In Search of the Resistance

For artists like Double Edge Theatre, Jean Claude van Itallie, and Bread & Puppet Theatre, theatrical protest is a tradition, not a trend.

BY DAVID DUDLEY

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Henry Ranney on the Ashfield, Ma., grounds of Double Edge Theatre as part of "We the People." (Photo by Bill Hughes)

“Aren’t you glad you live in a country where you can speak your own voice?” an elderly woman asks sarcastically, wiping chicken grease from her chin. “Your mother must be proud of you,” declares another, untucking her napkin from her blouse and giving my partner Abbie a disdainful look.

The women in this restaurant in Giant City, Ill., are upset by my partner Abbie’s T-shirt. It’s pale yellow and has an American flag on the left breast, with the words “Fuck Donald” directly above the stars and stripes. Not prepared for the confrontation, Abbie says nothing as the two women exit the eatery, a mom-and-pop operation known for its all-you-can-eat family-style fried chicken dinners.

Lots of folks in this area of Illinois are thrilled with the country’s newest president. But there are lots of others, like us, who are in despair over his election. Not five minutes before the first woman spoke, we were discussing, over dinner, theatrical strategies to raise awareness, combat misinformation, and define the horrors committed by President Trump’s administration. And then these women spoke across the divide, if not quite bridging it.

“Don’t worry about them,” I tell Abbie after a moment of uncomfortable silence, reaching my hand out to hold hers.

“Speak your own voice?” Abbie wonders aloud. “She was so angry, she misspoke,” I say.

Before we can process this charged moment, there’s another. Two men approach us from behind.

“You can’t wear that shirt in here,” one says. He’s short, balding, in his 50s, and dressed for golf. His father, who looks like Butterbean en route to a funeral, cuts in.

“You oughta be ashamed of yourself,” the older man barks emphatically, jabbing his finger at my partner to punctuate each word. “I don’t know what the hell’s wrong with you young people today. You oughta be thrown in jail for wearing something like that.”

I’m beginning to feel physically threatened. I ask the father to kindly stop pointing his finger. He responds by pointing it at me and demanding, “Both of you, get the hell out!”

As I turn to go, I discover that Abbie is well ahead of me. The father, who follows closely behind me, has balled up his fist as though he’s ready to throw a punch. I stop, turning to defend myself. Only then do I realize that a gaggle of men have clumped together behind the first two. They all have bloodlust in their eyes, so I decide it would be better to keep on going.
A few moments later we are driving down the narrow road that winds through Giant City State Park. We are silent. We don’t say the words, but we’re both wondering: What’s going on in this country?

And what can we, as theatremakers, do about it?

“We the People” at Double Edge Theatre in 2017. Pictured: Travis Coe. (Photo by Jeffrey Lewis)

These questions echo in my mind a month later as my headlights cut through the darkness on Interstate 90 in upstate New York. I’ve been on the road for 12 hours now, covering the distance from Chicago to Buffalo. I’m tired. It’s late. But I push on. I must arrive in Ashfield, Mass., by noon the next day to meet with Double Edge Theatre founder and co-artistic director Stacy Klein.

When I arrive on the farm that has housed Double Edge for the past 23 years, the company is in the midst of rehearsal. There’s a frenetic energy, and everyone has a task. One woman hauls a wheelbarrow full of rocks. A man bales hay. Still others are at work preparing outdoor performance spaces. I find Klein and her partner, Carlos Uriona, rehearsing with a small group in the barn.

Klein, whose white hair falls to her shoulders like a mane, is in deep concentration. She watches as Uriona, a sturdily built, graceful Argentine-born actor who is performing a leading role in the piece, moves about the space.

“Carlos,” she says, “please try to be content with staying in one place. Pretend this is a vista, and you’re taking it in.”

Uriona takes her advice, gazing out past the stacked bales of hay, where the audience will eventually sit, toward the old, raw wood that makes up the barn’s south wall.

Actor Jennifer Johnson speaks: “In everything, disappointment is the lot of women.”

The line resonates deeply, with an administration that has pushed for drastic cuts to health care and a conservative-led drive to limit access to, even ban, abortion. On these as on so many other issues, it feels like the country is backsliding fast. So Klein, who describes Double Edge as a feminist theatre, is working on a piece called We the People. But her work isn’t about answers, she says, but about questions.

“When you begin with questions,” says Klein, “you engage the audience’s imaginations. Who are ‘the people’? Who’s excluded? Right now, it’s women, black people, and immigrants. One of the big questions we’re asking is: What do they have to do to become ‘the people’?”

