

**and then, you act**

making art in an  
unpredictable  
world

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 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
NEW YORK AND LONDON

## introduction

I always took for granted that the best art was political and was revolutionary. It doesn't mean that art has an agenda or a politics to argue; it means the questions being raised were explorations into kinds of anarchy, kinds of change, identifying errors, flaws, vulnerabilities in systems.

(Toni Morrison)



The South African writer Antjie Krog described meeting a nomadic desert poet in Senegal who described the role of poets in his culture. The job of the poet, he explained to her, is to remember where the water holes are. The survival of the whole group depends on a few water holes scattered around the desert. When his people forget where the water is, the poet can lead them to it.

What an apt metaphor for the role of the artist in any culture. The water is the history, the memory, the juice, and the elixir of shared experience. I want to keep this notion in mind while examining the role of the artist in our present climate.

My previous book of essays, *A Director Prepares*, detailed the process of preparation and groundwork for an artist. But preparation is only useful in relation to the ensuing action. This book is about action during times of difficulty, whether personal or political.

Love is not a feeling. No matter how much you feel, love means nothing when unrelated to action. Love is action. In order to engage in effective action you must first find something that you value and

put it at the center of your life. When you put your life into the service of what you value, that action will engender other values and beliefs. Through engagement, things happen. Movement is all. Keep moving and yet slow down simultaneously. In Latin this is known as *festina lente*, “make haste slowly.” Inside of this paradox, you make a make a space where growth and art can happen. Within the framework of art and theater you will find a special freedom and the space and time to explore complexities. It does not cost you anything. It costs you your life.

You cannot expect other people to create meaning for you. You cannot wait for someone else to define your life. You make meaning by forging it with your hands. It requires sweat and commitment. Working toward the creation of meaning is the point. It is action that forges the meaning and the significance of a life.

And it is critical to have some direction and be clear about certain impossible goals that you are trying to achieve if you hope to achieve some of the possible goals. And you must be bold enough to speculate, postulate and imagine on the basis of partial knowledge. At the same time you must remain open to the very strong possibility that in fact you are way off the mark.

We are living in very particular times that demand a very specific kind of response. No matter the immensity of the obstacles—political, financial or spiritual—the one thing we cannot afford is inaction due to despair.

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, people in the United States awoke in a profound and palpable silence. In German the word *Betroffenheit* aptly describes the feeling. Simply translated, the word means shock, bewilderment, perplexity, or impact. The root of the word *treffen* “to meet” and *betroffen* is “to be met” and *Betroffenheit* is the state of having been met, stopped, struck, or perplexed. I see it as the shock of having been met, stopped abruptly in the face of a particular event.

Don Saliers, a professor of theology at Emory University suggests that the silence that follows a violent event is similar in quality to the speechlessness of a powerful aesthetic experience. He describes a space and a time engendered by the shock of the event where language ceases. We are left only with an awareness of the limits of language and the limits of what can be taken in. In this gap definitions disappear and certainty vanishes. Anything is possible—any response, any action

or inaction. Nothing is prescribed. Nothing is certain. Everything is up for grabs.

In the case of post-9/11, patriotism rushed in to fill the gap of this fertile and palpable silence. Patriotism served as a way to replace disorientation and *Betroffenheit* with certainty. And certainty, if taken to its extreme, always ends in violence.

As it turns out, this manufactured certainty did, in fact, lead to violence and more violence. Self-perpetuating aggression became its own *raison d'être* and the battle is worldwide, ugly, and nearly impossible to stop. U.S. citizens were told that any criticism of the War on Terror was unpatriotic. And yet, the concept of an open society is based on the recognition that nobody is in possession of the ultimate truth. When one is in touch with the complexities, it is impossible to be certain. If we fail to recognize that we may be wrong, we can only undermine any action done in the world.

The artist's job is to stay alive and awake in the space between convictions and certainties. The truth in art exists in the tension between contrasting realities. You try to find shapes that embody current ambiguities and uncertainties. While resisting certainty, you try to be as lucid and exact as possible from the state of imbalance and uncertainty. You act from a direct experience of the environment.

