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## Mysticism in the Theatre: What's Needed Right Now

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by Tom Block

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Mysticism represents the energy which drives, as well as unites all traditional spiritual paths. Mysticism characterizes the singular spiritual yearning at the heart of being. More importantly, mysticism represents the place where all sacred paths are in agreement: it denotes the *human* religion, shared by all.



Rumi by Tom Block.

As the great thirteenth century Sufi (Islamic) saint Rumi noted:

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 words be different? Though their teachings appear contradict, their meaning is one. Separation exists in their outward form only; in inner purpose they all agree.

British philosopher **Walter Stace** ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter\\_Terence\\_Stace](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter_Terence_Stace)) proposed two aspects of mysticism that were shared across all cultures, religions, time period and social conditions. One defined an experience that “looks outward through the senses” to apprehend the Oneness of all through the multiplicity of the world, comprehending this as the consciousness of the world.

A second facet comprised an inward looking experience in which an “emptying out” by a person of all experiential content and phenomenological qualities, including concepts, thought, sense perception and sensuous images, leads to a “pure” wakeful consciousness, through meditation or other mental exercises.

As we head into a more difficult and divisive period in American political and social history, a reinvigoration of these ideas represents a much-needed remedy. The energy, ideas, and impetuses provided by mysticism can inspire theatre artists and inform theatrical productions in specific ways, offering a timeless healing energy to the social illness that has burst an abscess into American culture.

Historically, playwrights have utilized mystical ideals to underpin their narratives, as well as stretch the meaning and intent of their work. Of course, a play like *Waiting for Godot* (Beckett), immediately comes to mind, as it takes place in the liminal space of mystical time (where eternity and the temporal meet).

We also find specific mystical references. One example comes from Shakespeare's *King Lear*, where the bard presents a world where Purgatory exists, but not the hereafter. Purgatory here and now. "I am bound/ Upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears/ Do scald like molten lead . . ." This tracks the mystical concept that physical life is the greatest veil between humanity and the Real—an idea that appears in all three Abrahamic faiths, as well as Buddhism, Hinduism and other religious paths.

Mystical thought is not currently an important aspect of our social, political, or even artistic conversations. It is often considered irrelevant and even anachronistic in our era: some contrary to the cult of the individual, the yearning after fame and fortune, and the capitalistic anarchy that defines contemporary society. But by reinvigorating mystical ideas through their insertion into living theatre, both mysticism and theatre can become central to a desperately needed social renewal—healing wounds, crossing social divides and helping to stitch the American society back together.

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There are many specific manners in which these ideas can play an important role in theatrical productions. I will outline three of them below. Just as important, at the end of the article will include a number of mystical texts from all time periods and many paths, which might offer language, methods, and concepts to influence theatrical writing, lighting, stagecraft, acting, and productions in general.



*The Necessity of Service* by Tom Block.

### Inspiration

Most, 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.

However, many of these same socially-driven artists do not consider themselves "religious" per se—they do not draw their inspiration from a particular path or set of religious prescriptions. Therefore, at times, they must draw from the well of social contact, of working with like-minded people or of simply "knowing" they are doing the right thing, though unsure from where this power within them arises.

Mystical thinking can offer a spiritual foundation for these creators, outside of the narrow halls of the religious edifice. Far from demanding, cajoling, asserting, and threatening—sometimes seems that religions do—mystical energy is as soft and yielding as water. Yet, as the Chinese philosopher **Lao Tzu** (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laozi>) noted: "For dissolving the hard and inflexible, nothing can surpass it."

For theatre artists, who feel driven to create for the purpose of inspiring positive social change, the gentle wisdom of great and open-minded thinkers can offer a strong foundation which to work, while not demanding, exhorting or punishing if certain metrics are not met. What's more, as Lao Tzu assures, this quiet energy is the exact thing needed to dissolve nagging spiritual questions within the theatre artist, and social walls between people without.

To center one's work in these ideas, I suggest reading mystical texts, sharing the ideas, gathering with like-minded friends and colleagues to discuss their relevance to the theatre and society, and generally making the mystical point of view present in one's life and worldview.

### Infiltration

Mystics have been thinking about, dealing with and proposing solutions for the very same social problems (greed, will to power, charity/lack of charity, the demonization of the "ot

etc.) for at least 5,000 years. Their ideas can provide a wealth of material, strategies and even specific language which can influence the creation of theatrical work. These ideas might be woven into plays, dropped into the mouths of characters, illuminating contemporary concerns with timeless wisdom.

