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An Interview with Myself on *Dark Goddess*, a Theatre Ritual

Since 1999, I have performed in and assistant directed an original theatre production in Austin, Texas at VORTEX Theatre. The show's title we carry over in subsequent years, *Dark Goddess*. Since the director, myself, and a handful of other performers in the production see ourselves as pagan, living witches in the arts, the structure of the show is loosely based on our ritual traditions. Through months of elaborate experiments in writing, voice, body and dreams, we co-create a spectacle of wonder and hope, power and affirmation. Performers play out Goddess archetypes through world traditions. The process of choosing the Goddess is both a personal choice and an imposition by the director, depending on the energetic harmony we want to achieve in the production. Too many Goddesses of war could clash with the few Goddesses of sex; too many Goddesses from Celtic traditions could stunt the expressive intent of the lone African Goddess. We aspire for a range of voices in Goddess traditions, many whose names are long forgotten under the stronghold of patriarchal religious orders. We rise as they rise; we travel into the labyrinthine tunnels of recovering the mysteries of maiden, mother, and crone. Spectators may join us, if they choose to enter the ritual performance space, pregnant with possibilities, the theatre.

The latest news on *Dark Goddess 2006* is that a local newspaper critic still refuses to list the show as "theatre" claiming the show is more of an "event."¹ True. It is an event, a very special event to those in the witchy know, but it is *also* theatre. We welcome all kinds of people with an open mind, sense of curiosity, or a need for something unique in their conventional entertainment choices too often ransacked by

¹ *Dark Goddess 2006* is the fifth show carrying the same title. The show is entirely different from subsequent productions, thus the indication of the year to distinguish between past shows.

insipid television scenarios. *Dark Goddess* is *also* a kind of religious experiment. It bothers me that this critic fails to see how our show draws parallel to Greek plays when players call forth the gods: Apollo, Zeus, Dionysus!?

What follows is an experiment in understanding my experiences over the last five years. I interview myself as a pleasurable example of playing with the powers of inquiry and criticism.

How would you describe the aesthetics of the production?

The question should really be what exactly are we trying to do in this theatre production? Make a spell, a prayer, a wish to change the world, to bring justice for those who have been wronged, to bring empowerment to women in a misogynist world. To have healing ooze into/onto/through our bodies that have been scarred by scalpels, suction tubes, breast implants, images of thin bodies and deadened clitorises. We want to impact the super-ego, the id, and the ego by invoking complete psychoanalytic dissolution, collapsing the boundaries between our ordinary lives and the dream world of possibility. We hone intentionality and strengthen our minds and motives with song, chant, tone and voice. We “do things with words” incantatorily, passionately, with focus. We shout, dance, scream, speak gibberish, sing, make music, mumble or cry. We express the divine nature of our bodies, as daughters of the earth and sky, mothers to our own bodies and in return, our promised obligations as caretakers of Her earth-body.

We listen to the quiet calls of yearning from the trees and breeze, the animals in spirit or in form that want our help. Indifference is not an option here. Nothing has indifference; what would the world become if nature were indifferent to our song?

Simple communication on a level beyond the language of “culture” and “civilization;” it is, to borrow from my favorite activist writer, Derrick Jensen “a

language older than words.” This language is spirit to spirit, breath to breath, heartbeat to heartbeat, and birth to birth. One life kills to feed life into another. So it goes and goes.

The mysteries of life and death; the seasons; the impermanence of change; the inevitability of loss. All these become core elements of *Dark Goddess*. Spectators witness, sitting in their seats, soaking up the images, and those who may be trained to sense the extrasensory aspects of the production—the tingling feelings through the fingers, the shaking of the belly, the quickening of heat through the spine, the solidness of the feet, the slight spinning effect above the head—these sensations are felt in an experience beyond catharsis. It is without language and perhaps even without signs. It is an intuition, a trusting, a belief, an inward knowing that something very powerful and wonderful is at work here. (I have never been to a grand Catholic mass, but maybe it feels a little like that.) Like soft, gentle, receptive treading in a forest covered in rare, fragile flowers, spectators could be aware of the delicate nature of magic.

How does the show work in theory and form?

The director wanted to create a theatre ritual piece that addressed her personal, political and spiritual community and inclinations. I am a member of this community comprised of, in broad summary, witches, pagans, polyamorous players, carnivalesque edgewalkers, secret worshippers of Egyptian goddesses, nudists, lesbians, transgendered folk, satanists, faerie priestesses and priests, political usurpers, poets and dreamers.

What makes this theatre?

This is such a ridiculous question. Theatre is, and always will be, ritual. This is the fundamental premise for “performance studies,” that all cultural action is a performance based on ritualistic behaviors and modifiers. What makes people like the aforementioned critic nervous about this production is that we structure the show similar

to a Wiccan ritual. We call in the elements: earth, air, fire, water, and spirit. We say words that we use in real ceremony, “By the earth that is her body, by the air that is her breath, by the fire of her bright spirit, by the waters of her living womb, our circle is cast. We stand between the worlds, and what is between the worlds, changes all the worlds. So mote it be.” We do have an enormous contingent audience of pagans, but does not something like *A Christmas Carol* entice the masses of Christianity to its theatre (ritual)? Or another religious show, such as *La Pastorela*, the Mexican-American shepherd plays? We are doing nothing new to theatre mixing itself with divine myths. We are just doing this with women calling all the shots, women opening their mouths and bodies to express horrors and ecstasies, pleasures and war, birthing and dying, from our intuitive, complex, sometimes paradoxical perspective.

Who sees this kind of show? Does it suit a particular niche in the community?

Yes and no. It is spectacle, and it is also a religious experience for people inclined to neo-pagan spirituality.

Do you find there is little room for disagreeing with this as theatre according to the idealisms you described?

Yes, but then again, it’s also about play. We encourage criticism of this kind of theatre but that does not hinder us from re-creating a new show year after year. If one could locate a fundamental critique of *Dark Goddess* is that it hinges upon a reclaiming of women’s mythic history, a process Jill Dolan warns against in her book *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*. She writes, “The need to reclaim women’s history and to portray women’s collective struggles against the patriarchal backdrop on which women have been victimized leads to a flattening of women’s experience. No room for questioning,

doubt or debate appears in this forum, which is constructed as perniciously monolithic” (88). There are indeed times when I wonder why we are creating this theatre. Audiences leave more in a mesmerized state of trance than political activation. Perhaps this is why we do continue to produce the show, wishing for a unification of the spirituality and practice in the world outside the theatre space.

How do I feel making, creating then performing as a goddess?

I am half-present while invoking Her. My eyes and ears become more tuned to the sensory experiences. My hands and arms feel like the air is thick enough to swim in. I may be “acting” as a trained performer, but since I am also a trained priestess, tuned to perceive extraordinary vibratory pulses in my surroundings, the performance is more than portraying a “character” for an audience to interpret motives. She—goddess on stage pulsing through a performer’s body—is sometimes rough and loud, petty and spiteful, silly and obscene, bloody and frightening, beautiful and strong, but I think more powerfully charged moments happen during slow building of energetic intention. When Yemaja sways her hips like the ocean, her followers supporting her with adulation, the deepening swell of the hurricane rushes into our hearts as spectators. We remember water; we remember She cannot be controlled. We remember She angers, too. We remember those who drowned in her depths. We know we don’t have answers to explain Her away. This humbles us, unifies us, and teaches us to practice truth in spirit and mind.

References

Dolan, Jill. *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*. Theater and Dramatic Studies; No. 52. Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1988.