Significant political events always drop a lens between the environment and the perceiver. Generations view the world according to the most dominant lens. The Great Depression, for example, permanently altered the way that vast numbers of Americans saw their own lives and fortunes. The McCarthy era produced insidious paranoia and a general suspicion about left-wing political convictions. The events of September 11th 2001 also changed the lens. For many, the event intensified the feeling of separation from the rest of the world. For others, the sense of isolation was replaced with an acute sensitivity to the globe's interconnective tissues. If, as the Buddhists suggest, the art of life is the art of adjustment, then what are the necessary adjustments for artists working in the present climate? What needs to change in light of the new lens? How can we stay connected to our own culture and remember where the water is? How can we work in the theater within an atmosphere of fear and hostility and constantly attempt to reveal the water supply of our humanity? How can we nurture the necessary courage, energy, and expression in the face of adversity?

I look to history, literature, science, and aesthetics in order to figure out how to function positively and effectively within the present environment. I have found many practical ideas and stimulating encouragement in the process. The research has been helpful and gives me courage and hope in the day-to-day reality of running a theater company and directing new productions.

Leonard Bernstein, the composer and conductor, suggested that a musician's response to violence should be to "make the music more intense." This is what I want to do. I want to make the music more intense. Not just loud but also eloquent, expressive, magnetic, and powerful. I look around at the American theater, and I see it mostly steeped in an old-fashioned aesthetic and performed on weak knees. I want it strengthened, emboldened, wild, persuasive, and relevant to the issues of our time. We need courage and a love of the art form. Powerful theatrical productions, brave writing, and radiant acting can galvanize and profoundly transform expectations about how broad the spectrum of life can be beyond daily survival. In a culture where daily human hopes have shrunk to the myriad opiates of self-centered satisfaction, art is more necessary and powerful than ever.

Rather than the experience of life as a shard, art can unite and connect the strands of the universe. When you are in touch with art, borders vanish and the world opens up. Art can expand the definitions of what it means to be human. So if we agree to hold ourselves to higher standards and make more rigorous demands on ourselves, then we can say in our work, "We have asked ourselves these questions and we are trying to answer them, and that effort earns us the right to ask you, the audience, to face these issues too." Art demands action from the midst of living and makes a space where growth can happen.

One day, particularly discouraged about the global environment, I asked my friend the playwright Charles L. Mee Jr., "How are we supposed to function in these difficult times? How can we contribute anything useful in this climate?" "Well," he answered, "You have a choice of two possible directions. Either you convince yourself that these are terrible times and things will never get better and so you decide to give up, or, you choose to believe that there will be a better time in the future. If that is the case, your job in these dark political and social times is to gather together everything you value and

become a transport bridge. Pack up what you cherish and carry it on your back to the future."

Near the end of the twentieth century, the Dalai Lama was asked if he would want to return to the earth in another century, even though it is certain that poverty, pollution, and overpopulation will make the planet a miserable environment to inhabit. "If I could be useful," was his response.

In a violent culture sidetracked by the attraction of fame, success, and individuality, this notion of being useful feels radical. Can art intend to be useful? Art is an exquisite and extravagant waste of time and space and a world complete unto itself. The product contains the process of engagement, struggle, and achievement that made it come to life. And yet the irony is that art is indeed useful in deep and enduring ways.

The poet Joseph Brodsky describes art as the oxygen that might arrive when the last breath has been expended:

A great writer is one who elongates the perspective of human sensibility, who shows a man at the end of his wits an opening, a pattern to follow... Art is not a better, but an alternative existence; it is not an attempt to escape reality but the opposite, an attempt to animate it.

In the United States, we are the targets of mass distraction. We are the objects of constant flattery and manufactured desire. I believe that the only possible resistance to a culture of banality is quality. To me, the world often feels unjust, vicious, and even unbearable. And yet, I know that my development as a person is directly proportional to my capacity for discomfort. I see pain, destructive behavior, entropy, and suffering. I dislike the damaging behavior and blindness of the political sphere. I watch wars declared, social injustices that inhabit the streets of my hometown, and a planet in danger of pollution and genocide. I have to do something. My chosen field of action is the theater.

In order to "make the music more intense," you must first examine your intentions. If the motivation for action does not transcend the desire for fame and success, the quality of the results will be inferior. If your aim is intense engagement rather than self-aggrandizement,

the results will be richer, denser, and more energetic. The outcome of an artistic process contains the energy of your commitment to it.

Next, recognize the basic necessary ingredients. The classic recipe for effective theater is threefold:

- 1 you need something to say;
- 2 you need technique; and
- 3 you need passion.

Like a milking stool, if one of the three legs is missing, the stool will topple over and be ineffectual. It is as simple as that.

Each chapter in this book considers and examines tools for action—for making the music more intense: context, articulation, intention, attention, magnetism, attitude, content, and time. I hope that my thoughts and digressions are useful in the field of action.