me gut-deep. But I have found one in *The Mysteries*, produced by the Classic Stage Company here in New York, and conceived and directed by Brian Kulick, CSC's new artistic director. Kulick has taken plays from the York and Wakefield Cycles of medieval mystery plays (adapted by Tony Harrison) and tossed in some texts from Dario Fo, Mikhail Bulgakov, and Borislav Pekic.

I've seen the production twice, and each time I, the defiant atheist and the (apparently) thorough (post)modern man, have finished the evening in tears -- not tears from being emptied out by tragedy but from something closer to a longing bordering (but never quite crossing over into) bliss. Bliss -- what an odd, almost foolish feeling to have in 21st-century New York/America. I've thought hard and long about why this feeling, why now -- and doing so has brought me back to the heart of theatre.

We may pay lip service to the religious origins of our craft but, in reality, we trace our theatrical roots back to the realists, naturalists, symbolists, and romantics of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. That is, the sources and impulses for theatre-making are grounded in a search for "reality," and that reality, no matter which shape it takes in whatever decade or even hour, is thoroughly materialist. This is not to say that people don't speak about things like "spirit" or "soul," but that language usually refers to the ineffable whimsies and darknesses that can't yet be nailed by the reigning vocabularies of science or economics or psychology. In the end, we believe, there is nothing but us, nothing outside of us, and our arts and crafts dedicate themselves to a constant explaining of ourselves to ourselves.

I can't dispute the liberation that such a materialist approach to the world offers -- but, as with everything in life, that liberation comes with a price: we have no way to explain, and thus blunt, both suffering and the fact of 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: give reason, give comfort, give hope, give light.

The Cycle Plays chronicle, in part, this human hunger to find a home where suffering ends and peace begins. We start with Creation, our childhood, where we have all that we would ever need for happiness yet lack the self-awareness

to know what we know and thus "sin" our way into freedom and its attendant suffering. Equipped with both our loss and liberation, we blunder our way toward Christ, who offers a second Paradise, not through the passive gift of a garden to hapless children but through the active loving of self and others. Or, more accurately, I think (and as Camus said), an ethic of loving bred from our common suffering creates fellowship, and fellowship may the only bulwark we will allow ourselves as moderns against the deluge of the world and the inevitability of our deaths. (Though our veneration for individualism and its isolating freedom gives fellowship a hard run for its money.)

Kulick's production ends by moving out of Dario Fo's piece about the fool at the foot of the cross into the Cycle Play dealing with Christ's harrowing of hell, where he goes, in short, to gather back to him his fellow sufferers and bring them upward into the fragile warm light of peace. Whatever this particular Cycle Play meant to its medieval viewers about renewing faith or affirming the nature of the divine, it meant something quite different to me. Stepping into the light, chronicling our hungers, seeking what solace we can in fellowship (actor to actor, audience to actor, technicians to audience), and then stepping out into the unavoidable night -- this is theatre doing its very best to help us harrow our own personal and collective hells in order to bring to light the better selves lurking among our discards and disappointments and murderous designs. I didn't leave the theatre changed or transmuted or "re-faithed" -- much better, I left it reminded. I left it 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. And how important it is to me, as a playwright, that I always aim for an art that will do the same for the audiences seeking some moments away in light and camaraderie.

# Script Tease

(March 2004)

In May 2004 I will graduate from my MFA program in Dramatic Writing at New York University. Overall, I have benefited a lot from the program. The confrontation with a nakedly commercial approach to dramatic writing has been both bracing and abrasive, and while I don't think I advanced much as a writer in terms of creative output, I did move forward in being able to clarify much more exactly the structures and strategies I use in my writing. If nothing else, I can parse the tri-level motivations of characters in Ibsen and apply it to my own concept of what drives my own characters.

Armed with all of this "knowledge," over the last six months I plunged into reading scripts for three different theatre festivals and competitions in New York as a way of "paying back" three theatres who have been good to me and my work. Here is the state of script writing, at least in the small slice that came down the sluices, and it falls, Aristotle-like, into three parts.

The first observation is an odd one, given that we were reading scripts written for the theatre. Whether using long, medium, or short forms, many, many writers have no real feel for dramatic action, and I mean that in two ways. First, they lack a sense of the action on stage being "driven," that is, every element, right down to the individual word, being designed to effect some sort of change. Things on stage are supposed to move, and so many scripts simply stayed inert. Second, their understandings of what drives change in characters are often limited to just "conflict," which generates heat but no light. They don't understand that conflict is simply one of the devices available to a writer to play out what a good play is really about: the struggle by someone to understand what cannot be understood about life, to solve the unsolvable mysteries, to say the unsayable.

This dominance of "conflict" is not surprising. It is the reigning mantra in all playwriting instruction, and its place at the top of the list is not surprising. After all, we live in a culture which fetishizes competition, with its collateral winners and losers, and believes that winning is a sign of virtue. But the end-product of winning, after all, is simply desire re-ignited, which generates the next round of competition to satisfy the desire, etc. This is what passes for primary motivations in common playwriting classes.

Which is also why a lot of the plays, despite sound and fury, simply go nowhere -- it's just round after round of aching and whining and getting and

losing. And this brings me to my second observation: the thinness of the ideas underneath the play.

In fact, I would go so far as to say that many of the plays don't have an idea at all, in the sense of some kind of thought-through wrestling with the world and the way it works. I find attitudinizing, posturing, cliché-recycling, regurgitation. And the scripts where you feel like there's a mind underneath using the stage to work through something -- exploring some kind of "what if?" -- the thinking feels self-limited, confined to our standard-issue mythologies about politics, psychology (especially in the wrong-headed belief that there is something called a "human nature"), sociology, and so on. There was very little sense of intellectual adventure in the writing, of passion and engagement and ebullience. Just a lot of noodling.

And this probably contributes to my third observation: the banality of the writing. Now, "banality" can be an artistic decision -- look at Ionesco's use of the commonplace to highlight the absurd. But in many of the scripts, the banality was a natural issue from the banality of the subject matter or structural approach. I'm not just talking about an absence of "poetry" but also a feeling that the writer is engaged in a wrassle with the language to squeeze it and shape it and make it yield new distillations. A possibly horrible piece of advice to playwrights, right up there with "make it about conflict," is "write as you speak." Theatre is a special place demanding a special language -- we don't need transcripts of the street but translations.

Now, I know that these scripts represent only a small slice of all scripts spilling out from printers around the country and the world (at times it seems as if anyone who centers a character name and writes a line of patter considers himself or herself a playwright). But of the three hundred or so people I read, I would say most need to start at the very beginning of the beginning and learn their craft, learn their discipline, re-think and re-tool everything. It is a mantra that theatres want new scripts from new writers, etc., etc. But these theatres, I believe, need to be much more demanding and critical about the "newness" they call for so that the untutored stuff like the stuff I read can wither away. "Theatre" is always in some kind of decline, and it's tempting, in a Jeremiah kind of way, to predict that unless theatres get real "new" stuff, they, too will wither away. But it is true that unless theatres demand works that excite, provoke, soothe, and send people into the night feeling as if they have just experienced a new world of possibilities and pains, then the institution of theatre will just noodle along.

