

Heat Bath by Matthew Maguire

Is the Theatre in Crisis?

The death of Theatre is an ongoing process subject to the laws of entropy; it will not be brief, but it will be exciting.

"Somehow, after all, as the universe ebbs towards its final equilibrium in the featureless heat bath of maximum entropy, it manages to create interesting structures" (James Gleick, *Chaos*, p. 308).

The Theatre will last centuries, perhaps forever. Will it always seem to be dying? Always. Theatre has perpetually been in crisis because of its evanescence. As Beckett would say, we "give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more." Microsoft can hope to gain permanent market share; the theatre never. It resists commodification in its bones, bones lighter than air. Because it is always vanishing in the moment, it is simple to see it as endangered, but its fragility is an illusion. It will never face extinction because it is not solid. It is an impulse. The history of its censorship reveals that the impulse to create Theatre is endlessly renewable. Examples such as the Puritans burning all the London theatres to the ground in 1642 demonstrate that the more the Theatre is attacked the more its power grows. There will be future moments when the Theatre will seem to be eclipsed, yet it will only have moved underground, historically a fertile womb. Witness the Eastern Europeans' secret living room theatre during the Cold War.

So the problem of the Theatre is always the problem of the wider culture. When the Puritans burnt the theatres branding them "chapels of Satan," was the Theatre in crisis? ["You betcha," said the ashes to the ember.] We can't isolate the crisis in the Theatre without recognizing its interrelationship to its community, now a national, even a global one.

To identify the root of a crisis we use the technique of Deep Throat, that shadowy guide to the core of the Watergate scandal: "Follow the money." By watching a corrupt Congress fight to block campaign finance reform it becomes ever clearer that our society is in a craven embrace with cash. Material products like silicon and crude oil drive our consciousness. Our legal system protects property as the highest value. We are rooted in the corporeal. Thus, the commercial origin of our collective image system. We are in danger of abandoning the pursuit of democracy because it is too chaotic. Chaos is bad for business. We sold our freedom for the myth of order. The myth of order has a perfect surface, and we are beguiled by surfaces. The surfaces are getting slicker and slicker. How can the arts compete in the commodities exchange? By recognizing that our new patronage represents the corporatization of the Theatre, and by offering an alternative vision.

As black lung is to coal miners so is the ideology of corporations to American Theatre. Like other occupational hazards, black lung and corporatization do not afflict all miners or all theatres. The percentage that succumb depends upon overall conditions. With the rising power of the corporation expect the percentage to rise. Black lung afflicts miners because the coal dust is pervasive in the air they breathe. There is no cataclysmic event or virus that can be pointed to as *the* cause. In the same way, the ideology of the corporation has become pervasive in the climate of our theatres. Because the damage is invisible to the eye some say there is none, just as the mine owners once refused to acknowledge black lung.

In the last twenty years institutionalization was the pervasive dust. Focus was drawn from art and given to the creation of self-justifying bureaucratic structures. As CEO's joined the boards of theatres the agendas of corporations and theatres began to merge. The corporation believes that the homogenization of society is necessary for the maximization of profit. Just as hard news is disappearing on TV in favor of soundbites, supposed human interest stories, and the Hollywood Minute, so pressure is on the theatres to conform to a standard that keeps cash registers ka-chinging. The agenda of the corporation is a social order organized around three laws for its client/citizens: Consume. Reproduce. Conform.

It was inevitable that the Berlin Wall would fall. On the plus side, people who believe in some form of socialist alternative no longer need to labor under the onerous example of the Soviet model, but there is a burden the arts suffer for the fall of the wall. Public perception, carefully modulated by the media, is that the event was a total victory for capitalism, "the end of history." This has created a climate in which everything is valued in relation to the market.

Corporations fear that because art is non-material it removes us, however temporarily, from our greatest goal: consumption. Plays that are socially and politically challenging are not conducive to the feeling of well being that motivates the purchaser. Exercising their "will to commodify," corporations have also exacerbated the real estate problem. The physical plant is crucial to a theatre's identity. Not a property owner? Then move along.

Wrestling this hydra exacts a price, so we must find strategies to fight burnout. The first is to see the larger pattern. Victimization increases when isolated people, seeing only their own quandary, fail to understand the wider context: the corporatization of America. For example: what's happening in the farm crisis is analogous to the Theatre's plight. Small independent family-run farms can't compete with agri-business and are going under at alarming rates. The crisis in small business: the little grocery fails when Walmart moves in. The crisis in education: small independent public schools, like the Bronx New School, highly successful in its neighborhood, are forced to close because they don't conform. Diversity is under attack in every sphere by the forces of homogenization.

