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ISBN: 1535573546
ISBN-13: 978-1535573542

*For the founding Fangz of newFangled theatReR:
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Entering the Circus

some context by johnmichael rossi

The year: 2000. After abandoning long-presumed plans to attend Berklee School of Music to study music composition, I set out on a different path, up the road, to Emerson College, to study theatre. I was immersed in reading plays by Arthur Miller and Clifford Odets, tracing the fervent words of Harold Clurman and his accounts of The Group Theatre. As I got lost in Beckett's silences, I dreamed of forming my own group, to create politically and socially conscious theatre. My first term started amidst the infamous Bush v. Gore election; high American drama. The great theft. The fix was in.

My interest and fascination in the drama of American politics had begun in 1998, during the Clinton impeachment trials. I was drawn into the delicacy with which language, written and spoken, had the power to cause great rifts within our social landscape. As I studied theatre practices and histories, I could not help but notice the same language being used in the media to describe and discuss the happenings of the world. So much wordplay. Today, absurdism and realism have cross-pollinated, turning the kitchen sink upside down and inside out, plumbing out all of our dirty insides.

My first introduction to American politics was in 1988, during the Bush v. Dukakis election. I was in the second grade. We were learning how to compute fractions into percentages. Mrs. Bianco took a poll, by hand, asking who was voting for Bush, and who was voting for Dukakis. Most of my class, triumphantly, and aggressively, raised their hand for Bush, chanting 'Bush! Bush! Bush!' Whether this was a reflection of their parents' political leanings, or the inner workings of a seven year old mind (where the name 'Dukakis' leaves little to be desired in comparison to the rough and tough, monosyllabic and easy-to-chant, 'Bush'), is difficult to know. I, on the other hand, was somehow privy to my parents' political leanings, and knew that Dukakis was the man for my family.

My 20th birthday: September 10th, 2001. A fancy dinner in an Italian restaurant in the heart of Boston. The next morning, at 9am, would begin my first playwriting class, with Stanley Richardson. I arrived early, eager to get started on writing the next great American play. Shortly after the start of class, the Production Manager, Richard Daley, stepped into class, with his gentle stage managerly manner, sending us home with news that planes had been hi-jacked from Logan Airport. I walked out of the building, onto Brimmer Street, towards the Boston Common, where crowds of people were flooding out of the financial district.

A week later, classes resumed. The American Dream-turned-nightmare had transformed Willy Loman into a neo-post-nothing; a perpetual migraine, images of bodies leaping to their freedom. The implications of Gore's concession speech, just ten months earlier, weighed heavy on my mind. In playwriting class, Stanley instilled in us the notion that, 'Writers must deal with, and respond to the events of the day; to open up new dialogue, new meanings, new experiences.' He tasked us with writing a treatment of a play that in some way, responded to this particular moment in history. I was appalled. I did not want to do this. I did not want to write a play about 9-11. I wanted to resist. I couldn't resist.

I was overwhelmed by the history staring me in the face, blocking my path forward. There was far too much history to catch up with. I was desperately trying to learn and re-learn history; the histories not taught, the histories over-looked, the histories white-washed. I was trying to understand how we got here. And I still had to write this treatment for my playwriting class, which I now resented.

In another class, Languages of the Stage, I was introduced to Suzan-Lori Parks' *The America Play*. I struggled to read it all the way through. I didn't understand it. I wanted to, but I couldn't. Maybe I did. The image and action of digging as a poetic metaphor stuck with me. I scribbled down some

fragments based on an image I had of a man, at a hole, digging up books and newspapers. A tattered flag flies in the background, and a melted *Barbie* doll lies nearby (I suspect I was also reading Beckett's *Happy Days* at the time). I submitted the treatment, in fragments, with intentionally angry gaps. The following week, Stanley flipped through a pile of student work, reading his comments aloud, provoking a discourse around form and content. He casually introduced the next piece as 'fairly interesting.' He read it aloud, and then handed it to me, suggesting that I start to write it. I did.

I had just begun working at a local café, Bella Vita, on Charles Street; making sandwiches, pouring soup and scooping gelato for Mohammad, the stern Jordanian owner. In between orders, I scribbled monologues and dialogues on the back of my notepad. I leaned in on Parks' digging metaphor. I mimicked Brecht's episodic structure. I looked to Miller for the poetic representation of human relationships. The news consumed me. Pop culture permeated my sensibilities. Baseball metaphors intertwined with the rhetoric of patriotism. I scribbled and typed through most of October and November.

The deadline for Emerson's New Write Festival, a playwriting competition, was coming up. I printed copies to submit, and gave the play one last read. I was bothered by the opening scene. I didn't like it.

