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in dialogue: A Poetics of Terror: Ken Urban

by Jason Grote
July 2004

CHARLES: It's beautiful. I wasn't expecting it to be this. Beautiful. I'm sure foreigners say that all the time. But it is. I've wanted this. To be here. But the politics are never simple. I had to nearly scratch out an editor's eyes to get this.
—Charles, an American reporter, on Rwanda in Ken Urban's *Sense of an Ending*

The world of Ken Urban's plays is extraordinarily complex. It evokes the globalized world, where exotic, fearsome jungles of terrorism and ethnic cleansing coexist with—and encroach on—banal landscapes of turnpikes, strip malls and subdivisions. In his work, meaning is decimated; but unlike absurdists, who reject meaning, or poststructuralists, who dissolve it into endless digressions, Ken's plays contain a great deal of it. The viewer of a Ken Urban play feels the play's effects—at question is what, exactly, that viewer is feeling, and why.

"There is a kind of 'bad math' in theatre," Ken writes in his essay "Emotions and the Theatre": "An actor cries on stage and the audience is supposed to cry with them...But why assume we cry in the first place? We may laugh...or maybe even laugh and cry, or perhaps do neither...I think this ambivalence should be explored...what I want are moments so emotionally complex that an audience is unsure how to respond."

This is indeed the reaction evoked when experiencing his risky—yet funny, and extraordinarily moving—plays. In *Halo*, Everyman (of the medieval mystery play) is portrayed as a businesswoman from New Jersey. Her confrontation with Death is adapted closely from the original, but the familiarity of the setting makes her journey disturbing and profound. In *Sense of an Ending*, the Rwandan genocide is made sense of—and, significantly, not made sense of—in a hilarious purgatorial brunch shared by (among others) Jesus Christ, Arthur Rimbaud, and Madeleine Albright. In both that play and *I™ KANT*, actors drop character, and address the audience or each other directly as themselves, implicating both viewer and viewed in unpredictable ways.

(Karel Kovanda, Czech Ambassador to the U.N. [1994] watches Jesus chug a Bloody Mary.)

JESUS: If He exists, He's a bastard. And if He doesn't, then

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what does it matter?

KAREL: Take it easy. No more for you tonight.

JESUS: Five years have passed, what's been gained?

KAREL: We didn't win. But there's more work to be done here and elsewhere, God knows. Sorry.

JESUS: You know why I like you, Karel? Your glasses. They are incredibly large. I find that endearing.

KAREL: Thank you, Jesus.

JESUS: Being the spawn of a non-existent deity is a real drag. Builds you up to believe you have all-encompassing powers only to be reminded every waking moment that you don't. Deprived of a body in order to better a soul that's nothing more than a prison. I've never been kissed before. Can you believe it? Karel, could you kiss me? Right now. Kiss me.

(Karel gently kisses Jesus on the lips.)

JESUS: Thank you. That was lovely. I'm shitfaced, Arthur.

KAREL: I'm Karel.

JESUS: Do you think our actions in life have any effect on the world around us?

KAREL: Yes, yes I do.

JESUS: Promise?

KAREL: Can't.

(Long beat.)

JESUS: Well ain't that a kick in the nuts.
—from *Sense of an Ending*

For his most recent project, Ken has paired with director Lear de Bessonet. Following a collaborative theater model reminiscent of Joint Stock or The Tectonic Theater Project, the writer/director team shared their extensive research on female terrorists with six actors. The result, *The Female Terrorist Project*, will appear this summer in the American Living Room at HERE Arts Center. I spoke to Ken about his self-professed "interest in issues of violence" and the troubling figure of the female terrorist.

"Theatre is better than film, novels, or any other medium for putting people through an experience," he told me. "There's the duration of it—you rarely read novels in one sitting, for

The Independent Press Association-NY recently honored *The Brooklyn Rail* with the following awards:

1st place: Best article about Immigrant Issues or Racial Justice-- Gabriel Thompson, "One Immigrant's Journey" (September 2004).

1st place: Best article about the Arts--Amy Zimmer, "The Brownsville Rec. Center" (April 04)

2nd place: Best article about the Arts--Brian Carreira, "Harlem Arts: A Faux Renaissance" (Dec 03/Jan 04).

2nd place: Best editorial or commentary--T. Hamm, "The Issue is Free Speech" (Dec 03/Jan 04).

3rd Place: Best Investigative News Story--Marjory Garrison, "Minimum Matter of Survival" (May 04)

Honorable mention: Best Investigative News Story--Williams Cole, "Housing vs. the RNC" (June 04).

Honorable mention: Best Original Feature--Yvette Walton, "My Life in the NYPD" (Dec 03/Jan 04).
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example. I'm not interested in violence in a way that glamorizes it, or distances us from it; I want it to be something that's really felt, but also works as a metaphor. Theatre can show us violence in a way that movies can't because it implicates us. We watch it occur live right in front of us and we don't stop it. But we also know, we hope, that it's not real."

(Maha as Leila Khaled, standing in the cockpit of TWA Flight 840.)

It didn't seem as if I was doing anything special. In fact, it felt very ordinary.
 This was the first time I'd done this, and I felt very calm. But I always feel calm inside myself. Especially when something violent needs to be done. It's so I can use my mind fully.
 We were flying over Palestine.
 And until now I cannot describe my feelings.
 I was just looking at it. For the first time. And feeling what it means to be away.
 Then I saw my father's face. He was smiling, but he was dead.
 I could hardly speak.
 —from *FTP*

To limit their focus, Ken and Lear chose to concentrate on the "new age of terrorism" dating from about 1967 to the present, roughly coincident with the emergence of globalization as a significant political and economic force. Like globalization, modern terrorism largely ignores national borders and, instead of being aimed at the state, targets "all who benefit from [the] ideology of oppression," as Ken and Lear put it their essay "A Room with a View: The *Female Terrorist Project* in New York."