And, to me at least, theatre and life are too short and important and damned interesting for just noodling -- they demand bigger writers and bull-in-the-china-shop writing. (Now, “Bull In The China Shop” might be an interesting festival title -- hmm...)

# The Map of Consciousness

(May 2004)

This is a brief column because graduation is upon me, the end-of-semester "T"-crossing and "I"-dotting that must be done to pass my MFA muster. So these are my graduation thoughts.

The May 2004 issue of *Harper's* contains an article by Nicholas Fraser on the recent dressing-down of the BBC over it's reporting about the "sexed-up" documentation Tony Blair used to dupe Britain into spending blood and treasure in Iraq. The article ends with a discussion of Marshall McLuhan's prediction that television (and, by extension, all media) would destroy literacy "and, consequently, history." Fraser goes on to say that McLuhan believed that "successive generations would acquire skills from television, but they wouldn't be skills capable of encouraging the notion of citizenship."

Against that onslaught, says Fraser, we have the BBC -- to be sure, "arrogant, pompous, sometimes less than fully comprehending" -- but, in the end, the "last bastion of intelligent speech and therefore of mass intelligence." It is "one of the free reliable maps of consciousness still available to us."

I would like to offer another "map," though, like the BBC, is, too, is often arrogant, pompous, and sometimes less than fully comprehending: theatre. Theatre is the only art form that has the capacity to break through the fog of media present-tense-ness that dims our minds and to insert us back into history, time, consciousness, constraint. Most theatre doesn't do this because it is mired in schematics that make it difficult to create a vital mass appeal out of it. But the machinery is there, the history is there, the beauty of it lies waiting for release -- we now need the cartographers that will make the map.

When it comes time to tip the tassel on May 13, I will have my protractor and ruler and vade mecum ready for my morning writing on May 14.

# The Sweats

(June 2004)

Whether a full production or simple reading, I always reach a moment when "the sweats" come. Out of nowhere, without prelude, the sweat beads up and rolls down. I've finally been able to link it to a particular state of the viscera, i.e., that sinking feeling that comes as the words roll out and a tiny strident voice begins to ululate, "This really sucks, doesn't it?" I imagine hateful laser eyes boring into my nape as people fume about having to sit still for such crap, having to pretend that the words merit listening to. My ears seem to doppler, the voices stretching and shrinking in pitch, and I fear that I will turn into some version of the impossibly moist Albert Brooks news-anchoring his way to disaster in *Broadcast News*.

After a while the condition clears and I can sit in the darkness and pay a straight and respectful attention to this gift being offered to me by these kind people reading my words with gusto and intelligence. But it never fails to happen: ten minutes in I am always attacked by the inward demons of potential failure, their outward stamp the wet negative half-moons under my arms and the itchy threading of rivulets through my beard.

Failure (fear of) (though that may be redundant) -- God, what an ever-present presence with me! No matter how many scripts I write, how I better my craft, how many times I get praised, how often I get offered useful criticisms out of a desire to see me succeed -- I can't silence this squeezing hiss that tells me I'm a fraud and a thief.

Where does it come from? Perhaps I could trace it to this or that psychological locale, but I think it's threaded deeper than that. I think it comes with the territory of being human because our whole lives areexamples of failure at work, if nothing else than the failure to keep from dying. And I can't deny a strong desire to avoid facing this unavoidable, to find a retreat where the heart stills and the self does not feel so "at the mercy."

Towards this end, the Marvelous Maria has recently been bringing yoga into our lives: morning stretches, afternoon restoratives, a practice called Phoenix Rising. Part of her concern is bodily health as we get older, but she also seeks a haven from living in a brutal city and from a job that overworks and undernourishes her. Much of the focus of this imported yoga is on "relaxation" -- loosening, lengthening, lifting. The instructors on the tapes speak about

the need to release all the tension our modern lives inject into us, cleansing what has been fouled by the drudgeries and indentures called our careers and salaries. Yoga as antidote, relaxation as analgesic.

I have been doing this now for several weeks and, yes, it is calming and gives hearts-ease -- but my body seems to be rebelling against such gifts. It wants to hold on to the stress that the yoga master wants to wash away; it feels this paradoxical discomfort at letting go of the tension that it has spent a great deal of time acquiring, even if such tension is purportedly toxic to the spirit. It's as if my body/mind does not want release from what makes it feel caged and jumpy.

This is what I have concluded about this conundrum. Relaxation has no dialectic. It is touted as a state to be acquired and then carried through the day, as if it were an aromatic sachet held against the nose as one slogs one's way through the daily job swamp. The sachet is fortified each day -- an essence, a spirit, a serenity that becomes a path that can become a life.

But I need dialectic to feel anchored to this earth, my life. And given the way I'm built -- my existential temperament, my semi-Catholic belief in our fallen but redeemable nature, a Puritanical reserve mixed with a hesitant idealism -- relaxation tastes like pale tea against the brewed heady bitters of mortality, finitude, gravity's pull, failure's push.

So this is where I have come in thinking about the sweats. 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. It's the possibility of failure, not the acquisition of success, that keeps me sharp (though I don't mind the balm of success as often as I can get it). Without the sweats, without the sense of impending implosion and mortality that the sweats bring, it's too easy to mistake contentment and peace as the purpose of living life. Failure and its attendant fears are what give me a rich artistic lode of frailty and fracture. Happiness is not a source of art -- the challenge is to refine my sense of failure so as not to be overwhelmed by it, not delete it from the forces that inform and re-form me.

# All is Almost Still

(June 2004)

The press release describes *All is Almost Still* (the title derives from a Brecht poem) as "in the absurdist tradition of Beckett and Pinter," which sets an immediate challenge for a playwright: how to keep an audience "hooked" into what happens on stage while what happens on stage is steeped in a vision of life where people can have no meaningful relationships and where they cannot change anything or communicate anything.

The grand dukes of adsurdism -- Beckett and Pinter and, to someextent, Ionesco -- essentially use circularity and repetition of speech and action to turn the non-action of the absurdist life into viable stage action (think of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's endless question-games or the three-hat vaudeville routine of Vladimir and Estragon in *Godot* or the gibberish spoken with such meaningful intensity in *The Bald Soprano*). Change that actually changes anything may not ever occur in the world on the stage, but that doesn't mean the journey into and through oblivion can't be funny, touching, maddening, heartbreaking, violent, and even energizing.

Playwright Adam Seelig, in *All is Almost Still*, however, takes another route, choosing to subject his audience to a two-and-a-half hour grinding "radical reinterpretation" of the story of Jacob, upon which, according to the press release, "the playwright imposes the constraints of modern domesticity, bringing in traces of de-evolution through images of our own racist and classist history."

