

# Theater

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## THEATER AND SOCIAL CHANGE

A special issue edited by Alisa Solomon

Lani Guinier and Anna Deavere Smith in dialogue

Reverend Billy: A text introduced by Jonathan Kalb

Essays, conversations,  
and statements by

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Robbie McCauley  
Judith Malina  
Bill Rauch  
Alisa Solomon  
and many others

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newspaper, TV, and radio stories about this issue. I use that crucial, empathic moment at the end of *Glory Box*, which is a very raw and emotional piece, to challenge the audience to do something so that this cruelty toward lesbian and gay lives can stop. The many hundreds of people who see the show wherever I do it are absolutely crucial agents for change who must be activated around the issue.

There is a deeper human goal to all this work, though, beyond the nuts-and-bolts activism. I am hoping the show can perform some kind of emotional and psychic chiropractic adjustments. I am asking the straight folks in the audience to acknowledge their heterosexual privilege and begin to extend their empathy to lesbian and gay relationships. I am also using the show to ask lesbian and gay people to wake up to the fact that we are second-class citizens in our country and to begin sifting through the millions of signs, signals, and laws our culture delivers that tell us our relationships are worthless.

My journeys with *Glory Box* have been a real confirmation to me of the potential power of performance and theater to get an alarm bell ringing. As I travel the country and abroad doing the show, I have been deeply reassured that what we do in these performance spaces and theaters has huge potential impact and ripple effect on both our inner selves and our social identities.

MELANIE JOSEPH

*A Sustainable Empathy*

This is the time, and already it's passed. Tomorrow will be over before you finish reading this, and when you look up you may notice that the perspective hasn't changed much since . . . when? And still, in the past twenty seconds, hundreds of billions of dollars have passed back and forth between the eleven or so people who control the wealth of the planet, and most of us figure there's nothing much we can do about that, except maybe go shopping, to dull the savage numbness in our hearts.

This kooky market culture we live in—things surface and disappear so quickly they have no value. And politics, where one occasionally looks for a way out—even a middle way—has become a product for the entertainment media to flog to a soundtrack of the Beatles' "Have to admit it's getting better / A little better all the time (Can't get no worse)."

So where does that leave the "theat-ah"? What can we do in the theater to help repair the world? Brecht said, "There are many objects within a single object, if the final goal is revolution; but there would be no objects within any object if that goal were to disappear." But what is the nature of revolution now, in a culture that constantly consumes itself, where the very nature of time in and time for people's lives has fundamentally changed (most of us have none), and where the notion of community smacks of nostalgia?



The successes of revolutionary theater under various repressive political conditions are legion. But these successes were possible because of the simultaneous existence of organized movements and a collective consent for change, if not a mass craving for it. Without these conditions, the impact of a theater of revolt is feeble. And there have been no such conditions in the United States for decades. Not only has there been a paucity of credible political movements to join, but most of us have been suspicious of the very notion of joining anything, protecting ourselves in a cloak of cynicism, which is too often mistaken for irony. As for a collective craving for change: that requires an activated, sustained, and sustainable empathy, which is unsupported in the current consumer culture. And without empathy, there is no revolution.

This is where art rushes in—specifically theater. I am interested in theater not as an incendiary device for the revolution but rather for its potential to excavate the vital, often deeply quiet moments that precede it. Against a background of so much rushing noise, it is this quiet, this pause, that I believe has the potential for great resonance.

This is where I part company with some of the activists I know. Let me be clear: I believe that the world must be changed in significant ways; that economic inequality has become and is yet becoming a greater deterrent to our ability to live lives of kindness, civility, and respect; and that change comes only from action. But in order for action to be sustained over the time it takes for change to take hold, it must be predicated on a deep relationship to one's humanity. This is a neglected if not forgotten relationship, and the purpose of theater (and art) now must be to remind people of what they've forsaken.

I formed the Foundry Theatre in part to bring activists and provocateurs from other disciplines together with artists to explore some of the substantive issues of our times. Many of those we've invited over the years have been keen to meet with artists, largely in hopes that they would then make works that discuss these issues, that help get the message out. Although I am interested in such possibilities, at times I find myself having to defend my colleagues against our guests' inclinations to make art into a marketing device, pointing out that art (when it's good—ay, there's the rub) is enough. So, dear readers, lest we forget come the revolution: imagine a civilization built on economic equality, humane government, and just laws—without Dante:

"Now we descend into the sightless zone,"  
 The poet began, dead pale now: "I will go  
 Ahead, you second." I answered, seeing his pallor  
 "How can I venture here if even you,  
 Who have encouraged me every time I falter  
 Turn white with fear?" And he: "It is the pain  
 People here suffer that paints my face this color  
 Of pity, which you mistake for fear. Now on:  
 Our long road urges us forward."