We the People includes a number of characters, living and dead, who are part of Ashfield’s surprisingly rich history of resisters and radicals. I ask Klein what she considers to be protest theatre, and she pauses for a moment.

“It’s very difficult to escape the political realm when you’re creating protest work,” Klein says, “and yet nothing in the political apparatus is about human beings. We aren’t engaging our true selves in our reality. Politics now is not participatory—it’s murderous, it’s corrupt. We can no longer believe in it. Yet we keep investing all of this time and energy and money into it, and nothing really changes.”

The solution, Klein believes, is for artists and activists to begin at the grassroots level and focus on human beings, as well as on building community.

“When Trump was elected, I was very afraid,” Klein says. “But then I had this feeling that we’re on the right path: living off the grid, striving to be sustainable. Double Edge is an outgrowth of anticapitalist ideals—the company itself is a protest that continues today.”

Part of that posture of protest is to strengthen the company’s relationships with individuals and
companies willing to barter, in order to save all parties money. Even more important is the company’s eagerness to get people involved in activities of the theatre in whatever ways they care to.

For example, Klein says, “We have relationships with a doctor who provides free care to company members. We have a dentist who does the same, and a baker who provides free bread to the company. They don’t want anything in return but to see our shows. All of these people make it possible to do the work we do, without being beholden to exploitative interests.”

Problems can arise when theatres are beholden to special interest groups, or to corporations who want to maintain a certain public image. When the Public Theater of New York City staged a bloody *Julius Caesar* with explicit references to the Trump administration, longtime benefactors Delta Airlines and Bank of America distanced themselves from the theatre. Though the show wasn’t shut down and the Public was easily able to replace the missing funds, the chill of censorship was felt, especially among theatremakers with fewer resources and lower profiles: The strong message was that if the work a theatre does conflicts with the perceived values and interests of donors, funds may be pulled. For her part Klein says that Double Edge accepts donations from all comers, with two exceptions: corporations and congressional Republicans.

Aside from donations, Double Edge earns its funds—roughly $800,000-$900,000 annually—through a combination of education and training programs, national and international touring, and grants. In doing so, the company strives to maintain a certain degree of integrity while continuing to make new work.

And not everything needs to be a huge statement: There are large acts of protest, and there are small ones. Klein, who has gone against the grain throughout her career, regularly engages in the little rebellions that give our lives texture, and may accumulate to engender larger changes in society.

“That I’m still working in the theatre is in itself a kind of protest,” she maintains. “Any time a woman does anything in the public eye, whether it’s Hillary Clinton or Paula Vogel, we’re making big steps toward a more balanced, ethical society.”

After our conversation, the rehearsal continues. Before long, the process stalls, as important decisions—like whether to use a door or not in a crucial scene—demand attention.

“What’s the point of having a door if it doesn’t shut?” asks Johnson.

“Or open?” chimes in co-artistic director Matthew Glassman. “We call that a wall, not a door.”

“No, it’s called our government,” jokes Klein.

A week later, I’m on another repurposed farm nestled in the rolling, wooded hills of Rowe, Mass. Shantigar, as it’s called, belongs to Jean-Claude van Itallie, author of *America Hurrah!* and *The Serpent* and a founding member of the seminal 1960s company the Open Theatre. I’ve come to Shantigar for two reasons: to write a play (Shantigar offers space to working artists for retreats, as well as workshops) and to speak with van Itallie about his work with the Open Theatre, and to find out how he’s addressing the challenges presented by the current administration. During the week of my visit, tensions between the U.S. and North Korea are escalating.

While working on my play one morning, the skies darken and a siren blares in the distance. Having lived in the Midwest for a number of years, I’m familiar with the siren—it signals that a tornado is
upon us, and that anyone within earshot should seek shelter in a cellar. Or, barring that, hide under a table.

But then I think, wait—there are no tornadoes in Massachusetts! Climate change compels me to question my common sense. Still, a blast of wind whips through the area, followed by heavy rain. The sound of the downpour on the metal roof drowns out all other sounds, including the siren. Fearing that the roof will collapse any moment, I take refuge underneath my writing table.

A few moments later, the doors burst open. This is it, I think—the whole thing’s going to fall! But then van Itallie, accompanied by two others, rushes into the room, soaked and, strangely, laughing. As van Itallie introduces the space to his companions, I watch and listen, waiting for the right moment to reveal myself.

Van Itallie’s assistant, Michael Schreiber, appears to be looking directly at me, so I wave. “David?” Schreiber says, squinting into the shadowy recess under the table.

