

Kairos, Creativity, and Flow: The Theater of the Self

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“It’s a life-long work, to work on one’s self. Each one of us is an instrument. That’s what is so odd, particularly being an actor: We are our own instrument. Do we want to be a banjo or a Stradivarius violin? It’s our choice.”

-André Gregory

“Him diggy diggy diggy, but no meat dar!”

-Joel Chandler Harris

The life of the theatre is dangerous. It is dangerous in the way splitting an atom is dangerous; if done poorly, it can result in catastrophe. But done well, it generates transformative power. Inside and out of the empty space, the performer, the director, and the dramaturg work to create alchemy in the human soul. They utilize tools and technologies which, when applied, transform a quotidian, mundane existence into a charged and meaningful life of presence. In this paper, I will compare the notion of flow, creativity, and presence in the somatic process of theater and performance. I will propose these are ideal means of generating *kairos*, an awareness of the creative numinous, and necessary for an individuated sense of Self.

We strive for purpose and meaning in our lives. We hope for inspiration that motivates and generates a sense of flow in our work. The term *flow* is in relatively common use these days. Originally coined by Hungarian psychologist, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1974), who used the word to describe a state of absorption and engagement within an activity where the requisite skill level and challenge were equally elevated, it now references things as varied as peak athletic performance, aesthetic creation, and in some cases, the liminal group phenomenon, *communitas*.

In 1998, I travelled with my theater company to Romania to participate in the Sibiu International Theatre Festival. We were one of over 100 companies and performers showcasing work in a variety of venues. One of the last performances I saw created what I can only call a temporal rift for everyone involved. Ticket holders were transported by bus to an abandoned castle deep in the Transylvanian alps. We hiked from the parking lot up a long hill, many flights of stairs, and were led into the ancient dining hall of an immense ruin. Church pews had been set up for audience seating facing one another, creating an acting space between the two groups of viewers. The performance of an unpublished play by Mircea Eliade, *Tzigane*, lasted over four hours and was entirely in romanian, but I barely perceived time at all, a sentiment many shared with me after. In particular, I recall a scene which took place on a city bus. Chairs had been placed in a row as the seats, and a hemp rope strung above them horizontally as for a ceiling rail. The passengers stood holding the rail/rope while others sat. One read a newspaper. At some point the newspaper was lit on fire. The actor calmly read the paper, slowly stood up, exposing the rope to the flames. Bits of the flaming paper floated into the audience. The rope, now also on fire, snapped. The main character was thrown into chaos while the remaining ensemble created a sense of purposeful focus. They began to chant and sing a ritualistic, rhythmic poem. The audience, riveted by the moment and engaged by the real, (if only slight,) danger, were not only witnesses, but participants in the spectacle. We were all transformed.

In the intermission that followed as they reorganized the hall, the audience were shepherded outside into a grassy courtyard and encouraged to sing songs from our country's traditions. We sang in French, German, English, Spanish, and languages we did not recognize. Someone passed a bottle of gypsy brandy. Upon seeing members of

that audience on days following during the festival, a knowing look passed between us as we carried the secret of our transformation together. After my return to the United States, I knew I had witnessed a secret of the theater's power for *kairos* and creative transformation which was a remote and barely accessible summit for modern western theatergoers.

Often dismissed as too expensive, irrelevant, and clumsy, the theater in our modern sense of the word, has lost much of its original cultural weight and meaning (Hall, 1999). In its Archaic origins, theater conveyed the stories of the struggles between humans and the powers of nature. It was accepted as fact the gods existed and controlled such natural phenomena as weather, crop yields, illness, and plague.

The plots of all Greek plays were already well known to the audience. They formed part of its religious and cultural heritage, for many of them dated from Homeric times. The interest for the spectator lay, therefore, not in the novelty of the story, but in seeing how the dramatist had chosen to deal with it... (Hartnoll, P., & Brater, E., 2012).

Audiences easily projected themselves onto the actions which took place on the stage. Their lives were also transformed by these concepts and beliefs. The *mimesis* which took place on the stage was a divine mirror, allowing the spectator to witness themselves in real time experiencing these dramas.