Seelig sets an appropriately adsurdist mise en scène: a hermetically sealed apartment where three unnamed people live: a bed-ridden elderly man who may or may not be an impotent God and a man and a woman who alternate being a painter and the old man's servant. (In Act I, the man plays the servant, the woman the painter; in Act II, they reverse the roles.) A ladder reclines against the back wall topped by a frosted, cracked basement-style window through which one could only possibly see shadows in blurred movement. The old man has separated his bed from the rest of his room by a mesh wall with a single opening (resembling the wall of a confessional). In the room outside the old man's chamber sits the painter contemplating a large grey rock that rests, squat and mysterious, in the middle of the living room.

Seelig also sets in motion appropriately absurdist activity. The old man has a window out of which he gazes, and throughout the two days that the play covers,

the old man waits for the appearance of a walker with a dog, and each day ends with the old man "faking" the arrival by creating a shadow-puppet against the back wall with two walking fingers while the servant maps the walker's route with a pencil in a large book. Act II repeats Act I, though not exactly, the ellipses and elisions meant to indicate, in good absurdist tradition, a change where no real change has taken place.

To fill in the time between the old man's anticipation and the walker's arrival, the servant tries to feed him four "meals": a pear, an orange, a red apple, and two eggs. The old man has various reactions to the offerings: he simply can't take the pear, the orange's beauty overwhelms him, the apple becomes a prop for a parody of William Tell, and the eggs (one of which is returned to the servant as a gift) remain uncracked. At one point, under the prodding of the old man, the servant tries to climb to the top of the ladder in order to catch a full glimpse of the passing walker, but each time the servant fails to reach the top and must return to the mundane reaches of the sealed apartment and the invalid's demands.

While the servant moves to and fro, the painter prepares to begin painting, but the preparation seems, in some way, to prevent any actual painting going forward. (Against the wall rest a dozen or so canvases -- they may not be finished or even touched.) The servant and painter exchange banalities and philosophies and the painter constantly threatens to go into the old man's bedroom (the old man and the painter, apparently, have never met each other -- instead, each has formed a vision of the other untested by real touch or sight).

But despite the possibility that tomorrow the ladder may be climbed, the walker glimpsed, the orange eaten, by the end of the play, clearly nothing has "changed" or ever will, the notion of "possibility" is just a whistle past the graveyard, and life has doomed the three to continue in their meaningless alterations and gavottes. As the lights fade down, the blackness that always lurks at the edges of this world (the servant always complains that they need more light) comes flooding in and levels everything out.

What "radical" point Seelig wants to make by all of this, and how he wants that "point," as he says in his press release, to "challenge [the] audience... to take a closer look at their own daily existence," never comes through clearly. If anything, Jacob's story is about taking robust action in the world (even if it means cheating and lying), not about giving in to futility and error. Jacob went on to be the literal and figurative father of Israel, but Seelig's "family" goes on to

become nothing but what it already is. And the story of Jacob's dream and his wrestle with the angel signifies a vision of life in which God literally links heaven and earth, and that ascent and descent on the ladder stands for the acquisition of divine knowledge and its dispersion throughout the world (as Maimonides points out in his references to the story). Here, no one learns anything they did not already know, and since they live in a self-referential world, any knowledge they have simply re-cycles without having a chance to evolve.

The direction, done by the playwright, contributes to this lack of clarity. Seelig paces the show in a way that constantly underlines the absurdity of the absurdity, as if he didn't trust the audience to "get" just how absurd his absurd world really really is. This over-attention flattens rather than heightens the world on stage, makes everything move at a glacial pace, and forces the actors into monochrome and portentious renditions that allow them no leeway to find any humor or lightnesses. (At least we get to laugh at Vladimir and Estragon's hat routine.)

Nathan Heverin's set design makes good use of the 78th Street Theatre Lab's narrow space. Raquel Davis and Josh Bradford's lighting design effectively define the play's different playing areas and provide "mood" without "moodiness." Iracel Rivero's costumes are appropriately drab and shapeless, mimicking the world in which the characters find themselves. But despite these adequate production values, *All is Almost Still* fails to do what a good play must do: dramatize events in a way that not only draws an audience in but continues to keep them interested in the world before them. It is one thing, over coffee and Gauloises, to opine that life is meaningless, that change is a mirage. But jejune coffee'd commentary does not a play make, and Seelig has failed to make the translation from café table to theatre space in a way that makes the audience's two-and-a-half hours richer at the end than it was at the beginning.

# What Is A Playwright To Do?

(July 2004)

This mulish mourning over a dead and dangerous presidential simpleton. Memos from people supposedly pledged to uphold the law justifying why law is an obstacle to the executive exercise of political barbarism. Soldiers dying so that an occupied nation can be employed as a payback to private companies who have supported a corrupt administration. Hackable touch-screen voting machines made by a company that is a major contributor to the Bush money machine.

And Pucci scarves now a minor rage on Madison Avenue.

What is a playwright to do?

I am not altogether sure. Almost three years ago I wrote a piece about writing plays in a time of war. I ended with this more-or-less hopeful manifesto-ish thought:

> This is what it means to create plays in the time of war -- to allow rage its inks and to be ready to scribble down what it divulges while not allowing everything and everywhere to be over-written by its typographies — to use the art to keep some corner of the soul available to light without denying the "darkness visible" that also pulses there. Both lights shine in us — plays in the time of war need the illumination of both to be honest, and it is honesty above all — not patriotism, not revenge, not the "affairs of state" or the consolidations of power — that will keep us, momentarily — momentarily — secure and healed as human beings.

I must have been whistling past a very long graveyard because given the events of the last year, and the coming bread-and-circus Republican convention here in Gotham, I find it harder and harder to believe what I wrote then. Given the stupendous imbalance between the machinery that Karl Rove can crank up to publish lies to the world and my small brain-factory that may, after creating a script and putting it through reading/workshop/development hell, get a production in a forty-seat house for a couple of weeks, a playwright committed to using his or her writing as a way to become a vital player in the public agora of ideas has a commitment to a noble folly.

To bolster my spirits and to help find some answers, I attended a panel discussion hosted by the Lark Theatre on "The Playwrights' Role in Fostering Social Change," with Kia Corthron, Lisa D'Amour, Betty Shamieh, Sung Rno, and John Weidman. Impressive panel, impressive thinking — but it was also clear

that plays, by themselves, and theatre as an entertainment medium, though they may "raise" issues, can never really "lead the discussion." There are a lot of reasons for this, ranging from the economics of theatre (social change and $90 tickets are a difficult match) to the fact that most playwrights and many theatres are not members of any larger community for which they can speak and reflect.

So, back to "What is a playwright to do?"

Here is the answer I did not want to think about but which has been "thinking me" regardless of what I want: Nothing. That is, in a culture as image-saturated and time-truncated as ours, theatre writing is not a useful way to broadcast anything important.Perhaps the Internet can become an alternate way to pamphleteer, but most likely not. So I think it's best not even try to use my art, art in general, as a way to forward ideas about justice, harmony, mercy, (fill in your own blank).