Two things that have changed since 1967 are the perception of, and guiding ideology behind, the terrorists. Unlike the romantic portraits of groups like Germany's Baader-Meinhof Gang, groups like Al-Qaeda are viewed as barbarians and are seldom seen as "freedom fighters" (at least in the West), and indeed often are violently reactionary religious fascists. Part of the goal of *FTP* is to investigate this change—and, as in Ken's other work, to play with the assumptions on which it is based. "To a New York audience, would [academic and failed suicide bomber Tahani] Titi's emotional hardship reinforce the image of a woman terrorist as overly emotional and irrational? Or would her struggle create empathy for the figure of a suicide bomber? Would it do both? Would these answers be the same if we were to do the play elsewhere, say Europe or Kansas?" they ask. "We never wanted to answer those questions, for, if we knew the answers, then the play wouldn't really be worth doing in the first place."

(Kate as Tahani Titi. She makes a video of herself.)

Sabih, the man I wanted to marry but couldn't, told me that if I was going to end my life, I might as well do it for a good cause. At the time, it seemed like a good idea. Kill two birds

with one stone, Sabih said. You can't say he doesn't have a sense of humor.

I would like to tell you that I am doing this to free my people. But I'm not.

I am going to wrap myself in explosives and walk into a marketplace, wearing a short skirt, walk into Jerusalem, wearing lots of hideous makeup, makeup the likes of which I'd never wear, it being in horrible taste and all.

I am going to walk freely in Israel and when I find a nice place, I am going to blow myself up.

You will blame Sabih. You will say he has provoked me, he has convinced me to do this. That he has taken advantage of my instability.

You will be wrong. You can tell yourself this forever. You will be wrong.

It is you. You have driven me to this.

—from *FTP*

FTP also explores issues of women and violence, particularly salient issues in light of the recent Abu Ghraib scandal. "While the media generally makes it hard to identify with male terrorists, women who kill, on the other hand, remain an object of acute fascination," explain Urban and Lear. From "A Room With A View," again: "We were excited to discover how often terrorists...received marriage proposals from strangers.... It is evidence of the sexual attraction men feel for these 'powerful women.' To us, this is part of the tradition of the femme fatale, that figure of desire central to the film noir genre. But at the same time, this attraction is matched by an acute repulsion.... What we find repeatedly is a simultaneous move to make the figure of the female terrorist both empowered and weak...at work is a circular logic that finds arousal in a danger that, in the end, it must contain or eradicate.... It is as if every stereotype about women comes into play in this figure, and that is why we wanted to make this play...to discover what these women tell us about ourselves and...the workings of power."

The world of Ken Urban's plays is our world. It is the long, slow decay of film noir and the quick conflagration of the civil war. But it's more about transformation than destruction. Similar to the work of Sarah Kane, within the apocalyptic imagination lies kindness and hope. Even in the midst of the worst nightmare our late-capitalist death wish has to offer, meaning—that is, real, actual human connection and compassion—exists, whether because of or despite ourselves.

(Gillian as a passenger on a plane. The future.)

The captain announces your descent, We'll be on the ground in fifteen minutes. An hour later you're still in the air.

Something's not right. Something's happened. The plane circles and circles. You aren't going to land.

The captain's voice on the loudspeaker: Passengers. Crew.

I'm not sure how to tell you. But. It's gone. All gone. The runway, the airport, the city, the roads, the country, the globe. There's nowhere left to go.

The captain cries. His name is Sandy.
For a moment you are full of joy. Now that it's all gone, it can all begin again. You and your fellow passengers—the Jewish lady with the turquoise jumpsuit and copper perm, the balding gentleman with the nose hairs and crucifix chain, the screaming baby with the eyes of a junky—you will rebuild the world here on this plane. Here, hovering above the destroyed earth, the world can be remade in your image. You laugh as Captain Sandy weeps louder and louder on the speaker somewhere above your head.
You stop, you remember. The plane will eventually run out of fuel. The plane will descend for a final time. Soon.
But until then you have won. Here, the world can be whatever you want it to be. The man with the crucifix cries now too.
You whisper in his ear, Don't worry I'm here for you.
—*The Female Terrorist Project*

The politics are never simple.

Ken Urban and Lear deBessonet's Female Terrorist Project will appear in The American Living Room at HERE on August 27-28. The FTP will then open for a four-week run in November 2004 at the brand new theatre et. al theatre space in Long Island City. His play I™ KANT will receive its New York premiere in March 2005 at chashama's new space on East 42nd Street, and Halo is published in Plays and Playwrights 2002 (Ed. Martin Denton). Ken serves as the artistic director of the committee, a theatre company devoted to new writing.

Jason Grote's play Moloch and Other Demons will appear in The American Living Room at HERE on July 28-29 and at Williamsburg's Brick Theater in August. His play Kawaiisoo (The Pity of Things) will be in The American Living Room on August 10-11, and at Le Petit Versailles on August 23. His play The New Jersey Book of the Dead will premiere in October at the Bloomington Playwrights Project in Indiana. He is, with Sarah Benson, the co-chair of the 2004-05 Soho Rep Writer-Director Lab.

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