In those genres of cultural performance which predated Greek theatre—for example, myth-recitation, ritual, oral epic or saga, and the telling and acting of lays and märchen—wars and feuds between groups of deities or clans and lineages headed by well-armed heroes, as well as competition for position, power, or

scarce resources, men's conflict over women, and division between close kin, were vividly portrayed, carried out in mimicry. (Turner, 1983, p. 103).

Jung conveys, in his autobiography, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, "Archetypes speak the language of high rhetoric, even of bombast" (Jung, 1965). Perhaps not coincidentally, this is often the language of the theater, certainly the theater as the ancient Greeks knew it (Trapido, 1949).

Traditional societies were distinct in their observance of cyclical time. They guided their lives by seasonal shifts and significant life events whose transitions were indicated by ritual and ceremony (Eliade, 1954, p.141). While the notion of cyclical time differs from linear time in its fundamental sense of eternal return, *kairos* diverges in that it represents the correct, or *right* moment for significant events. There is a feeling associated with *kairos* that differs from mundane moments. Theater director Anne Bogart describes *kairos* as a type of knowledge:

How does the archer know when to release the arrow? Kairos is the time apart from the sequential time that we know and inhabit each day; a time when things of great magnitude of special significance happen. It is time outside of time, quality time, special time and crucial time. Kairos cannot be measured and yet it always leaves an impression, an impact. I cannot make it happen but I can create the conditions for it to happen and I must be ready to receive it. (Bogart, p. 91).

Kairos implies awareness and the understanding of correctness or rightness of place and time. This is something the theater does well, when its artisans are attuned to its use. It is this sense I encountered in that Transylvanian castle.

Another way to describe the action of the dramatic presentation in theatrical performance is through flow. Csikszentmihalyi defines flow in several ways, but the

most basic and common description involves the sense of being “carried by a river,” or “...by an internal force one is almost brought along” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). There is a marked disconnection from our sense of linear time. Attention is focused on a limited stimulus field. There is full concentration, awareness, and involvement. Also, there is no apparent fear of failure—one is confident and secure of success. Self consciousness disappears (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014).

The creative impulse is often characterized by flow states. When the artist or creative is immersed in their work, the work is said to take over and something/someone else emerges. The artist’s sense of time has warped reality and they reemerge from the temporal shift as if in a daze, unaware of anything other than their pleasant success, an empty stomach, and that it is dark outside. But there is one main feature that separates flow from creativity, expressed eloquently by choreographer Twyla Tharp: “In order to be creative you have to know how to prepare to be creative” (2003, p. 9).

As the title of Constantin Stanislavski’s best known work, *An Actor Prepares* would suggest, the majority of the performer’s job is preparation (2011). This takes many forms. In my experience creating original work, it begins with intention. What do we want to say and why is it necessary?

My theater company created a piece about the Spanish conquistadors' search for the legendary kingdom of gold: *El Dorado*. We drew parallels between the brutal invasion they initiated, and the modern day lust for power and wealth. Our process involved months of research. We brought reference materials, music, clothing, and objects into the studio. With these we began to generate forms and structures into which we poured these ingredients. Like a crucible, the elements coalesced and we occasionally

dipped our hands, bodies, and brains into the mixture, using the new power to fuel improvisations in performance, dance, song, and writing. These elements were eventually distilled into our final elixir, which, bottled, was brought to an audience and poured into their figurative cups for consumption. In this way, preparing for the theatrical experience is alchemy. Any creative process is alchemy. It is that amalgamation of experience, thought, process, and the charging of a physical space with intention that makes art potent enough to transform those with whom it comes in contact.