Because art, though it can deal with politics as subject matter, and become politicized when elephant dung is used as part of an artist's palette, is not in its heart "politics." Politics is about the exercise of power, about Hobbes' state of every man against every man translated to more physically benign but no less savage arenas called the legislature, the courts, and so on. To effect political change, to bend a system toward the values that most of us would call humane and just, means acting in a political manner, to take up the lance and sword and leap into the melee. It is not about painting a Guernica or writing agit-prop — those activities, though possibly helpful in getting people to focus and broaden their minds, do nothing to change anything in any substantial way. Art is a palliative, another version of Dionysius' gift of forgetful wine to a suffering people. Or a respite from a grinding world. Or a stimulus to inward journeys. In other words, we often value art for the qualities that politics does not, and cannot, have.

What is a playwright to do? Hit the streets, staff the phone banks, hand out the flyers, organize the community, run for alderman, start a radio talk show, own a newspaper. Anything but think that the next script is going to change one iota of anything. That is not what theater can do or should do.

And I am ready, and hungry, to be refuted.

* * * * *

Postscript: Too negative an ending, and I have been trying to re-mix it, with these half-ass results.

There is no "playwright's role in social change." There is only the playwright's role in writing plays, in making theatre that takes people from where they are to where they haven't been. If theatre, or any art, can make us feel unlike ourselves, if it can radically re-size familiarity so that we come to see what could not be seen with familiar eyes, then it has done the social work it is meant to do. Load too much educational freight onto the art, make it too documentary, and the maker risks taking away from the audience member the freedom to feel strange and singular in response. If there is a social role for playwrights, it is this: take a look at the world, tell us a story both familiar and strange, leave us at the end amazed and uncertain enough so that the first words out of our mouths are not "Where would you like to eat?" but "What the fuck was that all about?", and make it so that we are really, really interested in finding an answer to that question. With that done, enough said.

But then I go to see Michael Moore's movie, "Fahrenheit 9/11," and beyond feeling refreshed in my outrage (even the choir needs to be preached to once in a while), I'm impressed not just by the power of an artistic medium to strike at people's hearts and heads but also the scale of the attempt: imagine a play opening in 800 theatres on a specific date and thousands of people going to see the play in one large communal endeavor. (The recent Lysistrata Project was the closest to achieving something like this.) So, a split response that brings me back to my original dilemma: how can I, as a playwright, achieve some similar kind of social and political impact when the means I have at my disposal are inevitably so local and minimal?

Hmmmm..... Open to any and all responses.

# Some (More) Thoughts on Spanish and Theater

(August 2004)

I just came back from a trip to Argentina, my first there in three years, where again I had to depend upon the linguistic lifesaver of mi compañera, Maria Beatriz, to make it safely through the swells and tides of the engulfing Spanish.

After my last trip three years ago I wrote an essay titled "Some Thoughts on Spanish and Theatre," where I mused upon what not being conversant in a language does to an artist who bases his whole reason for being on creating language-based "things" called scripts.

But that was after spending time in the urban theatre of Buenos Aires, a theatre scene not unlike what we find here in New York, though with differences. Nothing here like Teatro Colón, inaugurated in 1857 with a performance of *La Traviata*, and built by Carlos E. Pellegrini, father of a future president of the Republic. Teatro Colón functions, more or less, as a state theatre, that is, an artistic site shadowed by the political trends of the day. (On our visit there, Maria Beatriz and I skipped away from the official tour to sit in the box that had been reserved for the generals during El Proceso, the "dirty war." People, I presumed, paid what homage they had to pay to whomever sat there as they all listened to the higher art of the opera on the stage.)

But outside that, the theatre scenes are similar: something like the "commercial row" of Broadway on Avenida Corrientes as well as mid-range theatres like Teatro Maipo and many smaller theatres with everything from political cabaret to children's theatre.

This time, however, we were traveling northwest, into the provinces of Salta and Jujuy (and their respective provincial capitals of the same names), into land as brawny and beautiful as any to be found anywhere, and into the poorest areas of a country feeling particularly impoverished at the moment (as evidenced by the phenomenon of the "piqueteros," organized demonstrations, often violent, against the government by the dispossessed).

What we found was a theatre scene very much of the place and time in which we traveled, if by "theatre" we can mean any kind of enacted storytelling, using whatever means at hand for the performance. Salta and Jujuy are among two of the areas settled first by the Spanish, who traveled out of Peru and Bolivia into Argentina. Buenos Aires did not become prominent until much, much later (and after a great deal of bloodshed). They are also among areas that formed

part of the Incan empire (which one would swear still exists after looking into the weathered faces of local inhabitants). Thus, we traveled into a very syncretic area, where, to give one example, the earth-goddess Pachamama and the Virgin Mary co-exist without friction.

One form of storytelling is the peña, an evening (usually long, punctuated with much wine, empanadas, and clapping) of songs done in a particularly suave assemblage of voices (usually four, often five) backed by a couple of guitars, a drum, and pipes. We saw a couple of these in Salta, and always it was an evening in which visitors, locals, performers, the wait staff, dancers (two couples, employed to dance upstairs and downstairs, often doing the chacarara) all blended into a self-generated performance. No fourth walls, no voyeuristic etiquette -- everyone invited, no one left out.

North of Salta, as we moved into land and villages progressively smaller and more remote, we came across other kinds of theatre, based on the fused religions in the area, where "pagan" nature worship collaborated with Catholic theology in festivals celebrating essential simplicities: fertility, comradeship, cosmic cousinhood. Again, no fourth walls here, no "civilized gaze" privileged to sit at an aesthetic distance. Here, on what often feels like the edge of the known universe (the distances are immense, time ignores any upstart clocks), what we regard as the insulated benefits of civilization melt away, and something like what the humans here felt ten or twenty or thirty thousand years ago we feel now. It's very powerful, quite frightening, and utterly refreshing.

And now, back "home," back to the struggle to find my way as a dramatic writer, to find "success," I have all of these images and feelings swirling inside me as I sit and try to craft my way through a scene, to anticipate how an audience might react, am I keeping the dramatic action flowing, is it timed right to capture but not exhaust an audience's attention. And I can't help but hunger a little for those other ways of storytelling that seemed, well, more sensual -- not sexual sensual but the "sense-is-full" sensual, that gets us out of our heads and back into our 3D beings, that leads us from the academic abstract and the chattering ego back to the fullness of silence and awe that we owned as babies. If I could create theatre here in New York that did what sitting on the edge of the long-dead still-living Incan empire did.... Hmm....

# SPT: The Playwright at the Heart

(September 2004)

This month I would like to hand over my column here on Scene4 to a new organization I've been helping put together an interesting theatrical production for the fall: Sanctuary: Playwrights Theatre (SPT).

SPT was founded by fellow New York playwrights Bob Ferrante and Phil Hopkins, and this September marks both the formal launch of the company and SPT's inaugural production, "Six Nights." A little bit on SPT, and then a little bit on Six Nights.

SPT, founded and managed by dramatists, puts the playwright at the heart of both the creation and presentation of new theatrical work.

With SPT's encouragement, resources, and programming, playwrights can craft and test innovative, boundary-pushing, theatrically progressive theatre in ways not available to them through more traditional theatre establishments.

