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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

‘Taint not thy mind’

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements

for the Master of Fine Arts Degree

in

Theatre and Dance (Directing)

by

Michael Socrates Moran

Committee in charge:

Professor Gabor Tompa, Chair
Professor Andrei Both
Professor Judy Dolan
Professor Manuel Rotenberg

2015

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The thesis of Michael Socrates Moran is approved and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

Chair

University of California, San Diego

2015

DEDICATION

To Gabor Tompa who continuously brought enlightenment of theatre's artistic potential.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

'Taint not thy mind'

by

Michael Socrates Moran

Master of Fine Arts in Theatre and Dance (Directing)

University of California, San Diego, 2015

Professor Gabor Tompa, Chair

The play *Hamlet* is a trap of mirrors for both its characters and the artists that produce it. Like Hamlet, working on this play felt like the inevitable 'walking into one's grave' and thereupon begin suffering the abject terror of unknown consequences. It is a trap of mirrors because it reflects back our unpleasant and inescapable darkness. It transfixes the imagination to observe the anguish the noble prince Hamlet endures. He who wishes to illuminate the world must navigate his dark side and the dark side of others.

I directed *Hamlet* because I wanted to understand the transformation of Hamlet in the fifth act. I lived in terror of producing this play. However, I developed at least a modest awareness of the inevitable limitations that adhere to its production. The play is either too introspective or too extroverted. The wrongdoings are either minor or profligate. Also, some of the shortcomings and wrongdoings are not susceptible to change. The awareness of our failings transforms our relationship with the world. Is it possible that the trap of mirrors ceases to affect us so violently once we see the darkness the mirrors reveal about ourselves?

At the end of the day, a proverb by the monk, Martin Luther, seems applicable to Hamlet's journey, to the play's history and to all the collaborators who worked so diligently: 'Sin bravely'. If the root meaning of the word 'sin' is to miss the mark, then perhaps we 'sin bravely' because it is only by missing the mark, by walking into the unknown and by facing our terror, that we might be saved.

Taint not thy mind

My world view challenged by the production of *Hamlet*

While at UCSD, I directed Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. After my first year, I also started a theatre company called 'The Ubuntu Theatre Project.' All three efforts are deeply interconnected and influence one another. 'Ubuntu' is a Zulu Proverb that means **I am because we are**. It is a concept not expressed by a single word in the English language and a concept which the Western World struggles to achieve. Being intrinsically interconnected and intrinsically beholden to each others' existence by how we conduct ourselves is of overriding importance to me. It is an interconnectedness that is mostly disregarded and the disregard causes much social disassociation. Furthermore, if theatre is the poetic space in which metaphysical reality is made manifest, theatre is uniquely suited for revealing the latent interconnectedness that we share but much too often disregard.

The **I am because we are** concept is a guiding principle of my life and the concept guided my production of *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Hamlet*. Its dimensions also guided my creation and development of the 'The Ubuntu Theatre Project'. **I am because we are** clearly interrelates with Steinbeck's belief that the collective soul is greater than the sum of its parts. Steinbeck writes:

I says, 'What's this call, this sperit?' An' I says, 'It's love. I love people so much I'm fit to bust, sometimes.' . . . I figgered, 'Why do we got to hang it on God or Jesus? Maybe,' I figgered, 'maybe it's all men an' all women we love; maybe that's the Holy Sperit-the human sperit-the whole shebang. Maybe all men got one big soul ever'body's a part of.' Now I sat there thinkin' it, an' all of a suddent-I knew it. I knew it so deep down that it was true, and I still know it.

Experiencing the theatre's synergy by way of our interconnectedness is the essence of theatre—to make manifest in the audience a collective imagination of what invisibly links us together. The manifestation might help us transcend our social disassociation. Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* rallies us to join arms and participate in the paradox that, what is beyond us is also inherent in us. However, the predicate is the belief that when the transcendental synergy presents itself, we shall recognize it.