The precedence for this infiltration into theatrical productions lies in the history of mysticism itself. In medieval times, liturgical language was embedded into Sufi (Islamic) and Kabbalistic (Jewish) poetry, as a manner of providing little turbines of mystical power. This was called *shibbutz*, or “inlay,” and originated with medieval Sufi poets using *Qur'anic* their spiritual ornament. Later, Jewish mystics borrowed the idea, utilizing Biblical quotes to enliven their mystical poetry.



Gandhi by Tom Block.

Theatre artists might borrow from these great thinkers, reading and then inserting the words or point of view of anyone from Lao Tzu to **Nelson Mandela** ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nelson\\_Mandela](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nelson_Mandela)), to **Gandhi** ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahatma\\_Gandhi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahatma_Gandhi)), to the *Baghavad Gita* into their plays, thereby reinvigorating the concepts in a contemporary milieu. These “inlays” might also add a timeless quality to contemporary social and political problems, situating them more clearly in the stream of human history, instead of treating them as concerns unique to our era. It is important to remember that Donald J. Trump (for instance) is hardly a novel social concern. He represents a political energy as old as bread or beer.

For instance, in my play *Sub-Basement* (IRT Theater, March 24–April 15, 2017), I lace specific mystical quotes through the text, to highlight the spiritual search of the main character she struggles, halfway between poetry and the law. For instance, Arnaud, a homeless man, states, concerning his fate as an older gentleman with no means, that he is not afraid of “Death isn’t the end, after all. Just the doorway by which the lover rejoins the beloved,” a direct Rumi quote. His friend responds: “I told you not to read that stuff!” And a bit further along, as the “teaching” of the main character Adrienne devolves into the chaos of her internal state, Arnaud (the designated mystical adept) quotes Rumi again: “Sell your cleverness buy bewilderment,” to which our beleaguered hero asks why, if he is claiming to offer answers, he just keeps confusing things? He responds with the one of the most important mystical kernels: “It means that sometimes answers lie buried in confusion. In fact, sometimes confusion is the answer.”

These “inlays” also help theatre artists build their projects into spiritual engines, providing impetus for the audience to think in unusual ways as they work to positively influence the world around us. The infiltration into the general public takes place as the words and ideas are woven into the plays, and the ideas are disseminated to audiences.

### Specification

Going beyond inspiration and “inlay,” numerous other manners of relating mystical concepts to building theatrical pieces can be explored. Mystical impetus for underlying narrative themes or points of view; for considering set building or sound scores; for acting choices; for discovering novel creative motivations, and numerous other ideas emerge from a consideration of mystical writings and views.

At this point, however, it is vital to point out that I am *not* proposing a clear and direct expression of these concepts. I do not envision having an actor move downstage and, in a direct address, implore: “As the great Sufi Saint Rumi so presciently queried, ‘can’t we all just get along?!’”

Far from this literal presentation, *shibbutz* involves subtlety, dexterity, and gentleness in presentation. The audience, in my opinion, should not be able to flag when they are being approached with mystical energy or even quotes. These should be woven seamlessly into the theatrical presentation, leaving their residue in the memory and subconscious of the audience, as opposed to pounding them over the head with a (metaphorical) two-by-four.

Given this, however, there are numerous approaches by which this mystical inlay might be pursued. As noted, the clearest method is in language use. For instance, in a play of mine *Bestia: Sweet Mother*, I use many mystical quotes, borrowed verbatim from the sources. However, far from being delivered directly and with earnest intent, I twist them in such a way to cause the audience to consider them more deeply.

These words are put into the mouth of a CIA agent to justify her work in killing what we know to be an innocent woman, a Syrian freedom fighter. By putting quotes from the *Baghavad Gita*, Rumi, and others into her mouth as *justifications* for her “vital” work, it shows not only how language can be twisted, but also how these ideals can become subsumed in negative divisive energy. The implicit message is that these ideals must be considered and implemented in the manner in which they were intended: as doorways into the spirit and toward the appreciation of sameness.



Dancers ("Shades") and the author's paintings from *Emission* at Theater for the New City.

Mystical ideals might also influence set design. Although we've all sat in a theatre and seen, as the curtain rises, a perfect representation of the inside of a Starbucks Coffee Shop (d the little red straws!), mystical impetus would ask us to think a bit more deeply about issues of metaphor, the subconscious, and the quiet messages of the spirit emanating from w

There is much rich visual symbolism threaded through mystical writings, which might inspire set design to move toward the liminal or interior spiritual spaces, as opposed to a two first century coffee shop. A set designer might consider using the softness of materials to create a welcoming space; a water-theme to echo Lao Tzu's admonition that "for dissolvii hard and inflexible, nothing can surpass it" or unusual colors (all red, gold, or white for instance) to bring the audience out of the banal and into the world of essence.



Staged reading of *Duck* by Tom Block at the 14th Street Y Theater.

