

AN AESTHETIC MEDITATION

by **Kyoung H. Park**

I'm struggling to understand what it is I'm supposed to do, now that I've spent ten years studying the craft of playwriting. Knowing deep down that all of my trials and tribulations have been an artistic search, the answers I've found are no longer enough. To nail down my existence to the "making of art, not war," or "to be an artist," seems such a vague and disappointing answer. It's even harder to believe that all these years have been spent to live a cliché, answering my existential quandaries with slogans that fit more nicely on a button I'd pin on my clothes for fun.

I'm no expert in philosophy, but based on the discussions I've had with fellow artists, I've concluded that my existential crisis is not about my state-of-being, but the state of Art. In these times, in which the only thing going global is this demented financial crisis, the fear-mongering of politicians, and conservative power-plays from the ultra-rich, I've been struggling to understand not only politics, but aesthetics—the philosophy and understanding of what is Beautiful: of what is to remain.

The following is my limited understanding of aesthetics, of Beauty and Art, and an even more modest proposal as to why I've chosen to live the life of an artist, and to take my work to another level by starting Kyoung's Pacific Beat.

For years, I've treated my writing like a vocation, dedicating myself to the impossible in an increasingly hostile environment towards this work. Left and right, I've heard mentors and peers criticizing this path—warning me that playwrights statistically do not earn enough to meet the poverty line; that institutions are failing to open their doors to minorities; that non-Americans are not welcome in the American theater; that theater cannot make a change—even worse, that the theater is dead and that artists must suffer for their art.

To not acknowledge these discussions is foolish, but to cave in to these warnings like they're an absolute truth is tantamount to suicide and I've no interest in that.

Backstory

When I finished my degree in Peace Studies in Korea in 2007, I sat down with my advisor and told him I wanted to continue my work as a playwright to promote a culture of peace through the arts. My advisor was disappointed, telling me that I'd been accepted into the program because the faculty believed I was going to give up my "hippie life." At that moment, I knew that I would have to demonstrate that both pursuits could be followed simultaneously, that politics and theater are intertwined, that playwriting and peace are inter-related.

While finishing grad school, I worked in Korea's Arts and Culture Education Service, a newly formed governmental organization in Seoul. Many artists worked in this organization and the bureau won the bid to host UNESCO's 2010 Arts and Culture Education Conference in Seoul. It was a busy time, as



our organization provided artistic tools to local, often marginalized, communities so they could proactively participate in society through creative expression.

Meanwhile, I sat in my cubicle translating letters to foreign leaders in the field, asking them for their cooperation to advocate the significance of the arts. But at a governmental level, our cause couldn't compete with the daily discussions on matters of security, finance, health, peace and war, so I left my cubicle and quit my job.

I decided to find the ways to integrate my knowledge in peace and playwriting by working in theaters. In 2007, I went to London to write at the Royal Court Theatre and in 2009, I did grass-roots, political theater in Rio de Janeiro with Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed. In between those two travels, I spent a year teaching drama, musicals, and performance studies, including a course on "American and British Post-9/11 Theatre" at Kyung Hee University, while directing a student production of Chuck Mee's "Big Love."

"Big Love" was the first time I directed someone else's work, and it was also the way I escaped my personal, sexual-identity crisis which led me to convert to Buddhism in India. While directing "Big Love," I decided to once again, quit my job, and return my focus to playwriting by studying with Chuck. Looking at the past three years at Columbia, not only did I manage to finally settle into my identity by coming out of the closet, but also wrote a series of plays I am now directing and producing through Kyoung's Pacific Beat.

While I harnessed my determination to become the artist I wanted to be, practitioners and policy-makers at the UNESCO shaped the conversation for the 2010 UNESCO Arts and Culture Education Conference in Seoul. Still tracking the event, I was struck by a call for papers positioning Art as "the means of spiritual elevation and/or social cohesion; as modes of radical, critical thought; as prophetic signals of an alternative knowledge that might help improve the lives of people all over the world."

I thought to myself: Yes, to the articulation of what it means to make art. Yes, to the advocacy of greater art. Yes, to the understanding that good art makes us better people.

Aesthetics 101

I fast-forward a few years to a night at Sanskriti Pratisthan in New Delhi, India. I'm sitting there with Suneet Chopra, an art critic, and a group of young students brought together by an Indian couple that supports young artists in their paths. Mr. Chopra talks to us with discerning, analytic logic, about what it means to be an Artist and how Art functions in society. Referencing Aristotle, he explains aesthetics is about our knowledge of Beauty, captured by an Artist who makes Art as a way to relate to other people through "endless time."

The Artist, Mr. Chopra posits, creates Art with discipline and sharp perception and a mastery of his/her techniques. But he warns us that Art is as “good” as the artist’s relationship to his/her patrons, so the Artist must be aware of how Art is perceived in society.

