

Shape of Being

By Caridad Svich

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In times like these, times that are out of joint, tragedy and what it teaches us as a dramatic form may be our best hope of finding a way toward considerations of peace, reconciliation and forgiveness.

This last word sits on my tongue. Forgiveness. In some ways, its sound is soft and evanescent. The double "s" at the end of the word nearly fades as soon as one utters it. Yet, the word, for all of its seeming softness, is hard. And harder still when you face the page with the rage and despair effected by a world that feels increasingly fractioned by myriad issues, not the least of which are exponential economic inequity, and mercenary sectarian violence.

The radiating power of radical empathy and through it the courage to forgive the ones who attack and destroy, and the ones too that are on the receiving end of violence – physical, economic, and spiritual – allows citizen-spectators to reflect upon and perhaps embolden themselves toward acts of progressive transformation.

You may say, but why speak of tragedy now? The world is messed up, to put it mildly. What can a writer do or even hope to do in times such as these?

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A couple of years ago, I decided I wanted to face the page in a new way (or maybe it was an old way that felt new to me). Regardless, I wanted to look at the poetics of the page in a manner that felt intimately connected to the heart-mind-body. In effect, I wanted to look at dramatic form as a container not necessarily for narrative and character (although I have nothing against either), but as shape – the shape of being. My overriding question for this dramatic project (one I am still on, by the way) was "How are we/I in the world?" How do we define a communal "we?" And what do we mean when we say "I?"

I suppose this central question seems unbearably simple, but I have found – play after play – that drawing a shape of being and doing so with clarity, purpose, and intention, not to mention, an awakened sense of grace, is much harder than it seems, because it has something to do – at root – with forgiveness.

That word again. With its double "s" folding into the corners of the mouth, sitting on the tongue, waiting to be welcomed into the body.

If drama is animated by conflict – by opposing forces battling it out or making love in an arena of desire witnessed by spectators immersed in a dance of wills that cast their semaphoric signs across space and time – it is ultimately called to deliver on how and where it sits in relationship to forgiveness, and its twinned reflector, radical empathy.

If drama – old-fashioned word, I know; much less favorable to use when "performance" is preferred – but, for now, let's say drama, because, well, it actually means "action" in its noun form, and "to do and/or to act" in its verb form – demands of its citizen-spectators the creation of or the making way for

the condition of the tragic to be held in time and space, and in body and mind, then it may just encourage at very least a consideration of our greater potentialities as human beings.

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I'm not idealistic enough to think a play can change the world – that any play can change the world. Real change is not the deal. The deal is somewhere else. The deal is not even a deal, but rather a spirit-thing that cannot be quantified and measured with words like “social impact” and “effective outreach.”

What I'm saying is that the ontological process of examining being-ness goes beyond identifiable barometers of efficacy.

What I'm saying is that art may actually not be useful at all, despite the fact that in the immediate matter of things, there is the desire to measure its worth and value in economic and educational terms.

I think theatre's great power may lie in its uselessness – as radical and Wildean as that may seem – even while it reflects in ways mimetic and not upon the ethics of citizenship, the rule of law, and how power is wielded in manners tyrannical and not.

Theatre is not the world.

Theatre is something else, somewhere else.

It may look and sound like the world sometimes, but really, it is its own thing.

And yet, paradoxically, it becomes the world because of the unbearable beauty of drama's capacity to express a shape of being.

The I and we of theatre are in constant negotiation linguistically, corporeally, and sensorial - site to actor, actor to actor, actor to audience, text to space, and so on – to locate and dislocate. A sign is marked. A sign is erased. A sign lives in the ghosted space of theatre. Its meaning changes and shifts according to how it moves, and how it is received. Through unfixing planes of signified existence, it allows for new possibilities to be born out of the wreckage of solidity. The liquid and plastic nature of theatre make it urgent, dangerous and defiantly useless.

You can't hold it in your hands, because it cannot be contained.

And even when you film it, something in theatre resists.

It is this resistance – this essential dissidence – that lies at the heart of making theatre.

It cannot be the world, because the world already exists.

It can only be other, alterna, defiant, marked by its refusal to be marked.

Untracing theatre, un-marking from its markings, is what every writer does, even while lines are drawn into the sand of the page's canvas.

In so doing, the daily practice of enacting commonwealth – central to the making of drama – teaches us something time and again about what is possible through conflict resolution, and opens us toward a lightness of being we may not even know we possessed in the first place.

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I started making there in North Carolina. I wrote my first full-length play while I was a student at UNCC. It was a play that defined my path, and instilled in me the powerful self-recognition that I was a playwright – something I had not realized until then.

When I was a student at UNCC, I remember the classes, yes, and the work, yes, but most of all, the moments that were outside the classroom – when a professor would go out of their way to say to me “have you read this book or seen that film?” There is teaching that occurs through such guidance, but it is about someone looking at for you and pointing you towards something you may not have even known was there in the first place. I am grateful for those moments and the people that took the time to stir my curiosity as a young artist and demand that I deepen it.

I have written many plays since my time at UNCC. Too many to count! But the soil of North Carolina is in all of my plays, because that’s where the fire was truly lit.

To all who paved the way, and to a landscape that continues its call to me, my thanks, and a song:

“You walk along the yellow moon

You walk in fields of red

You walk as if the earth is still

There is no place to rest

Oh bitter earth, surrender me

Find me in lower ground

For when I wait, I wait for you

Down in low valley.

For when I wait, I wait for you

Down in low valley.”¹

¹ ‘Low Valley’ words and music by Caridad Svich from her play *Sanctuary (American Psalm)*