“My God,” van Itallie exclaims as I rise to my feet. “What are you doing under there?”

“There’s a tornado,” I say, excitedly. “Didn’t you hear the siren?”

“The siren?” van Itallie repeats, before adding, “That goes off every Saturday at noon. It indicates that it’s lunch time.” With that, everybody, including me, laughs.

Then van Itallie draws our attention to the names he has written on the walls of this writing room, hundreds of them, all written simply, and in black ink: Joe Chaikin (van Itallie’s partner in this lifetime); Paul Newman (who made a major donation to the Shantigar Foundation); Sam Shepard (who stole a story, van Itallie intimates, from a mutual friend).

I ask van Itallie about his feelings on Trump being elected to office. A pained look flashes across the artist’s face.

“To begin with, we should not look at the Donald with a simple dualistic view,” van Itallie proposes. “I dislike saying his name—every time I say it, I get a bad feeling, as if I’m contributing to his publicity treasure chest. So instead I call him the Donald.”

Van Itallie feels that the country is getting what much of the populace wants from the Donald—that is, “an authoritarian, fundamentalist form of government, horrifying but psychologically motivated.” But he encourages people of every political stripe to make room for many reactions, thoughts, and feelings.

“It’s my intuition that, since his apotheosis was unthinkable, and yet it’s happened, we have to think in new ways,” van Itallie continues. “We can’t think him and me. We have to allow the flow of our feelings and thoughts to include everything that we are and everything that we perceive in the world—and, in that way, stop making these rigid divisions between that which is bad and oneself, which is presumably good.” Van Itallie says we should be searching for forms that capture “what it’s like to be alive right now.

“At the Open Theatre, we were experimenting with theatrical form,” van Itallie recalls. “We were trying to find ways to strip down the facade of lies that we’d grown up with. The existing forms of theatre didn’t do it for us. It’s not merely a question of information. The whole shape of our thinking had to be reflected in new theatrical forms.”

Like many from the ’60s Off-Off Broadway scene, van Itallie also advocates abolishing the barrier between performers and audience. Though it’s easy to see this as a purely aesthetic preference, there are larger social implications at play.

“We should stop imagining a boundary between audience and the people creating stuff onstage,” van Itallie says. “Here, too, we must get past the duality. It’s more useful to go back to the origins of theatre, and to think of all of us in a circle—Apollus meeting in the amphitheatre to consider problems that have arisen from the community.”

According to van Itallie, the dualistic relationship of audience versus performers is a reflection of the capitalist system that, in a way, mirrors the dichotomy between politicians and voters: Voters cast votes, then passively watch and wait for politicians to take action. But how many voting
citizens actually support the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan? What of our military’s involvements in Syria and Yemen? And how will we deal with North Korea? How many Americans would vote for nuclear war? To stand passively by as our elected leaders wage war on the world does not absolve us of responsibility. Whether we agree with it or not, if we allow it to happen, we become accomplices.

“When we were creating in the Open Theatre in the ’60s,” van Itallie says, “we weren’t paid. We didn’t even have grants. There was no NEA. We either had to stop doing theatre, or do it our own way. We did it because we needed to do it. In that sense, theatre at the time resembled political movements. Everybody present was a participant.”

Just as van Itallie begins to tire of telling his ghost stories, the rain and wind die down. He suggests that we all head back to the main house for lunch. As we walk, he tells me, “You know, that siren comes from the Rowe Yankee power plant. The other reason it could have gone off is to alert everyone that nuclear war is imminent.”

It’s a week later and we are in the “circus field” of yet another farm, this one belonging to the venerable puppet troupe based in Glover, Vt. It’s a breezy, overcast afternoon. Schumann is in the midst of staging Bread and Puppet’s annual Our Domestic Insurrection Circus. I sit to his left, at the foot of a hill that will eventually seat hundreds of audience members from all around the world.

As we speak, a grotesque 20-foot puppet dressed in a pink suit towers over me. It wears a red tie, and placard hung round its neck reads: “The Greatest Prez.”

Taking this as a sign, I ask Schumann his opinion of America’s current chief executive.

“I had no feelings when Trump was elected,” Schumann says. “I am not American. I cannot become American. I’m a German immigrant. Hitler, the Nazis, the Holocaust—that’s my background, that’s my childhood. I don’t want to add another burden to that.”