Why is a diversity of alternative visions desirable? Finding the struggles of environmentalists analogous, I see the controversy over the Spotted Owl as

instructive. Many people argued, since there are so many species of owl, what does one less matter, especially weighed against the loss of jobs? The answer is that erosion is a dangerous process that accelerates geometrically. Since all the elements of a system are interdependent, the loss of one will trigger further loss. Similarly in the Theatre, many are willing to concede the attrition of small theatres, thinking it an inevitable consequence of their inability to build a protective base, but eventually the loss of small theatres will artistically bankrupt the large ones. When large theatres are as ready to fight for an endangered small theatre as environmentalists were for the Spotted Owl, then our necessary ecology will be enriched.

"Maximize profit" is the corporate mantra. Due to polite discretion this pervasive ideology has been translated in the not-for-profit theatre as "maximize growth." Indeed, corporations are growing. A drama of life as a food chain plays out as small productive corporations are snatched up in hostile takeovers with leveraged buyouts, saddled with immense debt, and abandoned when their productivity fails due to lack of capital. But in eco-systems balance depends upon the maintenance of stable levels. Excessive growth of any one group will endanger the balance.

Corporate marketing has found that sponsorship is a dirt cheap way to buy exposure. The strings attached to modest grants usually require the theatre to spend resources to satisfy the sponsor's visibility. After stroking the sponsor a theatre's net gain is diminished. We in the Theatre are whores, and not even smart ones, never even haggling for a higher price. Since general operating support is boring for the corporation, their largesse has become project related. An exciting example for them is: "The Mainstream Rep and Monsanto present." This means tailoring the season to suit separate sponsors, and more pressure to abandon seasons with an arc of interrelationships because those plays fail to buff the sponsor's image.

Corporate grants also co-opt in more insidious ways. Philip Morris, for example, buys silence with its grants, many of which are minimal, but having accepted the money, many artists who might otherwise speak out against the criminal effects of the company's product on the national health are silent.

Corporate support often fails to repeat; theatres are left flat. The agenda which the toppling of the wall opens up is the dismantling of all the safety nets. Witness Clinton's leadership in the dismantling of the welfare system. And that goes for culture as well. If you're not "too big to fail," and your bottom line ain't pretty no more, you're dead meat. Modern capitalism must be hyperflexible in its fluidity. Corporate planners intone that long-term investments in intangibles are counterproductive to net gain. That ain't no jive.

Hitler and Stalin knew the value of culture. "Art was central to their world view," says Klaus Goldmann, chief curator of Berlin's Museum for Pre- and Early History. "The Nazis and the Soviets went at it with equal vigor on the theory that if you destroy a people's art, then you destroy their historical identity and

confidence" (*The Heist of 1945*, Newsweek, July 15, 1991). We don't need Hitler or Stalin. We're doing it to ourselves. The primary henchmen of corporations--Congress and the media--have found that attacks on culture help to advance nationalism. And nationalism is the trophy wife of corporate life.

I'm not naive about patronage. Pope Julius forced Michelangelo to paint the fig leaves on the Sistine ceiling. Shakespeare had to write the histories to please Queen Elizabeth. Their patrons were no less autocratic. But instead of religion or politics, our patron's power base is economic, and like the mercantile class out of which it rises, its taste is more bourgeois, banal, and short-sighted. Jasper Johns once said, artists are the elite of the servant class. I suppose it's a matter of taste, but if I had to choose a master I'd rather serve Elizabeth or Julius than the dollar.

As the capitalist system grows ever more distorted, it will generate, against its will, a yearning for a sense of life not defined as a transaction, and the arts will gain in power. As Heiner Müller said, "Consumerism is not a dream. People who don't dream go mad."

So, yes, we have a crisis. What should we do?

- *Fight fire with fire*

I'm not suggesting that theatres avoid corporations. As corporations attempt to shape and mold theatres, so should theatres seek to reform corporations. After all, we're talking about the capitalist model; buying and selling is a two-way street. Why should artists be so passive and allow corporations to always set the agenda? Artists should leverage corporations in the same way that consumer groups affect change. Theatres should adopt Ralph Nader's strategies: public boycotts and public rewards. Theatres should boldly advertise that they accept donations from progressive corporations, and that they *do not accept* donations from tobacco, nuclear power, or from companies engaged in child labor. Major foundations, such as Ford, Rockefeller, and Pew, should be persuaded to fund arts groups to study how funding could be increased from socially responsible corporations and phased out from destructive ones. The flagship theatres should aggressively lobby their corporate donors to drop their carcinogenic products and practices.

