

Introduction

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We live in an era of unique challenges.

As I sit at my desk in New York City, the very democratic foundations of the United States tremble. Right-wing fascism, anti-Semitism, anti-Black, anti-Asian, anti-brown, and anti-immigrant sentiment explode across the Western world. Dictatorships continue to rule countries, from Myanmar to Uganda to North Korea to Venezuela to Russia to China, bringing more than a third of humanity under autocratic rule. And the mother-of-all-crises, global warming, foretells the Apocalypse, as seen in the Book of Revelations.

But humanity has always felt existentially challenged. The invention of the crossbow in the 4th century BCE foretold a time of unlimited casualties in war, leading to the potential destruction of civilization. Fifteen hundred years later, the end of the first millennium of the Christian era brought with it prophecies of imminent doom. During the European “Dark Ages,” the Bubonic Plague, now an easily treatable infection, destroyed one-third of that continent’s citizens. And I spent my own childhood cowering under covers whenever commercial jets passed overhead, wondering if the Russians arrived to drop a nuclear bomb on me.

Although each of these crises has been factual and appeared catastrophic within the worldview of their particular time period, the true human challenge represents an ongoing psycho-spiritual one. The true test of being human takes place inside of each individual’s head.

Even more than solving the symptom of the latest existential threat, each epoch requires a soothing voice to still the interior confusion of being human, a person offering a manner for individuals to overcome their anxieties, allowing them to connect to the spirit hidden within. And then understanding a way of attaching personal and social actions to this soul force, instead of their efforts emerging from the desperation and dread caused by the most recent portents of doom.

Every era demands a particular, prophetic response to ease the psychic ills of that time. Offering a way of reaching into the general populace, to raise their spirit from the gloom of the surrounding *zeitgeist*, to the transcendence which

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awaits in their souls. And successful prophets speak the language of their time period. They must be able to reach into the general society and mindset that surrounds them in a manner that is contemporary and meaningful.

This book offers one manner of doing so.

It proposes using the ideals of mystical theater reclaimed from the beginning of drama's history, refashioned for our era. It offers a spiritual palliative at a frontier that we have not much visited recently: where mysticism, creativity, and society meet.

The idea that classical mysticism or live theater might offer something central to our need for transcendence seems quaint, antiquated, perhaps even Absurd. But it grows from history, not out of the fevered dreams of one theater maker.

In ancient Greece, where Western theatrical history began 2,500 years ago, Dionysian performances (in honor of the God Dionysus) created this sacred space. At these festivals, the general society, its deepest spiritual yearnings, and the theatrical impulse fused into creative worship. More recently, visits to this vital frontier at the intersection of live theater and the spirit began to take place with 19th-century Russian Symbolists, 20th-century Absurdist drama, and through individual theater practitioners such as Konstantin Stanislavsky, Antonin Artaud, Samuel Beckett, Jerzy Grotowski, Howard Barker and others.

This book emerges from the ancient intersection of theater, spirituality, and society, as well as the work of more recent practitioners, to create a manual for prophetic renewal, set into the history of theater and mysticism. It offers a return to the Dionysian theater, though using contemporary language and aesthetic forms. This model fuses historical mysticism—defining a shared *human* religion—and theater's once and future role in leading spectators from the particular of their mundane lives, into the eternal of the Divine spirit, sparking a social rejuvenation based in each spectator's experience of transcendence.

No less today than at theater's beginnings in ancient Greece, the stage offers a doorway to a pristine, archaic spiritual state. The act of watching a play has not changed since the beginning of drama. It removes the audience from their mundane lives, inviting them into the possibility of sacred time.

Many contemporary theater makers appreciate this and believe that theater can change the world. However, though they feel this in their bones, they have lacked specific tools with which to implement their spiritual program. This book lays out quite clearly how this might come about, sinking the roots of this mystico-theatrical theory deep into the history of theater and time-honored mysticism, explaining how their fusion creates a powerful engine for social renewal.

