

Performing Human Rights During The War On Terror: Great Small Works' Rising Tide Parade

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In the spring of 2006, Great Small Works was commissioned by the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council to make an art parade to kick off the River to River Festival, a summer-long series of concerts and performances whose goal, it seems to me, was to bring back a sense of lively public culture to the still-traumatized environs of 2001's "Ground Zero." While previous years' parades had been collections of New York City artists' processional sculptures, we decided to make our River to River parade a street theater event, a politically themed meditation on rivers, streets, and the dynamics of power in communities faced with transformation and change. In this, of course, we were following the kinds of traditions which Bread and Puppet Theater, Welfare State International, and other groups in the seventies had pursued; as well as the rich processional traditions of the 1920s and 30s; centuries of outrageous carnival street performance, Renaissance outdoor spectacle; and even the origins of Greek tragedy in the wheel-mounted processional boats – the *carre navalis* – which some have considered the roots of European carnival.¹

Great Small Works (a theater collective founded by Trudi Cohen, Jenny Romaine, Mark Sussman, Stephen Kaplin, Roberto Rossi and myself) has been creating themed parades on political topics for a number of years, and our method has been to bring together different artists who create images (costumes, banners, processional figures, paintings, and puppets) as well as music and texts, to be performed in theater events which reflect our sense of the salient aspects of our moment and place. This time, meditating on the theme of rivers, and considering the particular spirit of the American moment in which we find ourselves, we decided to think of three rivers:²

1. The Heavenly Flowing River from the Submerged Kingdom of the Dragon

¹ Historians of European popular culture like to argue about the etymology of "carnival": was it *carre navalis*, the wheeled boat, or *carne vale*, farewell to meat, a reference to giving up that food for lent. In any event, Margarete Bieber's authoritative *The History of the Greek and Roman Theater* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961: 19) shows images of wheeled boats used for the Festival of Dionysus.

² All of us were involved in the parade except Rossi, who was away studying architecture.

King (from China's Qin Dynasty), as an indicator of the immigrant experience in the United States,

2. The Mississippi River, for its obvious connections to Hurricane Katrina, but also for the historical precedents of racism in action which typified responses to the Mississippi flood of 1927.³
3. The Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, not only as the site of our disastrous war in Iraq, but also as a seat of 13th-century civilization, typified by the work of Ibn al-Jazari, the Mesopotamian engineer who designed water-powered spectacle machines long before mechanical engineering emerged in Europe.

This is what happened in performance: we paraded three themed floats together in a long procession, linked by two brass bands (Kenny Wollesen's orchestra, The Himalayas, divided into two units, but still pumping out their characteristic heterodox brass band sound, shifting from Sun Ra tunes to Chinese opera themes); banners titling the parade and the floats; flat cut-out water puppets covered with a reflective surface; a group of musical bicycles; and a stilt dancer.

We paraded to six different locales in Lower Manhattan on a sunny Thursday during lunch hour, and in each spot the water cut-outs defined a performing area in which we staged a short scene based upon the storytelling possibilities of each float. We had asked our designers at the outset to include a transformation in their float, and those transformations helped define the dramatic structure of each scene.

Scene One: The Heavenly Flowing River

The first scene took advantage of our connections to the Beijing Opera performers of Chinese Theater Works, our sister company in Brooklyn. The performance centered on a giant puppet designed by Stephen Kaplin, a double-headed parading dragon that transformed into a giant Dragon King. The Dragon King began by reciting an emotional poem of loss and distance (in Mandarin and English) by the Tang Dynasty poet Li Bai. As the Himalayas played their version of a Beijing Opera Monkey King melody, the Top Hat Gang (inspired by the evil Axe Gang of Stephen Chow's 2004 film *Kung Fu Hustle*) entered dancing the Electric Slide. Our Top Hat Gang represented anti-immigrant forces now ascendant in the United States, and in chorus they declaimed "Illegal Aliens are invading from outer space, taking over our land and our way of life!" In response, the Immigrants themselves emerged from

³ Our reference for the 1927 event was John M. Barry, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How it Changed America*. New York: Touchstone, 1997.

the Dragon King's body: Chinese Theater Works' co-founder Kuang-Yu Fong (a Taiwanese-American director with intensive Beijing Opera training as well as considerable experience with western theater), as a Chinese immigrant in American dress, followed by the Himalayas. Trading lines through call and response, Kuang-Yu and the Himalayas declared, "the sleeping giant has awakened," and countered the Top Hat gang's anti-immigrant sentiments by saying "We are not criminals. [...] We work our butts off!" With action movie dialogue lifted from *Kung Fu Hustle* ("So be it: let's do it!"), Kuang-Yu faced off against the Top Hat gang, first in spear combat with Zi-Jun, and then in a sword fight with Yu-Huí (both Beijing Opera experts specializing in martial arts techniques). Between the two battles, Kuang-Yu and the Himalayas marched across the playing area echoing the chant of the immigrant demonstrations that had erupted across the country two months earlier: "Si, se puede! Si, se puede!" During the second battle, Jenny and I unrolled a scroll onstage, whose text complicated the issues by asking such questions as "Immigration problem? Economic refugee problem? Illegal employer problem? Globalization problem?" At the climax of the battle, when Kuang-Yu defeated Yu-Hui, the Immigrants chanted another line from the demonstrations: "Today we fight! Tomorrow we vote!"