And because new work must be seen to be known, SPT offers playwrights both unprecedented opportunities for production and an unprecedented measure of control over the production process itself. With SPT's help, playwrights can realize their theatrical visions in ways they might not have been able to before.

To put its mission into practice, SPT commissioned six playwrights -- Kia Corthron, Lisa D'Amour, Sheila Callaghan, Sung Rno, Cardiad Svich, and Jason Grote -- to each write a 10- to 15-minute piece -- but not the usual Short Play Festival-type of "two people on a park bench find revelation over coffee."

The gauntlet SPT has thrown down: Each play must make a prop central to the action. Each play must be tailored for performance in a specific non-theatre site somewhere in the five boroughs of New York. And each play, though designed for a specific site, must be still flexible enough to adapt to the five other sites chosen by the other playwrights since all six plays will be performed at all six sites for a six-night schedule.

What follows is an article written by one of the playwrights, Jason Grote, for the Brooklyn Rail, consisting of interviews with the playwrights and excerpts from some of the pieces. He has kindly consented to reprinting here for your delectation and edification. Attend and enjoy.

* * * * *

The Next Big Thing is Six Nights Long

by Jason Grote

QUALEY

One time on TV I saw this commercial, this old public service announcement which was the '50s about how great nuclear energy was and clean and everybody smiling happy "Hurray! Nuclear!" And all the kids running on the playground with the nuclear tower things right behind 'em, all cheery and white and I thought that's kinda like here except waste treatment and black. And Spanish. And now a little bit white.

JOSE

My mother said after the '93 World Trade attack, Mayor Giuliani built a bunker there with a hundred and thirty thousand gallons of oil, which people said Don't! cuz if something happened again it could blow up and poison all of downtown with PCBs, which he ignored, and which it did. So we moved to Harlem.

- From *Dual* by Kia Corthron -

A perennial New York issue that we can expect to be aware of during the Republican Convention is space, or the lack thereof. As I write this, protesters wrestle with Bloomberg over the right to assemble in Central Park, and we are likely to be exposed to countless other territorial battles. To New Yorkers, this is nothing new. Every day we negotiate the rigid etiquette of rush hour subways, desperately hold on to miniscule apartments, and navigate overburdened roads. But New York has other sides, not as well-advertised, full of creative, flexible uses of space, from stoop-sitting and community gardening to Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge or dance floors in Williamsburg lofts.

In September, New Yorkers will get a chance to see another side of the City—six sides of it. Sanctuary: Playwrights Theatre has assembled six writers (Sheila Callaghan, Kia Corthron, Lisa D'Amour, Sung Rno, Caridad Svich, and myself) and directors (Sarah Benson, Lisa D'Amour again, Lear deBessonet, Kip Fagan, Anne Kauffman, and Liesl Tommy) to create and mount site-specific plays for its "Six Nights" project. Each night one play is "home," while the other five are "guests." For example: Kia Corthron and Liesl Tommy's project *Dual* (excerpted above) takes place at Riverbank State Park on the West Side of Manhattan. On their night, all six plays will be performed there. On another night, Sung Rno and

Anne Kauffman's project, *Weather*, is staged on a rooftop in Greenwich Village, and all six plays will be performed there. And so on.

The project was the brainchild of Sanctuary artistic director Bob Jude Ferrante (himself a playwright). "How will the context be transferred from a home site to a guest site? Each playwright/director team will answer this question and I think the answers will be brilliant," he told me. "Besides the general coolness factor, some things that appeal to me about this project are freedom of motion, a chance to go for something sacred, and a stronger connection between story and reality. And it's cheaper." Sanctuary will spend the coming weeks assembling permission for the plays to perform in the sites—and preparing for the unpredictable.

* * *

KRIS

...David Letterman was a weatherman. Did you know that?

WILL

No. So what?

KRIS

I'm just saying.

WILL

I'm not trying to be David Letterman.

KRIS

I would practice writing backward.

WILL

I think I can do that.

KRIS

You think you do? The interview's tomorrow. Do you realize how many people are trying out for that job?

WILL

You want me to write backwards?

KRIS

I was just suggesting.

WILL

Here. I'm going to write backwards.

(Will writes backward in the air, in giant letters, "GO TO HELL.")

WILL

See? I can write backwards.

KRIS

"Go to hello?"

WILL

GO TO HELL! I wrote, "Go to Hell."

KRIS

I was joking.

WILL

I need some air.

(He gets up to leave. Stops. Looks at the umbrella.)

WILL

What's the weather like?

KRIS

Ironic as hell.

- From *Weather*,by Sung Rno -

This was a project I couldn't pass up. Here was a rare opportunity to work with some of New York's most talented writers and directors—and then there was the location. I have long been obsessed with Roosevelt Island. The Island's relative isolation, diverse population, and blocky, vaguely Soviet architecture gives it a weird sort of alternate-earth feel, and the Tram from Manhattan is reminiscent of an amusement park ride. But how would a play written for such a unique place play in the other locations? And for that matter, how would five other plays, by playwrights with unmistakably distinctive styles, play there? I spoke to some of the other writers about their inspirations.

"I chose the play first," Lisa D'Amour told me. "In my piece, Stanley Kowalski is searching for Blanche, because he needs really needs to ask her something. He's been on the road since 1953, but he's still very hungry and very sexy — that's part of his personal purgatory. He's wondering if he can find her in New York." Not every writer has approached the project with a specific mission in mind: "I'm not going to write it yet," Sheila Callaghan told me. "I'm building the piece from scratch within the space I'm writing it for. My play is going to be a direct result of a collaboration with my director and my actors, and my laptop." Other writers are combining the two approaches, using the City itself for aesthetic effect. Caridad Svich: "My piece has as much to do with interrupted possibility as actual possibility, and I think that is a quality especially true of NYC. I was thinking about Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, and how she was able to capture states of being, how she makes the reader slow down and understand a different way of perceiving the world."

I asked some of the writers and directors how environment informed their work: "I'm from a small town in Maryland - the town that houses the military base from which the infamous Abu Ghraib torturers came from," Kia Corthron

told me. "I've lived in New York sixteen years, the last nine in Harlem. I think my language is partly a fusion of my hick roots and my inner city adulthood."

For most, the site-specificity was a significant part of the project's appeal. Director Anne Kauffman told me, "Besides the fact that site-specific work opens up a load of visceral possibilities and engages text in a totally different way, I think that the most rewarding aspect of it is how it engages an audience. I think it gives an audience more agency somehow, more ownership, a more immediate sense that anything could happen." Some of the writers are more comfortable with creating theater for non-traditional locations: Lisa D'Amour told me, "While the transient nature of the production was related to the content of the piece, the fringe benefit was bringing audiences into spaces they wouldn't normally visit on an average day. When the audience is taken out of a 'usual' theatrical setting, they often relax their expectations a bit... the new space brings with it a new set of rules and surprises."

