

Sacred Theater: Playing With All Your Heart by Christopher Anderson

“I commit as deeply as I can, wanting to let my heart be transparent.”

Twenty of us are moving into position over a worn maple floor in an obscure warehouse studio in Minneapolis. We’ve been asked to take the classic pose of the Hindu god Shiva. Shiva, at once both terrifying and benevolent, the king of the cosmic dance, both destroyer and creator. I bend my right leg, lowering my center of gravity, and lift and slightly cross my left leg in the gesture of freedom. Poisonous snakes coil around my neck. My arms are loosely spread toward the raging fire circle of pure energy that blazes around me. From one hand shoots a flame powerful enough to destroy a universe. And in each of my other fifteen hands, whole universes -- or ways of being--are destroyed and created. Before Shiva, says our teacher, Margaret Nash Rubin, director of the Center for Sacred Theater in Ashland, Oregon, mortals tremble and seek release.

Rubin is a professional actor, former education director of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival and sacred theater workshop leader. Since 1986, she has worked as Jean Houston’s principal associate in Houston’s transformational work around the world.

Rubin in her workshops, Houston in her Mystery School, Robert Bly in his men’s conferences improvisational acting, and discussions of local plays we attend Rubin says she intends to help us see our lives as exciting works in progress -- expressions of “high play.” Her interests range over the scope of dramatic literature, including her beloved Shakespeare. But, through an accident of time, the day of this workshop is the day Shiva is celebrated and honored throughout the Hindu world, “What better time is there to work with Shiva?”

Rubin asks us to quickly journal about what it is in our own lives that we are ready to give up and allow to be destroyed, so that something new can be created in its stead. Shiva loves to eat whatever offal we can send his way, says Rubin. It comes to me quickly; I’m, ready to let go of some of my fear.

We break up into small groups and make our preparations. We will participate in a series of individual “plays.” Each person will pick someone from his or her group to be Shiva. Another will be an ally. A third will embody the resistance we need to overcome in order to make the release. The action for me will be

to approach Shiva with the help of my ally, move through my resistance, ask Shiva to destroy my offering, give him my fear, articulate the new reality, and then celebrate.

Sacred Theater is not about artistic or performing ability, it is about intention. “In the great play of your life,” says Rubin, “play it with all your heart, give it everything you’ve got!” The audience is caring and compassionate, not judgmental. It is there to receive your story as an offering rather than as a performance.

And without conflict there is no play. “Instead of blaming all of our conflicted places,” says Rubin, “we sacralize them and see what they did for us.” This is another framing of the Jungian concept about the opportunity we have of reclaiming gold from the shadow areas of our lives.

Shiva has been worshiped in various forms for twenty centuries by the Hindus. Standing on the dwarf of ignorance, in his charged ecstatic dance of destruction and creation, he has served as a great liberator -- breaking down whatever is in his path to release energy for new growth. He is death that contains life. And he is powerful. In some forms he is depicted with three eyes, representing the sun, moon and fire. The third eye is always closed because if it was open, the fire behind it would destroy all of creation. Shiva is a useful guy to have around.

Some of the conventionally religious can get stuck here, thinking this is idolatry. It’s not. This is an “outward anthropomorphic projection of an inner archetypal reality,” as Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette say in their book about another archetype, *The King Within*. “We would argue that these images are essential for psychological health,” they write. And they assert, “Imaging is a creative suggestive activity, a way of establishing contact with the unconscious, not of mistaking god for God.”

One of my group members asks me to be her Shiva. It seems easy for me. I bring up what I’ve known as my “monster” -- the one of rage and self-sabotage -- and I let him have full play. He loves to destroy. He anticipates it with pleasure and relish. With drum beating, the audience amplifying and encouraging like a Greek chorus, and Rubin making her suggestions, the moment of destruction

seems small -- like glibly ingesting a small morsel of food -- compared to the huge flow of energy coursing through me. It is sweet to commit to destruction for sacred purpose so that something else can live. I realize I can give my monster tasks now and then. He’s plenty hungry. Afterward, the woman confides to me that she was terrified to approach me. To myself I think, “For good reason.”

When it’s my turn to play out my story, it’s quite a journey. First I have to check how safe I feel in this space. I’m playing in front of my wife. There are people here I’ve just met. I commit as deeply as I can, wanting to let my heart be transparent. A close friend from my men’s group is my ally. My resistance is my shame, and I physically wrestle him. My ally tackles him from behind and pushes him aside. I think this might be too easy, but, heck, thanks ally, maybe it can be just this easy to go around my resistance. Approaching Shiva, I encounter grief about my absent father and the lack of fierce male energy in my childhood. Then I go to flaccid passive anger before Shiva, playing out more of my childhood experience. Rubin senses there is more resistance and suggest I ask my ally to help me again. This feels right to me, and we go back and wrestle again with the person portraying my resistance. I appreciate my ally’s enthusiasm for the rough and tumble.

Later, I’m in front of Shiva, amazed at my pleasure at being in the presence of such a succinct and strong energy. I offer my fear -- only part of my fear, because I feel I can’t let all of it go. We’ve been coached to see and feel it in our hands, with shape, color and texture. But Shiva isn’t supposed to make it easy. I must plead my case, speak passionately about why I’m ready to let this go, convince Shiva that it is for my good and the good of those around me that I should surrender this. I go beyond former perceived limits to experience my desire for release from this fear.

In the moments after destruction, I feel bereft and empty. Rubin sees this and invites me to stay in the moment until I’m ready to go on, guiding me to breathe deeply. Actors call a moment like this ‘suspension.’ A few beats later, it starts with me noticing how comforting it is to feel the arm of my ally -- and real life friend -- around my shoulder. And in the next moment I begin a move into a feeling of sweet connection; with the players “on-stage” and with many in the audience to wildly beating drum and raucous mayhem from audience and other players, complete my play with celebra-

tory dance -- or what passes for dance. Remember, this isn’t performance. Actual elapsed time just a few minutes, but it seems longer deeper and richer. Sacred theater happens in mythic time and space, says Rubin.

What’s the upshot of all this? Well, for the sake of brevity, let’s just say I learned some things and I’m walking a bit lighter. But, just as important, I experienced something Joseph Campbell has said that people don’t want to have the meaning of life explained to them. Rather, we want to have the experience of being alive. Inside a good book, movie, song or poem. When one of my daughters looks at me. In a memory of one of my deceased loved ones. In the arms of my wife. In spiritual ritual. In the middle of sacred play -- I have the experience of being alive.

Most teachers and workshop leaders doing transformational arts freely acknowledge their debt for this knowledge to the indigenous world. What many of us have thought Jung and Campbell and others were discovering probably has been known and practiced by the indigenous peoples; their psycho-spiritual healers, presumably for thousands of years. Much of discoveries are actually re-discoveries. Robert Bly, for example, working with indigenous ritual teachers in his men’s conferences, has said these native teachers have “put ‘legs’ on the men’s movement”.

Call it “legs,” or call it whatever you want to call it. This writer has found transformational arts to be a rich resource for personal healing and growth.

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