

## THE CIRCLE GAME

by Tanya Shaffer

I'm eternally stuck in the terrible two's-- it's always about "why." Here's the story of how "why" led me away from the theatre and eventually back to it. You might also call it (in the inimitable words of Joni Mitchell) "the Circle Game."

I started acting when I was eight years old, and continued non-stop until I was nineteen and suddenly didn't know what I was doing it for. When you're a child, you act because it's fun and you get to be the center of attention. In junior high and high school, you keep acting because it's fun and you get to hug people before and after the show. As an adult, you have to come up with a better rationalization if you want to maintain any self-respect.

But let me back up. During my first year at Oberlin College I attended a Take Back the Night march. Tromping through darkened streets with five hundred women, shouting "Hey hey! Ho ho! This patriarchy has got to go!" was one of the most profound experiences of my so-far life. I suddenly saw, in one quick visceral shot, that a) I was terrified to walk alone at night, b) I downplayed my intelligence to attract boys, c) I consistently shafted female friends at a hint of male attention, and d) all this had something to do with sexism. In one instant I saw my small life in the context of a broader societal structure. BAM! I was a political person. Nothing would ever be the same.

That summer I got my first professional acting job, doing summer stock musicals. Playing a prostitute in every show, I became uneasy about how this work meshed with my new-found political vision. Although I was thrilled to be making my living performing, I felt that the roles I was doing were reinforcing the very images I wanted to combat.

By the time I was a junior and studying acting in London, my commitment to theatre was teetering dangerously on the edge. My classes seemed uselessly preoccupied with form and utterly unconcerned with content. The message of the work was never discussed, and in fact was treated as the most irrelevant thing imaginable when I brought it up. "What is the role of art in society? How does theatre interact with current events? *Why do we do this?*" were questions that went unaddressed.

Back at Oberlin, I changed my major to creative writing, vowing to quit the superficial, ego-ridden world of theatre for good. Within a few months, however, I found myself performing my writing at the campus coffeehouse. Soon, almost behind my own back, the collage of poetry and songs began to shape itself into a solo show. In the midst of this, I attended a two-person touring play called "A Peasant of El Salvador." This simple story of a Salvadorean peasant who lost his family and land to government atrocities moved me so deeply that I made two resolutions on the spot: 1) To learn more about our government's involvement in Central America, and 2) To become like those two actors, creating art that changed lives.

After graduation I moved to the Bay Area, where for five years I pursued only theatre with direct political content. I toured my own work. I wrote for the Mime Troupe. I acted with El Teatro de la Esperanza. In my spare time I organized rallies and wrote letters to members of

Congress. On the rare occasions that I attended theatre that wasn't overtly "political," I felt sickened at the waste of resources.

Suffering from burn-out, I decided to take a year off and volunteer in West Africa. I hoped that contact with the larger world would reinspire me to both action and art. Just before I left, I appeared in a reading of Octavio Solis' play "Santos and Santos" at the Magic, sharing the stage with some phenomenal actors. The language crackled and sang, creating a vibrant, muscular rhythm. It was exhilarating and confusing. Confusing because, although "Santos" could certainly be considered a political play, its effect on me had little to do with message, and everything to do with artistry. The miracle of language in the mouths of fine actors made me revise my worldview.

"There is inherent value in beauty," I thought. I began to shift things around in my head to make room for that idea.

Although my time in Africa was among the most fulfilling of my life, the situation there was so complex that it further muddied my political vision rather than clarifying it. Still thinking of my "Santos" experience, I returned to the States determined to mine the world of "legit" theatre. For the next four years I pursued acting work everywhere I could, doing loads of Shakespeare, creeping slowly up the hierarchy of companies. I wasn't abandoning my commitment to social change, I told myself, I was broadening my scope. Eventually I would use the skills I gained through this experience to create my own work at a higher level.

And so the Circle Game continues, and almost ten years after touring my first solo show, I find myself performing another one, this time about my experiences in Africa. Just as my worldview shifted and expanded over time, my writing style also changed. Rather than attempting a crisp piece of agitprop, I strove to create a multi-layered tale, rife with life's contradictions. Just as I discovered in my own life that there are no easy answers, I tried, in this new play, to address the complex issues of race, culture and privilege without offering any tidy summations. I believe now that to look these things in the face and grapple with the truth of what you see is in itself a political act in a world filled with manipulation and sleight of hand.

"Is this a cop-out?" I ask the face in the mirror at least once a month. "Should I be handing out flyers, lobbying congress, working in a clinic, hugging trees?"

So far she always says no. "Those things are all valid," she tells me, "but so is this work. You're exactly where you should be. Keep the faith."

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