Part of that adventurousness involves restaging individual productions in locations for which they were not intended. "This project is more of a site-(un) specific project," said Sung Rno. "You can't fall back on sound or lighting tricks to do your work. The language and physical action has to do all of it. But I like the feeling of stripping everything down." "It's unnerving that we won't have control over the space, but on the other hand, that lack of control can be kind of enticing, too," Anne Kauffman told me. "The specific challenge is to not try and make every space conform to the parameters of the space chosen for our particular piece." Lisa D'Amour is even planning on incorporating the portability into her play: "On my night, Stanley is looking for Blanche in the lobby of a fancy hotel. On the other nights, he'll be looking in the other locations, trying to guess, I suppose, what places she might want to visit in NYC."

* * *

I think what you have to remember is we're at war.
I mean, you can't just walk around like...
I know you know... I know, but...
Everything's not all right. That's all I'm saying. That's all.
You can't expect things to be like they were. They're not.
We're like everybody else now. We've joined the fucking world.
No, I'm not being armchair... I'm not armchair...
How can you say that?
I'm here, right?
Today, tomorrow and the day after that...
I haven't gone to Berlin.
What? Do you see me going?

Well, if it's a job... yeah... we all would, if it's a job...
I mean, wouldn't you?
That's all I'm saying.
But it's not the same as wanting...
... wanting to live elsewhere.
That's ex-pat, right?
Do they still call it that? Christ, am I out of it? Am I?
I've got to keep up. No, I have to. I mean... we could be at war and I...
With some other country... or countries...
There are other countries.
I'm not being... How could you say that?
I'm travel, don't I? I see the world.
Christ, you make me sound like...
I'm not. One of Those.

- From A Short Time Afterby Caridad Svich -

Finally, I asked some of the artists what appealed to them about this sort of theater. What does a site-specific play have to offer that a "normal" play doesn't? Sung Rno, again: "I think legit theater has become ossified in the way that jazz is now part of LincolnCenter. There is not enough chaos happening inside theaters. I think that theater can create an intensity and complexity of experience that other media can't. But it's extremely hard to make that happen." "I worry that people are losing their ability to be curious, to explore the unexplored, to meet places and people who are different from them," Lisa D'Amour told me. "The fear manufactured by the current administration encourages paralysis and inactivity. I want to fight that." Sheila Callaghan perhaps put it best: "And why not? There are dozens of reasons not to take risks in the theater—fear of losing money, fear of alienating audiences. But risk is precisely the reason why theater still appeals to people in a way that few other art forms can. Creating the piece on the fly, in collaboration, is sort of like juggling on a high-wire, without a net. I don't know how it will turn out, and we might fall, but that's exactly what makes this whole experience thrilling, for us and for the audience."

# Market

(October 2024)

Last May, on a whim, I submitted a screenplay I'd written to the IFP/New York Market & Conference, where independent film industry people convocate in New York for a week to begin and continue "relationships" (dominant trope for the Conference) that will hopefully bloom into a thousand contracts.

I liked the script, and so did IFP: they accepted it as one of 200 projects out of 1600 entries from around the world ("entries" ranging from naked scripts like mine to completed features and documentaries by full-bore production companies). Here is the synopsis of "Ain't Ethiopia" from the IFP Directory (which was posted beside my thumbnail headshot face):

> After local whites lynch his wife as a suspected Communist, African-American Jesse Colton travels to Spain in 1937 to fight Franco. But there he finds that his real battle is with the fascists in the small Mississippi town from which he escaped and that he must return to face them down if his life, and his wife's death, is to have any meaning.

There wasn't a person I pitched this to who didn't pinch his or her lower lip and go, "That's a great idea -- I'd love to see that movie." Which was gratifying, though no one gave me a bottom line to sign on anything legal-looking. But then again, we were just starting relationships.

So here I am, the newly minted MFA'd screenwriter among hundreds of people all vying to either get the next big thing under contract as soon as possible (on the producers' side) or to sell the next big thing (from the rest of us. It was a naked bazaar, a souk of pitch and schmooze and glad-hand, not only in hopes of selling a product but, on a deeper level (and, yes, there is a deeper level here, even an artistic one), of being validated as one of those who can navigate this treacherous and vaporish world and become a success. And I loved every minute of it.

Which surprised me. As a playwright, I'm used to a much more muted level of ambition and enterprise and more attuned to talk about integrity (of text, of playwright's vision), of collaboration, of "vision" and "mission." In short, in the theatre, my ears have become used to talk about art, artistic impulse, noble self-abnegation ("no one gets rich doing theatre"), the conflict between art and commerce, and so on -- the talk of an art form that wants to believe it can be edgy and provocative but long ago lost any claim to be a voice for anything but it own internal concerns.

Not so at the Conference. Here, one king ruled: money. And its vassals: wanting to make more, fearing to lose any, how to leverage returns in domestic and foreign markets, etcetera, etcetera. And as much as it galled me to hear this again and again (in part because I don't have access to the sums of money that could help me make more sums of money), it also had an astringently refreshing effect. It confirmed the canard about the definition of a good movie: one that gets made. It can have the lamest story at its core and a slip-shod execution, but if a producer greenlights it and can get enough people on board to support it, the movie will get made, it will make some money (even if it goes direct to video or DVD), it will put hundreds of people to work, and will either rise or float on the whims of a whimsical public. No one feels ashamed about this -- after all, it is the "movie industry" -- and no one spends much time worrying if it is art or commerce. It is both; but if it isn't the former, it can still be the latter.

I pitched and schmoozed and glad-handed and business-carded with the rest of them -- and I actually got a couple of production companies interested enough to at least read this screenplay and a second one I have on deck. And I learned a lot of the lingo you need to keep the parlance common as you speak to these people. I now know that I need to get "talent attached" to my script, that "meetings" are not only about "making the pitch" but also about finding the producer's "comfort level" as they contemplate sinking "financing" into a "project" while also contemplating losing their shirts and jobs over the "deal." We'll see -- perhaps *Ain't Ethiopia* will one day reach that small pantheon of made films. (And it is, indeed, a small pantheon -- given the hurdles strewn in the way of taking a script from computer screen to thousands of screens, it is, as they say, a "miracle" that any movie ever gets made.)

Given all this brazen commerce, why would I, self-proclaimed theatrophile and hater of commodification, be pleased to be so embedded with the money-changers? In part because they were so honest; in part because there are actual chances to make a living through my dramatic writing (slim, to be sure, but gargantuan when compared to the non-existence of such chances in the theatre world). And in part, and I feel surprised saying this, for the entrepreneurial spirit I sensed everywhere and in everyone. Here were people unabashed about selling themselves (and it is always the self that is sold -- the product, the project, is just a calling card, a preliminary knock on the door). Here were people unafraid to push hard for what they believed in -- not a noble "believed in" because larded with all levels of self-interest and competitiveness but still a "believed in" that

got them up in the morning and forced them to move against gravity and ennui and defeat.

