

Peg Rubin on Keeping the Gods Interested: Reenchanting Your World in the Sacred Energies of Theater

by John Darling

The tools available to actors and producers are just too valuable to be confined to the theater. That freedom to explore magnificent roles sleeping within you or to create yourself anew, that power to recognize and embrace your part in the great drama - why, these are sacred energies and Peg Rubin just had to carry them out the front door of Oregon Shakespeare Festival and, like priestesses and shamans of old, spread them around the community so regular people could see and act and know their part in the larger sacred show that is our lives.

She calls it Sacred Theater. Peg's been presenting it in Ashland for 4-5 days, several times a year since 1992. It's part of her work with Dr. Jean Houston, the author, lecturer and philosopher of the sacred, who was a facilitator to the First Lady's recent book. Peg, an OSF actor in the 1950's and its publicity and education chief 1972-87, left to be Houston's "resident actor" and co-teacher in helping bring about world peace through developing the potentials in people.

They co-wrote "The Manual for the Peacemaker," (1993) about the six-nation Iroquois Confederacy which the Founding Fathers used as a model for American Democracy. Peg and Jean are fun philosophers who teach, entertain and cajole people into higher consciousness and hopeful, positive behaviors all over the world -- India, Australia, Netherlands, Bangladesh, England, Venezuela, the U.S., to church groups, psychologists, aborigines and (scandalous!) the president and his wife.

We didn't used to need all this help, because we instinctually knew to tell our tales to each other and, Peg believes, to the gods. That's how theater got its start. The stories were about what

I did today. And all the stories were sacred, because the hunt was sacred and so were the animals we killed and so was eating them and having children, making love, walking around, everything. We were enchanted and enchanting. But we've kind of lost that, so now our everyday stories don't seem all that sacred or even important. But they are, Peg wants you to know.

"We ARE story tellers. We are the only creature that does it. That's what defines us." Great, except for one thing. "Sometimes we get stuck in one story." Sometimes? Most of the time. That's why we have therapists, to help get the needle off the broken record. We want to be in charge of the power to transform. But Sacred Theater isn't therapy - no cures. It's the power to reenchant one's world by the power to act, in both meanings of the word, and by acting it out, ennobling it and recognizing it as our creation, our journey, essential to our role in the grand drama.

"In Sacred Theater, you use theater techniques - characterization, creative imagination, subtext, breathing, vocalization - for ordinary living." You go see plays at OSF and other local theaters, you go rafting the Klamath, you eat at great restaurants, all in the context of actor/ playwright. You drop that comfy spectator role. The actors on stage are not just entertainers; they are your teachers, telling you about your life.

One bunch witnessed that dog eared To Be or Not To Be speech and then came back to Sacred Theater and rewrote it in their own words, to match their lives, then spoke it on their workshop stage. Ah, to what or not to what?? What IS my question? Is it nobler to suffer the slings and arrows of A or to take arms against B? Is it all to continue on in futility, stuck in indecisiveness? I

think not. Let us produce a new soliloquy.

"Each person may watch one player. What are the questions he or she is considering? What does Cordelia (in Lear) want? How is she (and you) frustrated in her goals by the needs of others? How does she (and you) give up power? And what gets her (and you) through? Each person will do it from their point of view, so you learn about the play WE are in.

You see how we get stuck in our own point of view." And when you get in that power role of playwright of your own play, you realize, hey, I created it this one way- maybe I shall create it this other way now. Don't whine about it -- play it to the hilt! Remember, the gods are always in the audience, so (Peg quotes Alan Watts) "heed the 11th commandment: don't bore the gods!"

"People start by talking about what their lives are now and who they are in service to. They make a mask of that god and enact that god or have their partner do it to them. They write a dialog or do an improve with that god." Talk about up close and personal. "Maybe it's the god of chaos." A step above random perverse chaos, isn't it? It all takes on meaning and direction. Oh, I see, it's an interactive dance with the gods!

"It's telling the human story to honor the gods," Peg says quietly, "and so the gods will know more about us, more about what it is to be human." Ah, and so will we.

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