To the argument that all money is tainted, therefore distinction is arbitrary, I say some money is more tainted than others. The tobacco companies are the cause of millions of deaths every year. This money is obviously more stained than the profits of a solar energy company. No one is pure but there is a spectrum. Draw a line. Publicize it. The answer, "I didn't make the world," is defeatist. The world is evolving all the time, one way or another. The question, how can we produce this year without their funding? is answered by the question, how can you accept the dustbowl down the road if you don't make change now? A farmer is advised to irrigate and build erosion barriers. He says, if I do I won't be able to plant my crop in time. But if he doesn't he'll have no crop at all in three years. Artists should accept short-term loss for long-term gain.

- *Embrace hope.*

I feel like Dr. Jeckyl and Mr. Hyde. Hyde is savagely eager to see it all come crashing down. Jeckyl, searching for something to counter him, seizes upon the thin reed of hope inherent in the ultimate unpredictability of the world: *ya never know what's gonna happen*. In bleak moments the hope that the Theatre can ever can thrive in this blighted culture seems a pathological delusion; the only clean approach is to dynamite the thing and build from the rubble. However, if the world continues to change at hyperspeed--*and ya never know what's gonna happen*--then why not embrace the real hope that rapid change contains?

- *Embrace history*

Writing is a time capsule, a message sent forward in time. The paradox of a classic play is that it reveals that the time we know has passed is still present. *Hamlet* provides us with a breathing image of 1600 and we sense that time is now. Perhaps it's an illusion that time passes. The breath of a classic is the enigma of time. As theatre artists dedicated to advancing the form we mustn't forget this whirligig. *Hamlet* is continuously reinvented in successive presents. The 19th century was passed on to the 20th when Gertrude Stein watched Edwin Booth play *Hamlet* in San Francisco and discovered that two things could happen at the same time. We can't fail if we take as our guide Ezra Pound's dictum, "Make it new." However, as we anticipate the future we must remember to digest our sources. Some artists believe that to progress they must kill their artistic parents. Imagine how much faster we might progress if we subsumed them instead of denying them. No artist is without antecedent. The avant garde is a steady stream of births during which the *new* is created by the transformation of existing ideas. Today emerges from yesterday: O'Neill is already in Strindberg. History is the connective tissue.

- *Imagine an alternative reality.*

Work the margins--step back and reflect long enough to visualize an evolutionary move. This may take a long time, but as the classics show us, we have all the time we need.

- *Expose the apolitical.*

Artists must abandon the fallacy that their function is to record reality without political filters. Those supposedly apolitical artists nurture the myth that their art is unmediated; that reflecting the world through the lens of class would impede the flow of *the straight stuff*. However, the unmediated is an illusion; there's no such beast. When we're taking dictation from the muse we're mainlining heavy doses of received culture: habits, idioms, and patterns imposed from infancy. To not retool these filters is to accept the virtual reality goggles of our socialization.

- *Become an expert on censorship.*

Theatre has always been the conscience of its society. That function was eroded in the U.S. by McCarthyism and the black lists. The American Theatre is still attempting to recover. Cutting a theatre's

funding is only one form of censorship. One of our greatest challenges is to confront the amazing variety of censorship in American society:

Amnesia - Since our art is an art of memory, perhaps the greatest censorship of all: the massive amnesia of our society, embodied metaphorically in the image of a popular former president serving out his term in the grips of Alzheimer's.

Ghettoization - There has never been a more difficult time to sustain radical work in terms of paychecks and real estate. Insane rents strangle alternative visions.

Cooptation - To survive, many theatres flak for the corporate Medici. Instead of leading their communities in progressive directions the CEO's that dominate the boards have used the theatres to create bastions of conservatism.

Eclipse - I heard Ariel Dorfman speak of a time when Pinochet forbid newspapers to publish photos of secret police, so the Chilean papers printed black blocks and coined them the "black holes of Pinochet." Dorfman admonished that in the U.S. we have far more insidious means of censorship: the technicolor holes of Primetime. In the past the radical actions of the avant garde made headlines. Now the media and the corporate dynasties that control it have become more sophisticated and have seized the mass consciousness so powerfully that our chance for meaningful impact is in crisis.

Selective Tolerance - We can yell on our soap box and no will mind. I recall when Pinochet put seventy-seven actors in Chile on a death list. That was a recognition of the power he felt Theatre held. In the U.S. one of our great challenges is to fight the despair of irrelevance. The antidote for this despair is that tenet of chaos theory, the butterfly effect: the flap of a butterfly's wing in Beijing can set a Kansas cyclone spiraling. An individual voice can amplify over time, as Rosa Parks's act of refusing to move to the back of the bus helped to spark the civil rights movement.