I had been experimenting with a technique of overlapping monologues that I was stealing from Mac Wellman, whose work I was trying to make sense of in Rhea Gaisner's Contemporary Acting class. I almost didn't submit the play. But I had already spent money on the printing, so I decided to submit the play as it was. *a TACK of an American Conscience, an attempt to catch up* was awarded the Rod Parker Playwriting Fellowship, and produced by Emerson Stage that spring.

a TACK was the birthing of my writer's conscience, and the start of the journey of developing my writerly voice. It was also the beginning of my ongoing commentary on the American political circus. In the theatre world, there was a renewed interest in the classics, particularly the Greeks, that had grabbed my attention. I was studying puppetry and political performance with Dr. John Bell; immersed in the writings of Howard Zinn; about to graduate; all against the backdrop of the on-set of the second Iraq War. As a student director, I selected to stage works such as *Assassins*, *The Zoo Story* and *The Loman Family Picnic*. Reading Mac Wellman's work was encouraging me to become more playful and experimental with language; lost in wordplay, puns and alliteration; researching the etymology of words; discovering dated slang and particularly 'American' phrases. In my journals, the working idea for *the AmerikAn trip, tik* started to take shape.

This trilogy of one-acts was intended to be a prequel to *a TACK*. I set out to adapt the Oedipus cycle: *Oedipus Rex*, *Oedipus at Colonnus* and *Antigone*. I couldn't quite get my head around *Oedipus at Colonnus*. I somehow decided to rip / riff off the plot structure of *Hamlet* instead. Oedipus → Hamlet → Antigone became Kristopher → ErikA → Suzie-Bee. I started sketching out the play in my final months at Emerson, but it wasn't until later that year when I returned to NYC and the panic of the NYC blackout forced me to get down to the business of writing this naughty play. As I tore apart the Greek texts I seemed to be channeling Alfred Jarry, as an Ubu-esque aesthetic took over. Having just purchased my first Macintosh computer, I was obsessively compiling all of my music through iTunes; 90's grunge and hip-hop was on a continuous shuffle as a rhythmic subconscious established itself as the underbelly to my writing process.

In April 2004, I forged the idea of newFangled theatReR, presenting a performative staged reading of the 200+ page version of *the AmerikAn trip, tik* at the Stuart Street Playhouse in Boston. The reading ran over three hours, and involved twelve performers, who rehearsed intensively for two days. In October 2005, as co-artistic directors for newfangled theatReR, Megan E. Carter and I committed to our first producing experiment. We staged and performed the *the AmerikAn trip, tik* to a

sold-out (over capacity) three-day run at The Red Room on 4th Street in NYC. It was a loud, bombastic and high-octane performance; rough, raw and ferocious. In December 2005, we transplanted the production to Space 022 at Brooklyn College for an unauthorized pop-up fundraiser performance. This was the roughest incarnation of the production, and in many ways captured the spirit of the play the most effectively. By summer 2006, we had formalized our company and announced newFangled theatReR's first season, which included a revised staging of *the AmerikAn trip, tik*, at the slightly larger Kraine Theatre, and a revised version of *a TACK*, also at The Kraine.

These two plays are companion plays. They are part of an incomplete trilogy of plays. The third part, *The AmeriKingz, extra inningz by johnmichael rossi*, is yet to be written. It will be a performance-enhancing play about baseball, capitalism and US-Latin American relations.

jomiro

I have decided to publish these two plays so that they can become available to the public for reading, staging and producing. I am particularly interested in having these plays produced as a puppet production, an animated series and a graphic novel; I welcome artists of related forms to contact me for such collaborations.

For production rights and inquiries, please contact Johnmichael Rossi at: jmrossi@me.com.

Students exploring these works are encouraged to reach out for advice, but should prepare to receive puzzling answers to your questions.

a TACK of an American Conscience

an attempt to catch up by johnmichael rossi

jomiro

PRODUCTION HISTORY

a TACK of an American Conscience was first produced by Emerson Stage; April 2002, Studio Theatre, Emerson College, Boston. Directed by Joe Antoun.

A revised version of *a TACK of an American Conscience* was produced by newFangled theatReR; November 10-19, 2006, Kraine Theatre, New York City*. Directed by johnmichael rossi; Dramaturg: Megan E. Carter, Scenic Designer: Niluka Hotaling, Lighting Designer: Justin Sturges, Sound Designer: Jason 'SweetTooth' Williams, Costume Designer and Stage Manager: Howard Klein.

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|------------|--|
| GEORGE | Jason 'SweetTooth' Williams |
| MARTHA | Ashleigh Beyer |
| SAM | David Kane |
| VIRGINIA | Megan Raye Manzi |
| MARILYN | Megan Raye Manzi |
| TEECH | Seth Reich |
| CHORISTERS | Tanika LA Harbor Megan Raye Manzi Laura Sherwood |

* *The published script mostly reflects this staging.*

PLAY'N AMERIKA

CHARACTERS:

SAM
MARTHA
GEORGE
TEECH
THE AMERICAN CHORUS OF SORTS
VIRGINIA
MARILYN

SETTING:

A Schoolyard. Red Brick.

Then, ruins, a hole for digging.
Staked into the ground, a brand new, crisp
American flag.
A tattered Barbie doll lies on the ground nearby,
amongst other scraps of life cluttering the space.

As the action of the play passes through time,
stacks of history books and newspapers,
new and old, rise in piles.
The increase in stacks is far more significant and
urgent from MARILYN's final exit onward.
Time is constantly fleeting at an unnatural pace.
Years are passing within each scene.
One must do his or her best to keep up.

The occasional appearance of a star (*) in the
middle of a speech indicates that the next speech
begins to overlap at that point.