What happens when the unifying theme of **I am because we are** is inverted and the community creates an individual which is its antagonist? If on some level, Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* advocates conversion and participation in the transcendental **I am because we are**, *Hamlet* is its antithesis. In *Hamlet* the “time is out of joint” in Elsinore and despite the collective unconsciousness and self-denial, it is only *Hamlet* that ‘is born to set it right’. *Hamlet* advocates the individual's confrontation of the unconscious and he relies on his own integrity, his solitary vision and his individual connection to a greater power to support him in his charge to re-align and re-connect his world to that which is beyond self-gratification.

I feel strongly that the director and the fully developed human being must inspire his contemporaries to interconnect with him and subsequently walk alone

despite others' collective doubt, distrust and disagreement. My particular gift is that I collaborate and generously share the theatrical experience. I also incorporate many different voices without losing my own way. Although my sensitivity may be misconstrued as being too tentative and listening to many voices may be misconstrued as too confusing, I have enormous faith in my ability to know and trust myself. I demonstrated my gift for collaboration directing *Grapes of Wrath*. Many of my peers and much of the audience considered it one of their best theatrical experiences. The effectiveness of my collaboration was also demonstrated by my ability to start and sustain 'The Ubuntu Theatre Project'. Additionally, two thirds of the UCSD MFA Theatre Department followed me five-hundred miles north to the Bay Area where we performed six plays in six weeks. The students only received travel pay for their effort and could only expect minimal career gain by performing in a start-up theatre company. However, I knew that my collaborative skills would be tested in the production of *Hamlet* because it demanded such a strong, specific, solitary vision. I lived in terror that I would not be able to walk that path alone.

As the Ghost charged Hamlet to “taint not thy mind” and Hamlet’s declaration to “lose not thy nature”, I needed to see if I could retain generosity, sensitivity, and passion in an environment where self- interest might dominate the actor's performance. Indeed, this has been my recurrent effort in graduate school. Navigating these two value systems will continue to be a balancing act in the community as well as within myself. *Hamlet* encompassed this challenge to the extreme and simultaneously offered me a wealth of

content and a fraught process to explore my ability to navigate the theatrical tension as a craftsman, artist and collaborator.

Everyone has their version of *Hamlet* fixed in their imagination. Moreover, directing Shakespeare, and directing a contemporary *Hamlet* in particular, presents precisely the axis of conflicting points of view: it will either alienate conservative theatre goers because it is too radical or it will bore progressives because it is too traditional. Without the hope of pleasing a very large part of an audience, one must be introspective and pursue his values.

I struggled enormously. The actor who played Hamlet and I hold entirely different world views, value systems and interpretations of the role. This caused enormous tension in the directorial process and challenged my leadership skills. There were logistical limitations in design that significantly altered the concept. I did not cut enough in the text early enough and ran into trouble with staging the play in the four weeks allotted. My actors struggled to perform well as a group until our final rehearsal. Furthermore, the difficulties inherent in the play that I did not see caused a constant changing of concepts that confused my collaborators. What developed was a fear that affected the production and was an unhealthy undercurrent for everyone. It sometimes tempted each individual to abandon his dedication to the play and to protect himself professionally by performing well but not collaboratively. I endured an enormous crisis of confidence. I learned that I must be more adversarial at times, be more firm in my

direction and be more articulate in expressing my world view in order to consistently produce inspirational work.

Hamlet forced me to convert my passion into technique and much like his charge, “taint not thy mind,” and “lose not thy nature”, I was challenged to accomplish the conversion without compromising the incandescence that contributes to the gifts I possess as a director. Unfortunately, I did not meet the challenge well. I did not articulate my world view well. Although I believe the production was suspenseful and engaging, I did not justify the need for directing this play again in our present cultural moment.

While adrift and struggling with a dysfunctional Elsinore, Hamlet begins to accept his conflicted self and then discovers an inward freedom, which is otherwise elusive. Similarly, graduate school taught me to aspire to a self-authority that may only be achieved after surviving my lingering self-doubt and thereby continue the trek of mediating my weaknesses.