

## THOUGHTS ON COMING UP IN THE THEATRE BY A YOUNG MAN OF COLOR, PART I

*"People who shut their eyes to reality simply invite their own destruction, and anyone who insists on remaining in a state of innocence long after that innocence is dead turns himself into a monster." -- James Baldwin*

I have no intention of being a writer. I'm being serious. Writing is a craft and discipline, the development of which is dependent on the practitioner's love of the actual process of writing. I am simply a person unable to bear their own thoughts. And so my intention is to order those thoughts in such a way that I may purge them into the American cesspool of exchange; whether or not they are lost in the noise is a decision left to that which is beyond my scope.

I simply want peace.

Hence this blog.

Maybe I secretly (or not so secretly) do want to be a writer.

I certainly have the intention of continuing my career as an actor. Acting is a discipline which, like writing, requires studied attention to the truth. And if every day I can work on ways to increase my capacity for that attention then I think I will be doing my job. I don't know exactly when I decided to be an actor, just that it was the only occupation I ever cared to pursue. I am not interested in digging into my past to find "the moment" in which acting "saved" me because a) my childhood is a rather dry, tormented, and forgettable affair and frankly no one else's business; and b) I think anyone waiting for an artistic discipline to "save" them is frighteningly delusional. And perhaps the only consistent principle of any artistic discipline is the abandonment of delusion.

I've now reached the subject of this post: delusion. Really, that is the subject of this entire blog--or anything ever written that is of any worth--but in this particular post I will be addressing it directly.

Alright fine, I lied, I have to go into my childhood a bit--just for context. Hang on.

I was born in Fresno, California twenty-six years ago. Growing up my only two concerns were 1) pleasing every adult around me, and 2) escaping the turmoils beset upon me by my inability to cheerfully bear the conflicting ridicules of the American public school system and my traditional North African household.

One of my modes of escape (besides the obvious) was talking to myself. I had an unusual (or usual?) penchant for doing so. I would talk to myself for hours, alone. I would usually imagine some sort of conversation I wish I could be having with a teacher, parent, or another kid, that I was too frightened to have in reality. In most of these conversations, I was quite angry. This

release of my repression became the bedrock of my imagination and my first preparation for the "acting" discipline. Or the psychiatry ward. I found myself in the former.

I nearly failed high school, yet was elected class-speaker--which gave me a brief air of celebrity among the students because of the outrage I created among the parent teacher association. Due either to my speech's polemic against creationism and american imperialism or my relentless piss and shit jokes--I can't remember which. It was probably the piss and shit jokes.

I managed to get good enough grades in community college in order to transfer to a UC school. When I left school, I began building a professional stage career in the San Francisco Bay Area. I later made an unannounced move to New York, where my final acting work before the onset of the current global response to the novel coronavirus was playing a lead in a workshop production of a George Bernard Shaw adaptation at a leading Off-Broadway theatre and training with Shakespeare and Company in lennox, Massachusetts.

In school I did a lot of plays and studied under some respected acting teachers all while pretending to get a degree in political science. I then started booking a lot of stage work outside of school while pretending to be a sober, respectable, amiable young adult.

I spent most of my time in San Francisco homeless, living off the grace of friends or in a car I was using to drive for rideshare services.

My move to San Francsico garnered me my first real encounters with sex and alcohol, and I attest to being both a victim and a scoundrel in regards to both allures.

Entire days are blocked out of my memory and relationships with people I felt utter affection for have been completely ruined. I never thought anyone would care to help me because I had grown used to being treated like a forty-year old man since I was sixteen. Whether this treatment had to do with the disposition wrought upon me by my own internal turmoil or if it had more to do with the prejudice of others I still cannot tell. I suspect it is a sordid entanglement of both.

No more on that. I said I didn't want to talk about my past, but I just want to make a point. I am not coming from a noble place. I am a truly imperfect ally in the universal quest for justice.

And I'm still that frightened kid.

Consider this the conversation I wish I could be having with my two great loves: America, and the American Theatre.

And I enter this conversation having scarred and been scarred. I am in no position to condemn, only to tell the truth as best I can.