In Indian myths, the oppressed were always portrayed as demons, and Mr. Chopra used this as an example to argue that those who suppress creators (for example, women), will suppress artists. Therefore, the Artist should understand his/her history, as Art’s beauty will not be enough for Art to be “right in time.”

Furthermore, Art cannot create revolution—only open people’s eyes—so the Artist must strive to create Great Art by participating in Great Deeds. Mr. Chopra quoted Neruda—a poet, diplomat, and active socialist—saying: “you won’t find me in my collection of poems.” Mr. Chopra stated this quote to elaborate how the Artist is beyond the Art he creates, and that Art is Great when the Artist addresses the larger needs and deeds of his Society.

Art is social, Mr. Chopra continues, Art desires to engage with our collective intellect and feelings to open minds, hearts, and souls. But what if the Artist is marginalized? What if the Artist is oppressed as one of the demons of his/her culture?

In this case, Mr. Chopra answers: “Great Art in savage times becomes Savage.”

Savage Beauty

Aristotle defined Beauty by an Object’s order, symmetry, and determinateness. These Aristotelian breakdowns are not my expertise, but poets Marie Ponsot and Tim Seibles brought these concepts up last year when I was in residence at the Vermont Studio Center. It seems to me, from the madness of my notes, that the Beauty in Art, according to Aristotle, is the search for the Transcendental.

Transcendence can be qualified by three characteristics: is it True, therefore ethical? Is it Good, therefore well-made? Is it Beautiful, therefore, illuminating?

In contemporary theories, Beauty is more often defined as a reproductive advantage that exists within our collective experience, and not necessarily embedded in the Art Object itself. In other words, Beauty is considered a sensuous knowledge that evolves and adapts in public, extending and intensifying our natural selection of what is enjoyable in society through objects of Art.

In this case, Beauty is pursued by the Artist, living within him/herself the sociopolitical angst of what it is to be a good citizen and the anger, rage, and despair that comes from having an Imagination.

There is an inherited solitude that is engaged by the Artist; a life in silence that leads one to quit one’s job and run away with his/her head on fire. And this act triggers the search for recognition that we all share a certain sense of Beauty, which can be ordered through Art and shared in communion.

Moreover, the Artist does not presuppose automatic knowledge from or for the audience, but rather offers a constant storm that needs to be experienced in a space where Art serves as a public document that expresses what we don't get to live in our ordinary lives.

This Artistic Beauty can be "Beautiful" or "Ugly," sublime or ludicrous; in Suneet Chopra's terms: "Great" or "Savage". In theater, Beauty can be considered tragic or comic.

Erik Ehn defines tragedy as "the effort to climb the debris of circumstance-in-time as it falls into the past, climbing towards the present moment" and comedy as "our opening to the present amidst the calamity of ongoing collapse." (Erik Ehn, 2011) These are the overwhelmingly impossible/liberating circumstances through which the Artist creates theatrical Art to provide "either a sudden moment of insight or a slow cumulative process of understanding of "what it means for something to mean something." (Verwoert, 2008)

Ranciere linked this aesthetic experience with political engagement by arguing that the relationship between the Artist and the Public is a process of problem solving and collective knowledge making. In other words, the artistic practice makes of Art a theatrical space that can provide new contexts for Beauty, simultaneously representing prevailing social tensions, while holding off the urge for group violence by re-ordering the "meaning of abstractions that are no longer adequate to the needs and possibilities of life." (Holmes, 2007).

But the deeper, moral questions of current aesthetic philosophy are not about how to define Art. Rather, they question how to provide dignity to an Artists' existence, giving him/her the right to freedom, security, and the ability to be mobile and transgress the ordinary to re-produce new, sensuous knowledge through the making of Art.

Theatrical Problem Solving

In the case of Theater, theatrical problem-solving requires a Public Space. Erik Ehn writes that theatrical "action (protest) advocates for a reclamation of space... because a space [that] is large and subsidized doesn't mean that it is civil or civic." (Erik Ehn, 2011) The following section is a bit of a rant, but I now feel the need to differentiate Commercial theater from "theater."

Commercial theater is often inaccessible and a luxury; a leisurely activity that is discriminatory to its artists, neglectful of its audience, and politically dis-interested. Because Commercial theater is market-driven and depends on its good relationships to its patrons, well-subsidized, subscription-based New York theaters in particular, have not only betrayed the needs of social inclusion, cohesion and critical thought, but are "hastening their own demise" (Young Jean Lee, 2009) by closing themselves to new artists, female artists, minority artists, choosing in their place, to placate the concerns of an aging audience that is dwindling and losing interest in theatrical Art.