I am not going to propose that the "theatre world" and its denizens practice any of this brazenness -- but it wouldn't hurt me to do more of it. Let's face it -- even in our venerable theatrical world it is not art versus commerce but art as a commerce. Verdi believed that the box-office was as good an arbiter of worth as the swoons of the critics and repetitions of posterity. So did Shakespeare, who wrote his plays, made his money, and bought his real estate. And so should I, if I expect ever to move away from the malnourishment of the theatrical margins and into something like the hearts and minds of a large paying audience.

At least, that's how it feels at the moment as I wait to hear from the *Ain't Ethiopia*-reading producers. In the meantime, clickety-click on the keyboard, lick-paste the stamps, insert my response post-cards, and wait for the theatres to say yea or nay to a reading, a workshop, a production (be praised!) -- all, of course, for the greater glory of the artistic self.

# Two Reviews

(November 20024)

Senpo Sugihara: The Japanese Schindler
Written by Koichi Hiraishi
Directed by Shoichi Yamada and Koichi Hiraishi
Performed by the Dora Theatrical Company (based in Tokyo)
Limited Engagement: October 21 to October 24, 2004

Kaye Playhouse at Hunter College, New York, NY

The challenge in creating a dramatic work around the life of a saint is that the lives of saints are pretty undramatic. That doesn't mean their lives lack tension or moral struggle, but almost by necessity, the play becomes a hortatory unfolding of how the saint became a saint, a paean to a life far superior to those of us sitting in the audience. In other words, we end up not with dramatic theatre but with a eulogy dressed in theatrical clothing.

*Senpo Sugihara: The Japanese Schindler*, written by Koichi Hiraishi, which has been a long-running hit in Tokyo and been performed world-wide, doesn't do anything to avoid this dilemma. For over two hours we are told the story of one man's efforts to save the lives of thousands of Jewish refuges from Poland in August 1940 as the Nazis threaten to engulf the Jews and the Soviets threaten to engulf Lithuania. e begin the play knowing this; we end the play knowing this. And not much changes in-between.

However, the static production doesn't take away from the gallantry of the source material. In August 1940, the Soviet Union is poised to annex Lithuania. Chiune Sugihara, the Japanese consul based in Kovno, Lithuania, faces appeals by Polish Jewish refugees fleeing the Nazis for transit visas that will allow them to travel across the Soviet Union to Japan and on to the Dutch island of Curaçao off the coast of Venezuela. (Many of the refugees had "end visas" for the island, even though they were technically worthless since the Nazis had already occupied Holland.)

The Japanese government commands Sugihara not to issue the visas because of the Anti-Comintern Pact between Germany and Japan. First signed in 1936, and then renegotiated in September 1940 (in part because of Hitler's growing desire to invade the Soviet Union), the Pact committed Japan to a certain kind of neutrality in the face of any actions taken by Germany, including

rounding up and killing Jews. But Sugihara defies his government and issues the transit visas, eventually hand-signing 2139 of them before the consulate is closed down and he is shipped back to Japan, where he is dismissed from his post.

The play based on this history is performed entirely in Japanese, with English surtitles. (In 1998, when the play first came to the Kaye Playhouse, people could hear a simultaneous translation on headsets.) And Japanese actors play all the roles, including the two Jewish families who have allied themselves as they try to make their way to safety. (Which makes for some amusing moments, as when we hear a Japanese voice talking about "kvetching" too much.) Fumio Sato plays Sugihara with what one article called "a calm rationality and sense of purpose," and in general the cast fills the stage with energy and skill.

And, yes, we end the play admiring Sugihara's noble act (underscored by a lighting effect that places a bright halo around Sato's head as the lights go to black) and grateful for his courage and humanity, willing to believe his self-explanation that "I acted according to my sense of human justice, out of love for mankind." But, dramatically speaking, it makes for a long evening. So much is left unsaid and unexplored because all must be made clean and straightforward to tell the tale of the saintly deed. No mystery need intrude, no ignoble motive must be allowed to air. (Hillel Levine, in his 1996 book In *Search of Sugihara*, suggested that Sugihara was a spy and that his actions were supported by the Japanese government. For his allegation he was slapped with a libel suit by Sugihara's widow, which was later dropped.) Consequently, we are exhorted but, at least for me, not much moved.

But, to be honest, it is a bit churlish to judge the play this way. We have before us an exemplary act that, no matter what the motivation, saved human lives. And if the work is dramatically dull and not the right format for the material, it is morally bright, and given the times in which we live, such brightness can help disinfect the temptation to turn toward irony and fatalism.

After its run in New York, it will travel to The Harold and Sylvia Greenberg Theatre at American University in Washington, DC, for performances on October 29 and 30, 2004.

* * * * *

Kazuki: This Is My Earth
Written and Directed by Yoshimasa Shinagawa
Limited Engagement: October 28 to October 31, 2004
Kaye Playhouse at Hunter College, New York, NY

The biography is simple, even if the story is not. The artist Yasuo Kazuki had been drafted for service in the Japanese army in 1943. Captured in Manchuria, the Russians buried him for two years in a work camp in Siberia, where he witnessed the starvation and death of his friends and fellow soldiers. Released in 1945, he made his way back to his hometown of Misumi-cho (to what he called his "earth"), and for the next 29 years, until his death in 1974, painted what came to be known as the "Siberian Series," canvas after haunted canvas drawn from the tragedy of his imprisonment.

*Kazuki: This Is My Earth*, written and directed by Yoshimasa Shinagawa, considered one of Japan's "hot" playwrights, grounds itself in Kazuki's tormented artistic vision in an attempt, as stated in the play's press release, to "express... the lessons, hardships, and rewards" Kazuki acquired through his imprisonment and transferred to his canvases. Shinagawa, in an interview, said the he felt American audiences, after September 11, would find Kazuki's work relevant as they struggle to make sense of their own homeland tragedy.

The play, indeed, for two hours without intermission, gives us a full menu of "lessons, hardships, and rewards" as we follow Kazuki through his life as a young art student, then a father and art teacher, prisoner of war, and famous tortured painter. The action jumps around in time (timelines are announced by a slide projected onto a screen), the interior of his house pivots to become the barracks at the camp, voices of the past invade the present from upper platforms at the rear of the stage, and at one point the young and elderly Yasou engage each other as they try to articulate the meaning of what has happened to them.

The production values are quite good, with versatile sets, expressive lighting, appropriate music for underscoring and scene transition, and a cast of 15 who grace the stage with energy and commitment. Especially good are Hiroyuki Nishimoto and Jiro Tsuda, who play the older and younger Yasou, and Sachiko Yoda, portraying Kazuki's wife.

But in the end, through no fault of the cast, crew, or playwright, the play cannot capture the hard nut of pain at the vital core of Kazuki and his work and crack it open so that it pierces the audience's vitals. Only film could that, with

its ability to jam a camera in the face of a dying man and let us watch his life drain away, or follow the stroke of a brush on rough canvas (as Scorsese does with Nick Nolte in his contribution to *New York Stories* in 1989, "Life Lessons").