And already, I do not feel qualified to be having this conversation. For one, my only real

connection to America is that it is my place of birth--which isn't really the case because I was born in California's Central Valley--recently annexed land far away from the original pilgrim frontier. And I was given an American "education," if one can call public school in an area with considerable white supremacist activity an education.

I also did not go to acting conservatory (though I have attempted to get in, and got very close, but failed) and if I were to absolve my resume of one or two "fancy" credits then I seem to have no more experience than one of a myriad of hobbyists.

For as much emotional "support" I receive for the "challenges" I face as an actor of color I receive the same amount of disdain for booking work because "diversity is in." Because apparently the American entertainment industry is no longer racist.

But I'm not here to complain about the "industry."

Again my subject is delusion, which if approached from a place of rage, exacerbates. Delusion can only be relinquished from a place of humble understanding. Again, my practice is the studied attention to truth--which isn't to say that I know how to do this but that I am trying to teach myself how to do it.

I'll start with some questions.

What is America? More specifically, what are the acute values we Americans--or we who must call ourselves Americans whether we like it or not--must fight for?

And what is the American Theatre? More specifically, what is the American theatrical "industry" and what exactly does it offer us?

These questions of course, cannot be answered in a single blog post or an entire blog or perhaps by any accumulation of writing in the history of the world. Again, I am not an expert or an authority--just a person trying to find their own truth. Most of what you're about to read is an amalgamation of other people's ideas. If there's one sentence in here that is an entirely original idea I would be surprised and happy. But let me offer up some momentary considerations--not as answers, but as temporary responses.

The American value worth fighting for is liberation--that is the freedom from limits on thought and behavior for all beings. All beings. This value of liberation is perniciously haunted by enslavement. Whether it be the horrific mercantile severing of Black Beings and Indigenous Beings from their physical and cultural homeland or the demeaning prioritization of profit over the dignity of the vulnerable--particularly women and anyone who needs a paycheck.

The American Theatre is the American "seeing place." That is, the realm in which artists are free to "see" that which has not been seen before in order that their audience may have gleaned an

insight that releases them from the shackles of their preconceived notions. This function is also called entertainment--and it manifests itself in the involuntary laughs and gasps of its beholders. This theatre and its "industry" can offer us great story--be it "All My Sons" or "A Raisin in the Sun" or "Breaking Bad" or "Atlanta."

This realm of "seeing," this place of "story" is perniciously haunted by rape. Whether it be the literal rape of the artist or the rape by virtue of recrimination of the artist to maintain deference to those who have (financial) power over her/him/them.

That is to say, even in the places where the literal rape may not be happening, the recrimination of the artist in service of the institution almost certainly is--no matter how "lovely" the employers are.

A slave is not happy just because one can hear them singing while they work.

And the American worker (and actor) is still a slave.

Any thought to the contrary, in my eyes, is a delusion.

I'm not the first to think this and by no means the first to say it. I'm only saying it in my way.

The evidence to my point is the fit of gorgeously unbridled rage we all seem to be in.

My question is this:

Why so much concern for cancers within a body that is not ours to begin with?

I haven't covered all the complex, intersectional, conflicting territory on this subject but I will end this post on this series of thoughts:

We who are young and hungry in the theatre--particularly those of us who are of color--define ourselves by the rage and resentment we have against the way this "industry" degrades us. Degrades itself.

Why do we give a shit?

Once the money's back, we'll all still end up speaking languages and worshiping gods that are not our own and that have been imposed upon us.

I think that anyone who submits to the lies perpetuated by the "industry"--however large or small, in order to protect their "career" invites their own destruction. We are all responsible for our choices given any circumstance.

Sometimes the only choice is "career" suicide, but that choice still offers us our dignity. Which is

the only thing any of us can control anyway.

And how many examples exist where what seemed like "career suicide" offered the dissenter something greater than what they previously imagined a lesser choice might grant them?

Our masters are not gods. They are human just like you and me.

And we're not talking life and death here, at least, in terms of a career in art.

Every artist must understand that their fulfillment comes from within. And choosing dignity over what seems like a "rise from the ranks" in the short term is an effort which only feeds that fulfillment.