Many great social movements began in one time and place, then suffused the culture, creating a new imagination of possibility and, ultimately, inspiring social change. And theater, though seemingly marginalized within contemporary mass culture, provides the perfect creative petri-dish to incubate

novel ideas and infiltrate them into the public square. In the same manner that major change has begun with seemingly minor actions on a public bus, in a small meeting of a vegetarian society, or at a local bar (see below for all three), the theater might offer a place of regeneration, a space to nurture the first inklings of major, positive social revolution.

While this may appear overly hopeful, recent history provides many examples of profound and lasting social change beginning at a single point in time and place. Although these did not begin specifically in a theater, they provide examples for how other activists have used performative energy and creativity to spark renewal.

A few examples:

- The first time that Mahatma Gandhi questioned authority (in 1890 at age 20), he felt it improper to exclude a man from the London Vegetarian Society because the man refused to regard Puritan morals as a central pillar of society. The man in question supported newly available birth control methods and had been preaching their use to the working classes. He had been expelled from the group. Gandhi objected to the censure. However, he was so shy about standing up for what he felt right, that he wrote his views down on paper. The president of the society read them out for him. His first act of civil questioning ended in failure. But Gandhi's activist career had begun, culminating in his overthrow of the British rule of India 57 years later, through a nonviolent revolution.
- Many date the beginning of the (ongoing) civil rights movement to December 1, 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, when Rosa Parks did not give up her bus seat to a white woman. Parks became the tangible symbol of the resulting Montgomery bus boycott (December 5, 1955, to December 20, 1956), which received national publicity. This lit the flame which led (seven years later) to the massive march on Washington, led by Martin Luther King Jr., John Lewis, and others. A year after that, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, and sex. Rosa Parks became known as the "mother of the civil rights movement."
- The LGBTQ rights movement can also be traced to a day and place, June 28, 1969, at the Stonewall Inn (53 Christopher St, New York City—you can still grab a drink there). A spontaneous uprising by the LGBTQ community responding to a police raid at the gay-friendly gathering place began a series of demonstrations. It has been a long and sometimes painful struggle, but this moment in the summer of 1969 led to LGBTQ Americans getting legally married, serving in the army, and being open and comfortable about their sexuality. Of course, the fight for equality continues.
- Occupy Wall Street (starting on September 17, 2011, in Zuccotti Park, in New York City's Wall Street financial district) began as an unplanned protest against economic inequality. It gave rise to the wider Occupy

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Wall Street movement throughout the United States. One main demand was a livable, \$15/hour minimum wage (the Federal minimum wage at that time was \$7.25/hour). Now, a decade later, although the Federal minimum wage remains at \$7.25/hour, 20 states and 32 cities and counties have raised their minimum wage. Additionally, 21 major businesses such as Costco, Amazon, Target, Best Buy, and other multinational corporations have raised their minimum wage to at least \$15/hour. Currently, more than a third of the United States citizenry operates in locales or businesses paying this living wage. Bank of America announced they would raise their minimum wage to \$25/hour in 2025. These changes can be directly linked to that specific time and place, in the small park on Wall Street, in the heart of New York City.

Many of these, such as the civil rights movement, the fight for LGBTQ equality, and the Occupy Wall Street protests, involved creativity and art as a central facet of their activism. And in each of these cases, the smallest spark of energy lit a blaze of positive, restorative social change.

Now, theater spaces can provide a similar creative impetus for social revolution, one which influences people deep beneath the obvious differences in skin color, ethnicity, culture, and religion which divide us, to find the same shared spirit which resides within everyone. This book explores how theater makers can seed a restorative, necessary, and age-old mystical energy into the general society, one theatrical production at a time.

A century ago, the playwright Eugene O'Neill challenged the theater to re-create a dramatic vernacular which emerged from and returned to the transcendent.

This book answers his call.

Bibliography

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