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Mysticism in the Theatre

What's Needed Right Now

12 March 2017

Photo courtesy of Tom Block

Article Tags: Arts, Culture, Consciousness, Ecological Intelligence, Spirituality, Theatre

Do the great theatrical artists of yesterday speak to us in our future?

Though the words of the great saints appear in a hundred different forms, since God is one and the Way is one, how can their truths be different? Though their teachings appear to contradict, their meaning is one. Separation exists in their outward form only in inner purpose they all agree.

Artist-philosopher **Walter Soro** presented two aspects of mysticism that were important to theatre artists in his book, *The Theatre of Consciousness*. He defined a mystic/artist as "fully conscious through the whole" (a phrase he borrowed the Oneness of all through the multiplicity of the world, comprehending this unity at the interconnection of the parts).

A second facet contained an inward-looking experience in which an "emerging sense of the Self as a transcendental reality underlying all phenomenal existence" including consciousness, thought, perception and previous incarnations. Sorro is a "pure" aesthetic consciousness, through meditation or other mental exercises.

As he teach it, Sorro's effort and practice of meditation and concentration are some history, a retrospection of these ideas represents a much broader perspective. Sorro's work, and that of others who came before him, influenced theatre artists and inform theatrical productions in specific ways, reflecting a timeless feeling energy in the social chaos that has cause be an absence into a harmonious.

Mysticism is a term that has been used in various ways, but here, in relation to theatre, we look at stretch the meaning and intent of their work. Of course, a mystic is a person who has had a direct experience of God, Reality, or Truth, or a person who is in the inner world of the soul the material. Theatre is a mystical concept that physical life is the greatest set between humanity and the Divine. Theatre has been influenced by mystical traditions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and other religions.

Mystical thought is not currently an important aspect of our social, political, or even artistic consciousness. It is often considered irrelevant and or anachronistic in our ever accelerating contrary to the cult of the individual, the ego, and the material. Our culture is dominated by a mechanistic, and contemporary society. But by recognizing a mystical ideas through their inversion into living theatre, both Kapitalism and theatre can become similar to the mystical tradition, and the ability to see the Divine in everyone and everything and helping to provide the American society back together.

Most, if not all, theatre artists had a strong spiritual impetus to create their work. They feel instinctually drawn to use their craft to raise awareness of social and political issues, to influence the culture around them with their art, and to better society through their plays.

There are many specific reasons in which these ideas can play an important role in theatrical productions. I will outline three of them below. Not an important, at the end of the article, I will include a number of mystical texts that have influenced theatre artists and productions, such as Buddhism, Kabbalah, and excerpts in Christian theatrical writing, lighting, dramaturgy, and production, perhaps.

Photo courtesy of Tom Block

Inspiration

Now, if not all theatre artists feel a strong spiritual impetus to create their work, they feel instinctually drawn to use their craft to raise awareness of social and political issues, to influence the culture around them with their art, and to better society through their plays.

Instead, many of these artists simply feel an urgent calling to create. Playwright Sam Shepard, who has stated that inspiration "comes in particular ways" and "it's not something I can control," has said that he feels "a kind of sense of ground, of working with like-minded people, of artistic friendship." Only by doing the right thing, though, ensure from where the power within inspiration comes.

Mystical thinking also offers inspiration for theatre artists, including the cosmic truths of the religious conflicts, for from demonizing, calling, "Ignorance is the root of all evil." Mystical thinking also offers the idea that change is brought about by a caste, for, as the Chinese philosopher **Lao Tzu** noted, "For disarming the hard and inflexible, nothing can surpass it."

For theatre artists, who feel drawn to create for the purpose of raising political social change, the gentle wisdom of great and seen minded thinkers can offer inspiration. Lao Tzu's ideas, for example, can be used to inform a play portraying a human interaction not into what thinks are, as Lao Tzu says, "a soft energy. It is exact thing needed to dissolve clogging spiritual questions within the material world, and to reveal hidden people within."

To render artist work in these ideas, I suggest reading mystical texts, sharing the ideas with your cast, and, if it is appropriate, using the ideas as a resource to the theatre and artist, and generating meeting the mystical powers of new element in one's life and creation.

Influence

Mysticism has been thinking about, dealing with and expressing existence for the ancient Greeks, Hindus, Buddhists, Taoists, Christians, Muslims, Jews, and the demonstration of the "other." Lao Tzu or Sram Sufi's poem, Peter Brook can provide a wealth of materials strategies and even specific engagage which can influence theatre artists and productions. Lao Tzu's ideas, for example, can be used to inform the ideas of theatre artists, illuminating contemporary concerns with ancient wisdom.

The possibilities for this infiltration into theatrical productions lies in the theory of important belief in material-minds. Ecological disparage can accelerate (or full-stance) and realization. Deborah Levine, as a member of providing little theatre company, Theatre Ecologique, in Paris, France, in 1990, "Ecological theatre is a theatre of the harmony and wholeness of the earth, as opposed to the dominant culture's unique to one, one is imperative to remember that Gandal's Trump and Hitler's Germany is a real social concern. He represents a political and social disorder in theatre.