- *Attack the Theatre.*

I'd never suggest that the Theatre is perfect and we must direct all our attacks outwardly. No, the Theatre is a leaky corpse. Our heroes were iconoclasts, so must we be. Attacks on the Theatre have always provoked brilliant change, as in Artaud, Stein, Brecht, and Grotowski. Historically, there has always been a healthy and deep-rooted ambivalence towards the Theatre from within its own practitioners. The purpose of the avant garde is to carry on an intense pursuit of reality. Question everything. To do so we must tear ourselves from the equations that bind.

- *Resist experimental orthodoxy.*

One of the joys of current alternative work is that the arena has become deeply pluralistic; no one is compelled to speak in the official avant garde dialect. This has not always been the case. The art cops of the past, from André Breton to

Clement Greenberg, would bare their fangs when an artist broke ranks. Break their fangs. Chaos is what we must desire so that we may survive.

- *Avoid tunnel vision.*

Radicalize ourselves on issues larger than the grant trough. It is disturbing to see the Theatre community rush to organize against funding cuts. So myopic. The right wing's attack on arts funding is only a small piece of its strategy. Many of funding's defenders are not fighting against the government's criminal neglect of the AIDS epidemic. They aren't fighting for Labor and the environment and campaign finance reform. They ignore the fundamental interconnectedness of all spheres of our artistic and political life.

- *Fight burnout.*

Travel. Go to Sri Lanka, or to Venice before it sinks. Study medicine. Learn Yoruban. Throw a changeup pitch. Burnout sets in when one tries to accomplish the impossible for too long. What we do is impossible. Since it's rare for an artist to take a vacation, at least change the mental landscape on a regular basis.

- *Explore the deep terrain of performance.*

Balance art and politics. Work that imagines a radical alternative to our political tarpit needs to be enriched with a heightened awareness of the anatomy of our art. In other words, remember that as an activist your art is the spine of your protest. This requires a constant investigation of the nature of performance. The concept of performance is elusive because each action we take is performative. Turning over in bed at night, I experience a half-conscious awareness that the way I turn will signal a decision to the characters in my dream. I perform even as I sleep.

Performance is an action that aspires to an ultimate articulation. It is perhaps the highest mode of life. One of the many strands of thought running through my mind as I perform is: what is performance? And then I attempt to answer that through my action:

Performance is any human action framed by a circumscribed space.

Performance occurs when precise boundaries ritualize action.

Performance occurs when the meaning of an action is heightened by an awareness of its presence within a framed space: a stage, a bed, an altar, a witness stand.

When we draw a circle on the ground or on the floor and agree that everything that happens within the circle will have resonance, then we have created the conditions of performance.

The circle is like the stretched skin of a drum. Actions within the circle resound like the striking of the drum.

Performance is the culture's strategy to create events which resound.

- *Abandon false definitions of realism*

The Theatre thrives in a field of rapid oscillation between artifice and reality, an oscillation so rapid it blurs like a hummingbird's wings, creating a condition of hovering. The performer is a person who can see himself or herself as if in a hall of mirrors--the artifice revealing reality revealing artifice revealing reality ad infinitum. The playwright conjures moments that evoke our heightened awareness of the reality of artifice and the artifice of reality, that artifice and reality comprise life like alternating layers of a Russian doll. What does the doll at the core represent? Not finality, because there is no finality. It represents infinity.

- *Embrace the new technology.*

I appreciate a foreboding about the colonizing potential of technology, but I don't share it. When I say technology is *merely* a tool, I don't deny that tools shape consciousness. Yes, prime advances in tools like the wheel and the printing press altered human perception, but they didn't supplant essential rituals like performance, and never will. The computer and its brilliant progeny, the internet and interactive multi-media, have already changed the world. Audiences are more attuned to alternative realities because of virtual technology, realities which are primarily *internal*. This is not threatening. Artists, theologians, and assorted mystics have inhabited internal space for millennia. Witness the Aboriginal concept of the Dreamtime, in which all of us inhabit several dimensions simultaneously. Technology will change us as has every one of our tools, but we will eventually subsume it. That has been the historical pattern: a new tool dominates consciousness until the novelty of its utility is overshadowed by the new ideas it enables, then it becomes background. What intrigues me about the possibilities of new technology is the implication of an infinite collapse of space/time. A place where the boundaries of inside and outside dissolve, where things happen but nothing takes place, may be a logical fallacy, but we are more ready to imagine it because of the new technology, and that is a fertile mindset for Theatre.

- Put your whole world in a time capsule and send it again and again.

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