Instead, we get, in essence, a biographical lecture (complete with slides of Kazuki's work) intended to leave us with an example of a life fully if not always happily lived that we can then apply to our own (admittedly half-lived) lives and make them better. In short, it is another example of hortatory theater designed to improve us. This does not mean that there are no stand-out dramatic and theatrical moments in the play. For instance, the repeated recitation of a recipe by the starving soldiers in the camp for a cake drenched in maple syrup brings a surreal dark humor to the fore, and Kazuki's efforts to paint, underscored by his paintings projected onto a screen, come close to breaking through the fourth wall and letting us in to his tormented world.

But the sum of all these parts, while certainly leaving us informed, does not necessarily leave us moved. As playwright Shinagawa said in his interview, the play "lets us think about what is war, what is death, what is human, and what is art." That's the problem: we certainly do think about these things as we file out of the theatre. But we need theatre to do more than just make us think. It needs to make us feel as if we have lived what it is we are supposed to think about. Kazuki comes close, and for that reason alone is worth the price of admission. But it also demonstrates the limits of "self-improvement" theatre. Theatre should not try to improve us, which is an impossible task anyway. It should pain us and break us open, not to improve us, but to rearrange us. But that is an essay for another time.

# What Is A Playwright To Do? Part 3

(December 2004)

I have already tried to answer this question twice in this space, once three years ago, and again just last July. But the defeat of Kerry at the polls and the ascension of Bush to his throne bring it to the fore again: in a time of political peril, of what use are the playwright's talents?

On November 3, I took refuge, as many compatriots did, in sarcasm. I received from a friend of mine a piece rounding through cyberspace, "American Coastopia," in which all of us latte-loving, pro-gay marriage-ites make our own land. It begins thusly:

> Ladies and gentlemen, you needn't fret anymore. We have decided that we can't live in the United States anymore, because so many of you in the "heartland" are so full of shit. We were all going to move to various other countries, but then we thought - why should WE move?
>
> We are tired of rednecks in Oklahoma picking the leader who will determine if it is safe for us to cross the Brooklyn Bridge. We are sick of homophobic knuckle-draggers in Wyoming contributing to the national debate on our gay marriages. So we have done the only thing we could.
>
> We seceded.
>
> May I present to you: AMERICAN COASTOPIA.

If you're interested in the whole text, you can find it online, I am sure. I didn't entirely agree with the snarky tone of it, but at the moment, such a secession seemed like a necessity, if not necessarily a good idea. Where, in fact, was there a place for those on the losing side?

I got quite a few emails back taking me to task for writing the piece (which I didn't) and, in writing the piece (which I didn't), expressing the same intolerance and blinderedness as those red-staters who believed, as Michael Feingold recently wrote in the *Village Voice*, that the greatest moral effort of our age, in a time of war, pestilence, disease, and famine, was to force women to have babies and to keep two men from having a marriage license.

In my responses to these emails (and in my defense), I said this:

> I actually did not write the piece -- I don't know who wrote it. I just distributed it because I don't disagree with it. I may, in fact, be guilty of the very intolerance and prejudice of which you accuse me -- in fact, I know I am -- but in part it comes from just being tired of having intolerance

> and prejudice lathered over me for being an artist, for living on the East Coast, for daring to trust to reason rather than superstition, for believing that love and affection trump gender every time, for distrusting theocratic pretenders to the throne, for thinking that a gun permit ought to be at least as tough to get as a driving license, for wanting a real democracy rather than a participatory fascism, for advocating that women shouldn't have the government govern their bodies, for knowing that a fertilized ovum is not a child, for knowing that capitalism sucks -- but enough. I am willing to leave all them alone if they will leave me alone -- I will "open up my heart and mind" that far, but I don't want to sit around their kitchen tables and I don't want to listen to their sermons because I know, in their own hearts and minds, they would just as soon move me and "my kind" off the reservation and are not open to being convinced of anything but what they are already convinced of.

But they won't leave me alone because now so many of their own are in power, ready to privatize and baptize everything not nailed down. All American Coastopia says is, Let them do it, just not to us. Let them have their pinched kingdom of a pinched God on earth -- we just don't want to be there. We will be very happy being, as Irving Kristof slanders away in his *New York Time*s Op/Ed piece of November 6, 2004, "bicoastal, tree-hugging, gun-banning, French-speaking, Bordeaux-sipping, Times-toting liberals." He forgot the latte, but that's all right -- we won't.

Don't get me wrong -- being in Coastopia does not mean, at least for me, an abdication of this country. I will use whatever meager talents I have over the next four years to bring this country back to its senses, wake it up from the nightmare of conservatism, make it again liberal and liberated. But for now, I just want to be left alone by the "folk" -- I need to rest up for the fight.

But having said all that, what, then, is "the fight"? At the moment, the stages around here have no shortage of plays political, such as *Guantánamo: Honour Bound to Defend Freedom*, *9 Parts of Desire*, and *Pugilist Specialist*, to name a few. And there will be more, no doubt. But these pieces seem too "on point": like any art "ripped from the headlines," they can end up becoming past tense as soon as the headlines turn. And too often they become indictments not of the audience but of the non-audience, who are not there to defend themselves (or be executed, depending upon one's level of rage), or appeal to an amorphous "humanitarian sentiment," exhorting us to better ourselves.

I have looked, as I often do, to Shakespeare. His explorations of power and corruption are not by any means "contemporary" (aside from the fact that it would have been politically stupid and dangerous to rip his plays from his age's

headlines), yet to re-read Julius Caesar or *Macbeth* is read again a scathing probe of the corruptions of power and ambition that bear immediately on the White House, the U.N., and the owner of the company that makes the Diebold touch-screen voting machines. In other words, historical distance and rhetorical imagination make the contemporary more contemporary than scripts pulled from transcripts and actors impersonating living politicians.

So, for me, the plays I want to produce over the next four years have less to do with writing a theatre appropriate for American Coastopia than it is about sifting our past with a fine comb to, first, examine how we got here and, second, to remember that our American history, as skullduggerous as it is, also boasts of large spirits and broad humanities that we can salvage and enlist as we try to restore "America" to that version (Version 1.0?) that had dedicated itself, rhetorically as well as through action, to unalienable rights and inclusive liberties. (Remember a time when religion, through the Social Gospel, actually preached a righteous crusade against corruption, poverty, and capitalistic greed?) Americans know so little of their own history, and their ignorance puts them at the mercy of the ideologue revisionists and political raptors.

But I don't just want to create historical dramatizations, a higher level of the costumed interpreters at Williamsburg. I also want audiences to understand their own part in their own bamboozlement, their complicity in their own amnesia. Unless they feel some sense that they have made choices that they can also unmake (another way to think of "redemption"), then they cannot participate in recovering their own history.

I would not recommend that American theatre go this route entirely -- apparently, somebody out there still needs a diet of dysfunctional family dramas, one-person coming-out confessionals, and "buddy" plays that trace the inevitable declines of growing up after college, and no reason exists why they should not get fed. But doing this makes sense for me -- a useful writing that tries not to didact people but instead get them, as the mantra goes for surviving a fire, to stop, drop, and roll. I hope it is enough.