While Schumann’s remarks may give the impression that he’s detached from U.S. politics, this is misleading. Schumann has been making protest theatre in the States since the early ’60s. Beginning with the Vietnam War, Schumann and company have protested nearly every war the U.S. has fought, whether official, as in Iraq, or more shadowy, like the overthrow of Allende in Chile. He is deeply concerned with the evils perpetrated by our nation’s leaders in our name, and with making sure that his audiences stay informed about these and other pertinent issues.

“Wherever we perform, we end up with a naïve audience,” Schumann says. “The news isn’t there. People only have the tiniest pieces of information about what’s really going on. They’ve only heard rumors. So, in a way, you must make information part of your artistic project.”

Schumann is particularly incensed by America’s involvement in Yemen, which he calls a war of empire. He wonders why it’s hardly being mentioned in the news.

“Instead, they just want tickling little news items,” says Schumann. “They love Trump. You can’t find
a *New York Times* without him or his family on the front page. Entertainment is what America eats as news. That means that the information is tainted, totally.”

Part of the problem, as Schumann sees it, is that people can’t see, can’t imagine, that there is an alternative to the two-party system whose sides have become increasingly hard to differentiate.

“People don’t know who to vote for, so they vote for movie stars,” Schumann exclaims. “Our objective for this year’s circus is to make people realize that there are alternatives.”

On protest and theatre, Schumann has much to say. He isn’t satisfied with the stuff that makes up most protests: passing out leaflets, painting signs, shouting slogans. Echoing his Greenwich Village contemporary, van Itallie, Schumann also takes issue with the us-vs.-them model. And, though Schumann has made major contributions to both puppet theatre and protest theatre, he seems always to want more.

“Protest theatre is about the involvement of large groups of people,” Schumann says, “in an unexpected event where they do something that contributes by its mass.” He recalls a planned protest in Washington, D.C., against the World Trade Organization that changed overnight into an anti-war protest when it was reported Bush (“this idiot,” in Schumann’s words) was planning to invade Iraq. “We had to transform,” Schumann says. “We went into the crowd that day, full of people who were there to protest the WTO, and asked them to help us transform our performance into an anti-war show. We found 200, 300 people. We choreographed the piece on the spot. And we marched it through Washington.”

Schumann’s theatre often attempts to include people and events in spontaneous uprisings—in essence, to expand the boundaries of the theatre. Not willing to stop there, Schumann and company decided to create a new political (or anti-political) party called the Possibilitarians. In contrast to British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s TINA slogan of the 1980s (“There Is No Alternative”), the Possibilitarian’s slogan is TATA, for “There Are a Thousand Alternatives.”

As the big puppets—the Greatest Prez, Satan Himself, and the Chefs of Disaster—are ushered backstage, Schumann muses rhetorically, “There are no alternatives to capitalism? The capitalism which allows these big corporations to destroy the planet, and human relations, in their profiteering quest? That’s total nonsense!”

Just then a clump of performers wearing large Founding Fathers masks enter from stage left. They proceed in a dignified way, but then begin to waiver as they clash with another group of performers, dressed as flowers.

“It’s all in preparation for revolution,” Schumann says. “But revolution isn’t this mystic, brutal, machine-gun uprising against existing machine guns. Revolution is in the mind. It’s a big job for the intelligentsia to work on—to see how the existing mindset can be changed, or how it can be approached, even. It’s a tricky problem.”

While Schumann admits he has more questions than answers, he feels strongly about certain approaches that need to be immediately altered. “We’ve got to look to people in our communities,” he says. “Elect on a small-scale. Forget about the goddamn party system.” Schumann goes silent as his frustration builds.

Meanwhile, the circus’s Founding Fathers—now aflame, lying on their backs, kicking their legs in the air—have been defeated by the flowers. Schumann smiles and shakes his head as the Founding Fathers struggle to get back to their feet.

**Driving home from Louisville after the eclipse—which astrologers believe can bring about epiphanies big and small, personal and societal—**my partner Abbie and I are engaged in the same conversation that has obsessed us for the past year: What’s going on in this country? And what can we, as theatremakers, do about it?

I mention the things I heard from Klein, van Itallie, and Schumann: Buck traditional models of funding; move to a place that will enable us to live without the need to have three jobs each; build strong community ties; strive to move beyond dualistic thinking; work tirelessly to discover new forms inspired by life as it is right now; encourage and participate in direct
democracy; and, perhaps, join or found a political party that values people over the economy.

Though all of these ideas have traction, and we are ready to commit ourselves to them, we agree to discuss further. As we approach our respective homes, there’s a rumble in my belly. I ask if she’s hungry, and she says yes. Where might we grab a fast bite?

Not, we quickly decide, at the all-you-can-eat fried chicken place.

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