I know this because for most of my early and brief career, I made choices which weren't about this kind of fulfillment.

I want to shift my focus back on to my own dignity.

I get the feeling this is all too terribly idealistic.

I probably couldn't do it.

But I have to try. Otherwise, what's the point?

I shame no one for taking the money. No one. I'd do it too if I could.

I simply offer a question which I am by no means the first to ask:

We take the money at what cost?

Have we forgotten about the theatre that only exists in our hearts?

Any attention to the "industry" can only take us away from this theatre in our hearts.

And in that sense we become the monsters we've been fighting all along.

I have been both a monster and a lamb in this "industry." I have already been on the receiving end of things (from both men and women, white and not white) that are undeniably cruel. And I have done and said things for which I should never be invited back. All of this and my career has only barely begun. Things have to be different. I have to be different. And for myself and for anyone else who is young and upcoming in this euphorically glorious and horrifically depraved circus we call the American Theatre I think that change starts with telling the truth.

We are in the midst of a battle where, as Baldwin puts it, "all are betrayed by greed and guilt and blood lust and where no one's hands are clean."

I propose we remember that no one's hands are clean.

Some hands are bloodier than others, but no one's hands are clean.

We've seen the reality. We don't have to invite our own destruction.

Our innocence is dead. We don't have to become monsters.

We're not some Scottish king, who finds himself "in blood stepped in so far..." that he can no longer turn back from the violence his desires have unleashed.

We can still turn back. And become the Egyptian, Nigerian, Syrian, Indonesian, Chinese, Chilean, Brazilian queens and kings we were meant to be.

We don't have to subsume to the sordid narratives prescribed to us by those who know nothing of our own stories, myths, and ideals.

I want a theatre where all are invited to humble fountains of ablution.

I want a theatre that washes out lust to make room for love.

I want a theatre that washes out greed to make room for generosity.

I want a theatre that washes out whiteness to make room for blackness.

I want a theatre where talent is cultivated rather than wasted because of prejudice against one's race, gender, or lack of material resources.

I want a theatre that is clean and liberated.

I want a theatre that is fun.

A clean and liberated theatre will be the first sign of a clean and liberated America.

Any attempt to purify the process of a theatrical ensemble is its own act of revolution.

Let me repeat that: any attempt to purify the process of a theatrical ensemble is its own act of revolution.

By "washing" and "purifying" and "clean" I do not mean safe and obedient. I mean doing what's

necessary so that we can feel free to be the radical, indiscreet, messy, impure, unformed, truthful beings we were meant to be.

In order to do this we have to wash away that which make us safe and obedient; the lies that pass for "practicality"--which is simply a word that refers to what benefits none but those who seek to profit off our bodies and minds.

When we truncate the process in service of the bottom line we lose our audience. Which is to say, our souls.

Let's build new theatres, "seeing places." That would be far more rewarding and no less fruitful than seeking the approval of those who thrive off excluding us. Let's come to the alter as both owners and humble beginners without an atom's weight or less of pretense. let's discover deeper traditions that are clean and liberated and exorcise the shame of the falsehoods we've taken for granted.

Everything we've been taught is bullshit. Everything.

Let's wash it away and make space for truth.

The truth is much older and much more beautiful.

That is why there is such a concerted effort to hide it from us.

Our power combined with our truth will make us unstoppable.

The effort is real and there aren't "more important things to do."

This is more important than picking the right politicians or championing the right public policies--though we can't not do that either.

I say this because history shows us that the greatest influence over people is not law or lawmakers but exemplars of humanity with no intention of brokering power. That is to say the philosophers, artists, and dissenters. All of whom are the same. And some of the greatest among them exercised their talent in some of the worst conditions known to humanity.

Other people can't help but want to be us.

So let's give them an example.

Sometimes we have to break shit because we just have to.

And that's ok.

But beyond that,

Our rage is meaningless.

Our energy is essential.

The "industry" deserves neither.

Fuck the industry.

The people deserve our energy.

To be continued.

This post is dedicated to the late Barbara Ann Teer.

\*\*\*

*Mohammad Shehata's blog.* [mohammadshehata.com](http://mohammadshehata.com)