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Chuang Tzu: Mysticism of the Absurd

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by Tom Block

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This series (<http://howlround.com/tags/series-mystical-thought-by-tom-block>) explores the ideas of three mystical thinkers, and looks at how their philosophies can be applicable to theatrical work.

New theatrical works can take their inspiration from many arenas. Recently, much theatre has been based in specific contemporary events, using the stage to raise awareness of social and political issues. Plays such as *Exonerated* (Culture Project, 2003, dealing with the death penalty); *Next Fall* (Helen Hayes Theater, 2010, exploring faith in contemporary America); *The Gabriels, Election Year in the Life of One Family* (Public Theater, 2016, about electoral politics), *The Humans* (Gerald Schoenfeld Theatre, 2016, a slice of life of a “normal” American family) and many others treat the poetry of the present, often exhibiting a specific political point of view.

But the energies explored in these performances, though situated in the present, are timeless. We may not like to admit it, but we humans haven’t really changed that much in temperament or spiritual yearning in the past five millennia or so. The most positive of these eternal energies is represented by the human mystical impulse: the drive to empty oneself of personal desire, to be replaced with a total appreciation for the unity of all seemingly disparate aspects of our universe. As Chuang Tzu (d. 287 B.C.E.) noted: “Great knowledge sees all in one; small knowledge breaks down one into the many.”

Within theatrical performances, timeless mystical thought can be utilized to expand contemporary narratives, deepen the meaning of current concerns, and connect them to the enduring issues that humanity has been struggling with since the beginning of our shared journey.

...continuity has been struggling with since the beginning of our shared journey.

In this and later posts, I will explore the ideas of three mystical thinkers from different eras and cultures, and look at how they might be translated onto the living stage. Through using their concepts to inspire language, theatrical space, time passage, set design, and even costumes, a new dimension can be added to productions.

“Within theatrical performances, timeless mystical thought can be utilized to expand contemporary narratives, deepen the meaning of current concerns, and connect them to the enduring issues that humanity has been struggling with since the beginning of our shared journey.”

Chuang Tzu (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zhuang_Zhou) was a Taoist philosopher who lived during the fourth century B.C.E. He developed a philosophy of skepticism generously laded with humor and absurdity. His ideas can provide inspiration for theatrical interpretation, including spiritual depth, subtle humor, and strange linguistic and performative juxtapositions.

One recurring theme in Chuang Tzu’s work is the importance of *uselessness*: that sometimes just *being* is more important than being useful *for* something else. This story illustrates the idea:

There were three friends discussing life.
One said: "Can men live together and know nothing of it?
Work together and produce nothing?
Can they fly around in space and forget to exist?
World without end?"
The three friends looked at each other and burst out laughing.
They had no explanation.
Thus they were better friends than before.

In our culture, these men would be called lazy good-for-nothings (or worse), have all state aid cut off, and be forced to live by begging in the streets, treated as outcasts. However, perhaps there is a wisdom to their madness—and something which might stretch a theatrical exploration of contemporary issues.

First of all, language construction or situational staging could show two people sharing a moment—absurd, incomprehensible, or even just plain contradictory (“Can they fly around in space and forget to exist”)—yet which brings them together. This could help define a relationship without explaining it.





A “labyrinth of circular time” as represented by three “shades” and three paintings in the author's play *Emission* at Theater for the New City’s “Dream Up Festival.”

Additionally, taking the cues from this idea (the majesty of uselessness), a circular conception of time and activities might replace the linear. In Chuang Tzu’s ideal, going in circles is no different than taking a linear path from point “A” to point “B.” In fact, it might even have *more* merit. This idea could be translated into a timescape for the play’s action: the production might begin at a specific point in time, meander about into the future, back into the past, and then terminate in the present, where it began.

It might also influence set design, where any setting from a few black-box cubes to an elaborate visual-scape could be staged in such a manner as to represent the labyrinth of uselessness, the circular nature of yearning, the pointlessness of desire. How could “acceptance” and “the purposefulness of uselessness” translate onto the stage? In as many manners as there are stage designers, each bringing their personal vision to this novel and bizarre mystical idea.



Image from the set of the author's play *Night Out in Spain* (Theater at the 14th Street Y, June 2014), which shows a non-linear version of a set design.

Another short passage from Chuang Tzu’s thought offers further impetus for creative theatremaking:

What is meant by a "true person"?

The true people of old were not afraid

When they stood alone in their views.
No great exploits. No plans.
If they failed, no sorrow.
No self-congratulation in success.

Here, Chuang Tzu touches on a central mystical idea: equanimity. In this concept, a person is completely unfazed by either praise or condemnation. Their internal sense of self is unchanged in either case.

Again, this ideal runs contrary to our contemporary cult of celebrity, media, and putative fame. The idea of being completely untouched by what other people think is not just contrary, it's *anathema*. But it is a central spiritual ideal, and by using it to inspire theatrical presentations, an important dynamic between contemporary culture and spiritual history can be established. This view might influence costume design, for instance, by having the hero or protagonist of the piece represented in shabby clothing, or by a person in homeless garb.

Dialogue might take its cue here, making the spiritually or morally stronger character far less verbose, and perhaps even linguistically weaker, though in actions stronger than other, more malicious (and verbally mellifluous) characters. Set design, props—the weaker having the more beautiful pocket watch, for instance—even soundscape could help to elucidate the sense of a character's rectitude, as one who “if they failed, [feels] no sorrow and [experiences] no self-congratulation in success” (Chuang Tzu: above). A soundscape for a single hero which veered from the beautiful to the grating, for instance, or consisted only of street sounds or might simply be represented by the buzz of a fluorescent light. Something which represents the timeless, the unadorned, the uncaring—but the deeply Real.

Mystical ideas have much to teach us about contemporary stagecraft. And Chuang Tzu, dead now for more than 2300 years, can inform, inspire, and add depth to a theatrical performance. A playwright, director, and production team might use the ancient sage's wisdom to expand the meaning of their piece, as well as subtly tie it into more than five thousand years of human creative yearning.

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