Scene Two: Mississippi River (1927 Flood)

The second scene of the *Rising Tide Parade* featured the Mississippi River, or more exactly a bamboo and cloth Mississippi riverboat designed by Alessandra Nichols. We first performed this scene at Bowling Green, in front of the old Customs House, and only a few yards away from an over-life-size bronze bull celebrating the financial district. After the scene was announced to the lunchtime bystanders, the Himalayas played a New Orleans-style version of the old standard "Bye Bye Blackbird", as the riverboat sailed into view. Two characters in top hats, the Jersey City rapper HiCoup and Circus Amok director Jennifer Miller, set the context of the scene with a quick exposition of historical precedents to the Hurricane Katrina disaster:

HiCoup: In 1927 there was a flood in New Orleans.

Jennifer: New Orleans, New Orleans, New Orleans.

HiCoup: As the Mississippi rumbled, what happened?

Jennifer: What happened, what happened, what happened?

HiCoup: Southern hospitality exposed the truth.

Jennifer: What is the truth?

HiCoup: Blacks were rounded up into work camps, held by armed guards and prevented from leaving as the waters rose.

As the band played a funkier version of "Bye Bye Blackbird," the water

cut-outs danced a rising flood, becoming more unruly and agitated until the band burst out in a cacophonous roar and the boat exploded apart and its pieces spun around amidst the waves, then settled down as the two narrators returned.

For the next chapter of the scene, HiCoup embodied middle-class black characters (a preacher, and then the mayor of New Orleans) whose advice to African-Americans facing the flood was to stay put and trust those in power, a clear link to the recent story of Hurricane Katrina. These bits were interlaced with Richary Pryor jokes about racism (culled from vintage videotapes), as well as more recent Katrina jokes harvested from the internet, whose targets were the Bush administration:

HiCoup: Hey Everywoman, what is George W. Bush's position on Roe versus Wade?

Jennifer: I don't know, what?

HiCoup: He doesn't care how the blacks get out of New Orleans! (Rim shot.)

While all this was going on, two narrators wrote out texts in chalk on a nearby construction wall, and after the last Katrina joke, read them aloud:

Sam and Jenny: 1927–

John: flood spurs migration of tens of thousands of blacks from the Mississippi Delta.

Sam and Jenny: 1928–

John: Mishandling of Crisis affects presidential election.

Sam and Jenny: 2005–

John: Hurricane Katrina creates over one million refugees.

Sam and Jenny: 2008–

John: Mishandling of Crisis affects presidential election. Republicans voted out of office.

All: Hurray!

This bit of hopeful agit-prop ended the scene, and as the band recommenced "Bye, Bye Blackbird," the riverboat reassembled, the water cut-outs reorganized, and we were off in parade formation to the Stock Exchange.

Scene Three: Tigris and Euphrates Rivers

The Stock Exchange was the most symbolically laden performance site in our parade. To get there we had to pass numerous counter-terrorism barriers that, due to the official legitimacy of the parade, opened for our heterodox spectacle. Employees on their lunch hour watched us as we passed, an unfamiliar spectacle element in an environment that was already semiotically charged as the center of American capitalism. We reached the corner of Broad and Wall

Streets, where a giant American flag covered the Greek columns of the Stock Exchange, and a statue of George Washington stood on a pedestal in front of Federal Hall, where Washington himself was first inaugurated President. It was here that our Tigris/Euphrates float would perform both as 13th-century Mesopotamian technology, and as Shi'i mourning ritual.⁴

Iranian artist Ahmad Azari designed the Ibn Al-Jazari float as a giant version of Al-Jazari's renowned Elephant Water Clock, but added six portals in the base of the float from which 30-foot-long maroon streamers could emerge. At the corner of Broad and Wall Streets the water cutouts set up a circular performance area, into which our banners stepped; we then announced the scene as "Science and showmanship! Medieval Mesopotamian technology! Ibn al-Jazari's elephant water clock!" The Himalayas stood on the steps of Federal Hall, playing their version of a Sufi trance melody from the Moroccan village of Joujouka. As the music echoed loudly against the walls of the surrounding buildings, a glockenspiel bicycle entered the performing circle, joining the float and the water cutouts as they spun in countervailing concentric circles. Then, a dozen performers ran into the ring, and, as the other elements stopped, they rotated around the circle, performing clock-like gestures of vanity, while gazing into the reflective surfaces of the water cut-outs. When the Joujouka music crescendoed to a peak, the performers ran to the Ibn al-Jazari float in the middle, and Jenny Romaine led a call-and-response version of a traditional Persian poem celebrating the mourning ritual of Ashura and the martyrdom of Husayn, Muhammad's grandson, who, according to tradition, was brutally murdered along with his family by rival Sunnis:

Announcer: What is raining?