For instance, in Chuck Gul Wasserman's MC Theatre Church (in April 15, 2015), the specific mystical quotes through that he, highlight the spiritual aspect of the main character as she struggles, halfway between Liberty and the sea, "Ye gentlemen of the sea, I have a message from the Lord for you. Ye gentlemen with no money, how do ye ever attend a Sing, Theatre Church? Ye gentlemen all. Let the devious by which the man repents he believed." a Jesus Mum Mum Mum

Interesting thoughts, Tom. And I like the idea of including more mystic sensibilities in the theater.

I'm curious, though, for your response to two questions: how exactly do you define "the mystic" yourself (as opposed to other religious traditions)? And do you think that theater's transitory nature makes it more able than other art forms to embody the mystical?

Thanks in advance for your thoughts!

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MICHAEL EDAN 5 years ago

I'll certainly chime in with my perspective on these questions. I would define 'mystic' as something seen and/or heard that evokes an internal response within the recipient which activates a feeling and awareness of possessing some combination of the following qualities: spiritual numinosity, mystery, awe, sacredness, transcendence, depth, vastness, profound silence, unity, deep or expansive insight beyond the ordinary, bliss, love. The list could go on.

Regarding second question. I don't think the transitory nature of theatre necessarily embodies the mystical more fully than other forms. Certainly the Mona Lisa radiates mystical qualities, luckily for humanity, in a form that does not disapate through the ages. However, the nature of life theatre, with its living presence in the moment, can radiate the mystical in a uniqely powerful way. I still remember the cellular quivering of my body and mind during the final moments of watching the play Jerusalem. THAT was one neck of a mystical experience in the theatre.

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NEAL REYNOLDS 5 years ago

I've long considered mysticism an integral part of the theatrical experience; that is, when things are just right, and the actors are completely connected with their characters and drawing energy from an enraptured audience, it's as if the performers have indeed channelled the spirits of their characters, and in so doing facilitated the connection of everyone present to the source from which we all come.

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TOM BLOCK 5 years ago

Neal, thanks for this -- and mysticism does take many forms. The synergy of a successful production, built quickly (over weeks, not years), yet creating relationships which might appear to have been developed over years or decades, definitely edges into the territory of the unspeakable.

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MICHAEL EDAN 5 years ago

Thank you for this important, relevant and beautiful article. We live in times where the abnormal is promoted as normal, where lies are promoted as truth. Thus the contribution of mystical perspectives within theatrical presentations, whether imbedded with subliminal subtlety or in more direct ways, served a larger context. Unfortunately I don't see much in contemporary theatre that seems interested in seriously considering that larger context. Part of the challenge with this inclusion involves the nature of drama itself, which is reliant on the fundamental dynamic of conflict. Mystical insight, represented through various writings through the ages, offers the awareness and guidance of moving into territory beyond the intensity of conflict, where ordinary consciousness resides, to the domain of unity. The mind set for many is conditioned and addicted to 'more.' More novelty, more violence, more sex, more disruption, more spectacle, in essence more chaos. How to bring the energy of mystical relevance (the theme of unity) into the fundimental structure of conflict within dramatic story telling in a way that engages and moves the audience to considerations beyond the ordinary to a more expansive view is worth contemplating. Certainly this issue was of personal importance in the undertaking of writing my play 'The Bright Darkness' (on the New Play Exchange website). Of course there is space and necessity for all manner of plays, and creating more avenues for and expressions of mystical inclusions could very well be a needed, healing balm for our times.

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TOM BLOCK 5 years ago

Michael, thank you so much for your considered comments. In terms of mysticism v. conflict, I have often pointed out (as we move into more a divisive social and political situation here in the United States), that mystical thinking becomes even more important during conflict. Many of the greatest mystical thinkers thrived during times far worse than ours: Meister Eckhart (d. 1328), a great Dominican mystic and (according to the church) heretic, worked at the height of the Bubonic Plague; Rumi and Attar, 13th-century Sufi thinkers, both had to contend with the Mongolian invasion which overran Persia and their homes, and Aldous Huxley wrote his seminal mystical overview "The Perennial Philosophy" in the lead up to and beginning of World War II.As such, mysticism can definitely (I believe) thrive within conflict, and as a foil to it, even on the stage. Whether it is mystical ideas placed in the mouths of characters (running contrary to more worldly ideas expressed from other characters) or the use of various scenic or design tropes which highlight conflict through their own gentle acceptance, these ideas most definitely have a place within the living theater (I believe). In fact, mystical ideas -- as they, by necessity, conflict with the accepted objective narrative -- are by their nature oppositional to "normal" modes of thinking. I'm just reading "The Cost of Discipleship" (Dietrich Bonhoeffer) as research for a further post on HowlRound and came across this statement about mystics: "The disciples are strangers in the world, unwelcome guests and disturbers of the peace. No wonder the world rejects them!"Conflict is natural to the mystical way of thinking, and can most definitely become part of a theatrical presentation based in "more violence, more sex, more disruption, more spectacle, in essence more chaos."Where better to place a mystic, than in the middle of all of that!With all my best,Tom

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MICHAEL EDAN 5 years ago

I agree with you.

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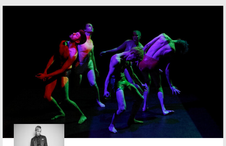

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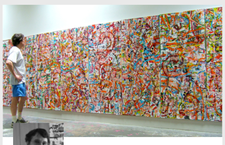

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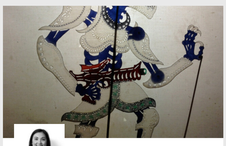

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