I create liminal spaces through the use of my paintings on set. As a longtime visual artist (and playwright), I am able to pair paintings with subject matter to add psychological and spiritual depth to the set design, as well as expand the subtext of the characters. This is another option: to work with a visual artist to help build a novel, world-bending vision of th

tableau of the play. These various and strange visual presentations can remove the audience from the banal world of a Starbucks or perfectly rendered hotel room, and indicate that messaging involved takes place on a different, and deeper plane.

The same can be said of the soundscape, of course. While I certainly appreciate hearing the exact sounds of the street, a period streetcar, or the interior of a bar (“I know which one is!”), I feel that sound—like the set, language, and all aspects of the play—should help remove the audience from the banal to consider deeper issues, and how they can affect our interactions.



Cellist Serena Miller, actor Irinia Varina, and the author's painting in *Emission* at Theater for the New City.

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**“Mystical and spiritual ideals...offer a vital and fresh manner of reconceiving possibility, approaching the audience beyond their conscious thought.”**

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Every playwright and design team will define their own manner of doing this. Personally, I like to work with live music, and specifically the cello. A good cellist can not only interpret and interact with the language and actors, but also deepen the tone of the piece's meaning.

Mystical and spiritual ideals are “timeless” because they relate in a very specific, though different manner to every time and place in human history. Although they are not much considered in today's theatre world, or any other facet of society (not even religion!), they offer a vital and fresh manner of reconceiving possibility, approaching the audience beyond their conscious thought.

A Sufi saying holds: “Words spoken from the mouth will never get past the ears. Words spoken from the heart, enter the heart.” Now more than ever, our task is clear: theatre artists speak from the heart, so our audiences can “hear” with the most important sense organ we have: the heart.

**Suggested Reading List:**

Aurelius, Marcus: *Meditations*

*Baghavad Gita*

Berry, Wendell: *Standing by Words*

Black Elk: *Black Elk Speaks*

Buber, Martin: *Tales of the Hasidim*

Buddha: *The Dhammapada*

Chuang Tzu: *Genius of the Absurd*

Eckhart, Meister: *Selected Writings*

Gandhi: *All Men are Brothers*

Heschel, Abraham Joshua: *God in Search of Man*

Huxley, Aldous: *The Perennial Philosophy*

Lao Tzu: *Tao Te Ching*

Mechthild of Magdeburg: *The Flowing Light of Divinity*

Merton, Thomas: *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*

Rabi'a: *Rabi'a the Female Mystic and Her Fellow-Saints in Islam*

Rumi: *Rumi and Me* (William Chittick, translator)

Sheikh Sa'adi: *The Rose Garden*

Sogyal Rinpoche: *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*

Weil, Simone: *Waiting on God*

Yeshe Tsogyel: *The Secret Life and Songs of the Lady Yeshe Tsogyel*

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**Robert Robbins** • 3 days ago

I think shamanism is a better spiritual path for theater artists than transcendental mysticism. Shamanism is the exploration of the human psyche to discover the truths within ourselves. The shaman goes on a vision quest to visit the spirit-world, the psyche, and returns from the other world with wisdom that is to be shared with the tribe. It is important to note that the very first actors were shamans, performing rituals for their tribe. The key to shamanic practice is the visionary experience; this can be obtained through trance or Jungian active imagination which is quite similar to the process of writing a play.

Strangely, there are few books on the relationship between shamanism and theater. I've obtained most of my knowledge on the subject from depth psychology and comparative religion. But I recommend the following:

"Shakespeare's Royal Self" by James Kirsch. A rare example of Jungian analysis applied to drama. The author analyzes Hamlet, King Lear, and MacBeth.

"Sacred Play: Soul-Journeys In Contemporary Irish Theatre" by Anne F. O'Reilly. This is probably the best book on how drama is the process of "soul searching" but you have to read a lot of contemporary Irish plays to follow her meaning.

"The Way Of The Actor: A Path to Knowledge and Power" by Brian Bates. This book explains how the actor functions as a shaman.

There is a lot of literature on aspects of shamanism which relate to theater; ritual, initiation, unconscious symbolism, etc. But I've never found a book that really ties all together or packages it for the theater artist so you have to do a lot of reading and thinking to see how to apply it to your work.

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**Tom Block** → [Robert Robbins](#) • 3 days ago

Robert, thank you! Fascinating insight. I have a dear friend I have worked with, James Leonard, who has created a climate change divination tent, in which I gives climate change Tarot readings to querents. It is called the Tent of Casually Observed Phenologies, and offers an interactive, audience-centered vision of the lines you are talking about. You can get a sense of his work here: <http://jamesleonard.org/work/>