The ancient Greek concept of *Kosmos*, according to psychologist James Hillman, is an aesthetic notion, referring to, "...the right placing of the multiple things of the world, their ordered arrangement." (Hillman, 2014, p. 36). This could as easily describe our focused attention or attempts at individuation. As we endeavor to transform our sense of our place in the universe from simple biomechanics, returning to a metaphysical notion of *integras*, we can apply the notion of *Kosmos* to ourselves, within and separate from the context of the larger world. There is a parallel then, between *kairos* and *kosmos*. The theater in its purest form is the culmination of the right placing of things at the right time and bringing a group of people together in connection to these elements. This is the definition of *communitas*: the cultivation of a group of people in shared liminal experience.

...the first step toward a more creative life is the cultivation of curiosity and interest, that is, the allocation of attention to things for their own sake.

(Csikszentmihalyi, 1973, p. 49)

Since we are concerned with an attenuation to the creative numinous aspects of our everyday lives, it makes sense we should examine what this attentiveness looks like.

With the modern psychological transformation of consciousness toward the rational, we have moved our knowledge of self beyond the control of omniscient and creationist entities, to a self-centered universe of determinism and nihilism. In this vacuum, the theater is primarily left to merely entertain with stories of human struggles of more mundane and psychological scope. Our place in the universe, in the cosmos, is infinitesimal, and our times reflect that alarming and sudden disconnection from a cosmic mystery.

...if the programming of our [theatrical] institutions is governed by tentativeness and trepidation, tentative and trepidation plays will be created. Those plays will in turn foster a tentative and trepidatious audience. Ant that audience will, in turn, come to expect and seek out tentative and trepidatious programming. The question, then; how do you break this cycle? (Tannahill, 2015, p. 44)

Peter Hall describes this transformation, pointing out that though theater has transformed significantly over time, it has done so to adapt to the needs of different cultures and different audiences (Hall, 1999, p.12).

...theatre does not exist without an audience. There has to be a consensus of the public that agrees to attend the play and listen to what is being said. In order to be accessible, theatre therefore tends to be a little behind the rest of the arts—because the majority of the public is also a little behind. [...] the death of the theatre usually leads to regeneration. (Hall, 1999, p. 13).

What has been lost in this transfer is not just our sense of meaning, but also the link with natural rhythms and cycles. In trying to reconnect the theater with its original function, that of *mimesis* of our larger symbolic lives and the establishing of *kosmos* and

kairos, we must look to the reconnection with the individual and their own sense of power and self.

An idea of the theater has been lost. And as long as the theater limits itself to showing us intimate scenes from the lives of a few puppets, transforming the public into Peeping Toms, it is no wonder the elite abandon it and the great violent satisfactions, whose intentions do not deceive them. (Artaud, 1958, p. 84)

The theater is a public institution, even if only for an audience of one. The covenants that are assumed when we enter the theater space are all but lost. A true theater then, must be earned back, not freely given. “This is what live theater gives; it sits outside of our daily routines and requires more of us. It cultivates empathy” (Tannahill, 2015, p. 89). This is the psychotechnology theater affords: *kosmos, kairos, and flow*.

The theater relies on the body and its attention as a medium for expression. In this it is unique. It can employ all elements of plastic arts, performance, and expository creativity as its palate. In the rehearsal process, the performer generates experiences born out of trust between themselves, the space created by their fellow actors and artisans, and the willing audience. The stage, like the rehearsal room, is charged by the *intention*, much in the same ways a church is a vessel of religious intention. It becomes a crucible for an alchemy of spirit. Whether it is for research, discernment, rehearsal, ritual, or performance, there are concentric rings of intention that radiate outward from the heart of the performer through the action, into the space and through the heart of the audience.

Our postmodern reductionism has all but eradicated the availability of an audience to participate in a performance toward any transformative capacity. We hold ourselves apart from the universe, from one another, without ritual, temporal, or spatial

awareness to guide our intention and attention. Thus the only means of transporting an audience is to change an audience into participants. Once they are participants, we can create transformative experiences that fit the definition of *communitas*. We are looking for a new technology of awareness that allows the individual to engage in, and trust in a process that will generate sought after effects. We are looking for openness and good faith. We are searching for a means of creating safe spaces in which entertainment, faith, and the liminal event can combine to assist the work of the individuating psyche. In this we can learn more about the self and the world through the transformative power of moving image.

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