This turn of events has led established theaters to exploit their capital assets, launching campaigns to re-design and re-structure their physical spaces, rather than re-investing in the work they make. Now, artistic validation is recognized through commercial profit, resulting in the production of new works, too often musicals based on movies that are performed by celebrities, to promote a culture of “spectacle” and “consumption” so despised by cultural theorists like Debord.

Meanwhile, newly built performing arts centers are becoming neo-Deleuzian “envelopes,” in which their re-construction focuses on the creation of its surface while their security task is to protect the inside of external dangers, in order to ultimately accommodate a fluid relationship between the private and public, in an age in which the public realm is managed by private agents.

The Commercial Theater’s attempts to “overcome elitist exclusivity fails, since it reproduces the paradoxes of the upper-class’ liberal openness, its falsity is the falsity and limitation of our tolerant liberal capitalism.

The message of this political unconscious is democratic exclusivity. They create a multi-functional, egalitarian open space, but the very access to this space is invisibly filtered and privately controlled. In more political terms, performance arts venues try to enact civic normality in a state of emergency. They construct an open space which is cocooned, protected and filtered.” (Zizek, 2011)

This “geezer” theater, as Mac Wellman coined, is endemic in American theater, but “equality, the dream of a better world for all, with a concomitant reduction of human suffering, and the increase of the means of happiness, are not silly pipe dreams. And if they are silly—they are so in that curiously neglected, old sense of the word: light-hearted, joyous, full of the bright playfulness of the soul.” (Wellman, 1993)

So I turn to the roots of suppressed theater—Brecht’s Epic Theater, Absurd Theater, Theater of Cruelty, Poor Theater, the Theater of the Oppressed; a theater that made of Art a “tool for social change;” a space for existential nausea to be remedied through rigorous, physical discipline; a platform for political activation and societal transformation through the radical and critical re-positioning of the Artist in Society.

These are the theater movements that embraced the great deeds worth pursuing in the making of art, despite the fact that the status quo (unwilling to be challenged) labelled these Artists as delinquents, deviants, and rebellious, blacklisting them in the times of the “red scare” and today, more cruelly ignoring their significance through institutionalized bias and financial neglect.

It could be argued that this rejection is deliberate, as this is a theater of mischief, in which one can transcend boundaries to reject neo-liberal capitalism’s colonization of a consumer’s lifeworld (Habermas), by creating a public space between the artist and spectator where we see the similarities among dissimilarities to attain a better sense of “who we are” and “how we can live together.” (Gillick, 2007).



The creation of these new social possibilities is dangerous to the Status Quo, as the Theater allows the Artist, his/her collaborators, and the Public “to go beyond their own certitudes and participate in collaborative knowledge-making that is not just the sum of their previous experiences.”

According to Deleuze, this new, knowledge-making is created and found through the collective, as Art help us transgress—go past conventional blockages—and civically progress, to find new routes in indeterminate spaces to construct our own narratives.

But “if art and peace building are to be revolutionary—are to effect change, to subvert stasis and idolatry, to trigger metanoia—then they are experimental. The marketplace and civil doctrine restrain us here when they feel threatened. And in the genius that authority has for conservation of wealth, it sets art and peace at each other.” (Ehn, 2011)

Theater and Peace

Ehn elaborates: “Theater for peace is no more natural than peace for theater. We do not have one for the sake of the other; we also can’t really have one without the other... Putting theater in process in order to cause peace, or putting peace in process in order to cause theater...this may function, but the way is inexact...”

To the extent that performance practice is designed to be liminal—where it’s outcome is intended expressly to promote peace—it should be balanced by a category of peace building whose success is measured in the number of plays it produces—cultural expression as a direct measurable outcome of peace building.” (Ehn, 2011)

Bringing this back to my original question—how to link Playwriting and Peace as part of the same civic endeavor—the Great Deed I humbly seek to pursue is to address the severance between Theater and Peace and to re-connect them by articulating the principles of theatrical Art in a newly globalized context.

This Proposal is not new, but rather a reinforcement of what Theater can be: an Art that seeks to bring Us together, to elevate our Spirits and Transcend the everyday for a suspended glimpse of what is True, Good, and Beautiful in being Human.

And to that effect, I am preparing to launch Kyoung’s Pacific Beat, an experimental theater company dedicated to the promotion of a culture of peace by radically destabilizing normative cultural assumptions that cause direct and structural violence in the world. However, based on the theoretical proposition that globalization takes place in a “state of anarchy” in which no rules apply, our work will not follow any form of theatrical realism but instead, explore through no rules how we experience this state of anarchy. We’ll follow these principles with the belief that through art and dialogue, Theater has the power to question oppressive social structures, bridge cultural differences, and explore our world’s interconnectedness to serve as a tool for non-violent, social change.