

# New York Welcomes the International Human Rights Art Festival

By **Meagan J. Meehan** - December 2, 2021



*International Human Rights Art Festival will return to New York for its fourth season on December 6 to 12, 2021.*

International Human Rights Art Festival will return to New York for its fourth season on December 6 to 12, 2021. Artists from 15 countries spanning the globe will be presenting art at the festival which was intentionally scheduled to coincide with International Human Rights Day on December 10.

This festival aims to bring artists together with social and political leaders and the general public to imagine a more caring world. Featuring dance, theatre, music, spoken word, comedy, circus, and film, the festival is a well-rounded celebration. The International Human Rights Art Festival began back in 2010 and was helmed by Amnesty International. A playwright with his own short play being presented as part of an evening of one-acts in the festival.

Tom recently discussed this festival and more via an exclusive interview.

**Meagan Meehan (MM):** How did you discover your talent for writing and what was it about plays and theater that drew you to them?

**Tom Block (TB):** I have been writing my whole life — since my first poem at 16 years old (“Hope, hope, better than dope!”). I was a travel and features journalist in my 20s, then wrote books (my sixth is due out in February, from Routledge: *Mysticism in the Theater: What’s Needed Right Now*). I came to theater late — my first full-length play was produced at Theater for the New City in July, 2013, when I had just arrived at 50 years old. Since then, I have fallen madly in love with the media, as it is the only type of writing that is completely interactive. There is nothing more exciting (that I have experienced) than stepping into a rehearsal room, to discuss, interpret and present the words I have written. Seeing them come to life is unlike any other literary activity.



**MM:** How did you get into the arts and decide to helm this festival?

**TB:** I fell into painting at 26, when I took a foundation in arts course at the Boston Museum School and followed a well-trodden path. I painted for 25 years (at the same time that I was writing several books), doing my own work with Amnesty International, Jewish-Muslim peace groups and other activist NGOs. During this time, I was working in the lonely world of their own creation. So, I developed an idea for an activist art festival, and the International Human Rights Art Festival, in 2010 outside of Washington DC. After I moved to New York, I founded the International Human Rights Art Festival, in March 2017 at Dixon Place.

**MM:** How have you seen the festival evolve over the years?



**TB:** We began as a single weekend festival, presenting 40+ events. However, given the response, the energy and the hunger of both healing advocacy creative work, we began to expand. We became our literary journal (we have published more than 150 pieces), began awarding literary prizes, supported artists-at-risk, founded a fellowship program for international adults and youth, expanded, hosted a series of interim events, which are essentially mini-festivals, added programming, all collected under our signature values of dialogue, engagement. No righteous anger or finger-pointing; we use our voices around the world, and open doorways of healing and understanding.

**MM:** How do you select the artists that are presented?

**TB:** There are two main criteria for our artists: their work must be of very high quality, and it must help work with artists in any media, provided that their work is professional, sincere and vulnerable — express take on the world, however painful.

**MM:** Is all the art strictly political?

**TB:** Excellent question. We work with many artists from countries run by dictators, and for simply writing a poem, they can find themselves jailed, in exile, or dead. For these artists — in one of the 60 countries around the world under authoritarian rule — simply putting a pen to paper can be equivalent to holding a gun to the leader's head. Very political. However, the exact same poem written by a creator in Europe, Canada or the United States might barely elicit a yawn. This is to say that my work in this field has led me to understand that the social importance and political nature of art has to do with the gestalt in which the piece was created — the society in which the work is made. A video in Egypt can get you jailed and killed, while the same video created by an American artist might garner only 50 hits on YouTube. Context is everything. Audience reaction — even if the audience is the "authorities" — matters in terms of the political power of the artwork.

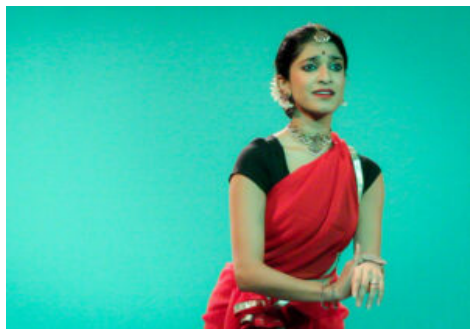
**MM:** What are the themes of some of the plays this year?

**TB:** To give some sense of the breadth of our performance work, here are a few of the works we are presenting:

- **To Raqqa with Love** (by Zizi Majid): In her beauty salon in Raqqa, Syria Sofia keeps her doors open to her customers during her time as a hostage.
- **Sarah Klakum** (by Len Goodisman): Joe, pretending not to be a journalist, climbs a hill above the mighty Ganges to tell a story about a long ignored and little known Indian tribe.
- **Note to Self** (by Cate Wiley): Zoe wants to jump and Jerry wants to stop her. Why would a healthy-looking person want to do a thing like that?
- **Honduras** (by Sara Farrington): In the summer of 2018, one mom hid in the mountains, while one mom was killed, while one mom made it, while one mom lost her kids, while one mom heard about it on the radio, while one mom waited at the bus station ... Honduras is inspired by true events.
- **IN/VISIBILITY: A Lab Report** (by Gabrielle Senza): weaves together stories, dreams, fears and visions of a world.

Of course, there are many more performances — 35 different pieces from artists from 24 countries over the course of the festival.

**MM:** Can you tell me a bit about your short play?



**TB:** “Let’s Pretend” concerns two children playing with modeling clay and a Japanese toilet and ends with a bullet-proof backpack that mimics the way in which we adults, cast adrift in a world we create with the best of intentions and too-often end in war, oppression and violence which nurtures us. These kids are simply mirroring what they hear in their dinnertime conversations to the nightly news.

**MM:** What are your favorite things about the International Human Rights Festival?

**TB:** No doubt about it: working with and giving a platform to these amazing creators. While our week-long festival provides a space for artists to perform, our literary and fellowship platforms support artists from around the world — from Libya to Papua New Guinea.

and everywhere in between — and for many of these artists, this represents the largest and most international platform for their work.

**MM:** What other projects are you working on right now and what themes might you like to explore in the future?

**TB:** My book *Mysticism in the Theater: What's Needed Right Now* is due out February 4, and in it, I develop the concept of "Mystical Theater," which is an amalgam of theater history, Absurdism and classical mystical thought. I hope to express this model on the living stage, and I would love to get them on their feet on stages. I would also like to explore other departments, as it offers a fresh manner of channeling the spiritual values so many theater makers feel in a specific manner of implementing. I would also like to expand the first chapter of the book, *The Human Family*, which explores similarities of mystical thought in all religious paths, into a full-length book, and I am querying publishers. I also have a novel — at the intersection of William Burroughs *Naked Lunch*, Orwell's *1984* and Jonathon S. Johnson's *The Road* — I am shopping around (that is finished, though an exceedingly odd piece of writing). Of course, we will continue to have an impact of the International Human Rights Art Festival!

**MM:** What are your ultimate goals for the future of this festival and is there anything else that you would like to mention?

**TB:** Currently, the International Human Rights Art Festival is the largest and most wide-reaching creative outlet of its kind, bringing together, as it does, creators from around the world with major political, cultural and activist personalities, and opening a conversation between change makers and decision makers. We hope to continue expanding our work in all directions, by publishing books, expanding our work with the social and political systems, supporting more artists-at-risk around the world and moving from being an art event into developing as a social movement, at the intersection of creativity, society and the spirit. A safe harbor in an increasingly mono-

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The full schedule can be viewed at [www.ihraf.org](http://www.ihraf.org). Tickets are \$20 each, or \$50 for a festival pass. The event is held at 195 E. 3rd Street in Manhattan).

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