Chorus: Blood.

Announcer: Who?

Chorus: The eyes.

Announcer: How?

Chorus: Day and night.

Announcer: Why?

Chorus: From grief.

Announcer: Grief for whom?

The Chorus did not recite the final line of the poem: "Grief for the king of Karbala'," a reference to the martyrdom of Husayn which is the central action of Ashura. This left the subject of grief our scene undefined, no longer linked

⁴ The two major denominations of Islam are Sunni (the largest branch) and Shi'i. Shi'i Islam predominates in Iran, and much of Iranian poetry and drama is connected to Shi'i traditions and rituals.

with a particular religious story and culture, but free floating, with the subject of grief left open for the audience's meditation. However, in my mind any articulation of grief in Lower Manhattan connects inevitably with the World Trade Center bombing, and I believe this came through in our performance. The transformation of the Ibn al-Jazari float came next: black streamers and confetti poured down from the top of the float's tower; the black hijab covering a woman puppet sitting in the tower's base suddenly disappeared, revealing a white, flower-decorated hijab and the puppet's red-and-white-striped face. Then, six performers pulled out the 30-foot-long blood-red streamers, the band played the Joujouka music, and the water clock began a slow counter-clockwise rotation, the long red streamers creating a strange counterpoint to the long red stripes of the giant American flag. After the ensemble completed one revolution, the music stopped, and Jenny stepped out to recite an excerpt from another martyr poem, this one from the Urdu Sufi poet Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai. "People, I know what you are thinking," Jenny said to the crowd; "you are saying to yourself" – and here she began the Sufi poem – "The earth trembles, shakes; the skies are in uproar." Gesturing towards the giant American flag she continued, "This is not a war"; and then gesturing towards the red streamers, said "this is the manifestation of love." At which point the band began to play, the streamers were folded back into the float, and the parade moved on.

What did all this mean, and what does it have to do with human rights and puppetry? First of all, it seems clear that human rights stand in distinction – and sometimes opposition – to the rights and agendas of government and such large entities as corporations. In this way human rights, or their Enlightenment predecessor, natural rights, want to be the automatic protection of common people against the abuse of power. Traditional carnival parades, as Mikhail Bakhtin famously noted in *Rabelais and his World*, hinted at the same thing, although they didn't say it outright, and cloaked their aspirations with the fun of entertainment and mayhem.⁵ What contemporary street processions such as the *Rising Tide Parade* can offer is manifold. By their design they bring together artists and non-artists, performers and non-performers, who, having developed a stake in what they create, unite momentarily to articulate some shared sense of awareness about our current existence.

In the United States at present, where the dominant operating mode of the Bush administration has been one of carefully inculcated fear, any kind of live public articulation of ideas outside the domain of mass media is note-

⁵ See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1984.)

worthy. The heavy symbolic weight of Lower Manhattan, as the seat of world capitalism and consequently as the supposed central target of “global terrorism,” is a constant presence, both physical and psychological. The *Rising Tide Parade* did not counter that symbolic weight and its implied narrative head-on, in the manner of a protest parade, but in a more roundabout way, by telling stories with images, objects, texts, and music that, ultimately, asked questions. What are the implications of seeing immigrants not as undesirables, but as kung-fu culture heroes with potential political power? What does it mean that the social effects of Hurricane Katrina are not unusual at all, but a reiteration of race and power politics played out almost identically sixty years earlier? And what is the essence of a celebration of mourning, the welcoming of blood and grief, when such a celebration links the dead in Iraq with those who died in New York?

After the *Rising Tide Parade* ended, one of the musicians said to me that he would remember playing on the steps of Federal Hall for as long as he lived. I think he was not simply talking about the great acoustics of the massive stone walls surrounding the space, but of the fact that our parade momentarily transformed the corner of Wall and Broad Streets into a place of unusual and specifically foreign gravity⁶. We had re-used bits and pieces of ritual performance, in our own fashion, and perhaps by dint of the modal intervals of the Joujouka tune, or the implications of 13th-century technology, or the great spectacle power of cheaply made puppet theater, we had succeeded in transforming that public space into the site of a 21st-century mourning ritual, whose contemplative possibilities, on one level or another, we all enjoyed.

Sources for *Rising Tide* Procession and Pageant

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⁶ Wall Street, as the center of American Capitalism, has over the past century been the site of numerous demonstrations, from 1915 supporters of Eugenics, to Black Mask's 1967 “Wall Street is Death Street” procession, Abbie Hoffman throwing dollar bills onto the floor of the Stock Exchange in 1968, ACT-UP's 1987 action to protest government and corporate inaction in the face of AIDS, and, from 2003 onward, anti-Iraq War demonstrations.

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