The World after *The Bomb*

*T. Nikki Cesare*

The world ends with the threat of an international nuclear holocaust and begins with the Garden of Eden as an idyllic, diverse, penguin-infiltrated, middle-American town meeting. It is the world according to the International WOW Company’s *The Bomb*. I first encountered *The Bomb*—a four-hour-long, 27-cast member kaleidoscope of history, culture, and personal relationships authored by IWC artistic director/writer Josh Fox—during the first run of the show, 28 February to 17 March 2002, at the CSV Auditorium in the Flamboyan Theatre at the Clemente Soto Vélez Cultural Center on New York’s Lower East Side. *The Bomb*’s first run offered an intensely intimate reflection on the post-9/11 life of the city’s shocked population. The play’s second incarnation, 24 May through 14 July 2002 at the same location, still focused on the aftermath, but like many New Yorkers, it had moved past the initial impact and was beginning to question the endemic xenophobia and paranoia running rampant in the U.S. during the months after the Twin Towers came down.

WOW’s staged reenactment of 9/11 and the day after suggests not only that the attack was a product of a history of violence that began with the invention of the atomic bomb, but also takes very seriously the threat of nuclear war that has emerged as the “War Against Terrorism” moves from Afghanistan to Iraq. These questions are embedded in the retelling of the history of the development of the atomic bomb in the 1940s by American scientists working on the Manhattan Project under the leadership of Dr. J. Robert Oppenheimer. Oppenheimer is portrayed by IWC’s associate artistic director/cowriter, Aya Ogawa, a Japanese American woman.

Dressed in a man’s suit and hat, Oppenheimer, or “Oppy,” as he is referred to in *The Bomb*, enters late in the first act. He offers a monologue of his life, beginning with the split he feels within himself throughout his childhood and early adolescence, and concluding with the way this parallels the splitting of the atom:

**OPPY:** Ask yourself if you could have stopped your own birth. There is no answer. I never asked to be born. I have never been comfortable as a human being; that is no secret. But obviously, I had no choice. The same is true for the atomic bomb. You cannot suppress ideas; you cannot stop their march forward into invention. And you cannot contain them once they have been born. [...] I stand before you as a shattered man. I have been exiled from the government I fought to preserve. I have been humiliated in the press. I have been branded as a communist by the powers that be. And I have been reviled as a monster by people from all over the world. Never has my existence as a human being been more uncomfortable. But I find that the myth is true: at the bottom of my Pandora’s box there is hope. Our hand has been forced, by God or by our own curiosity, whichever it is, whether we like it or not. And I do not regret asking. (Fox 2001a)

The act concludes as Oppenheimer takes a bite from the poisoned apple and then offers it to the audience, suggesting both his knowledge-laden exit from the Garden and an invitation to the spectator to join him in his exile.

Formally, *The Bomb* is nothing new. It is linear and essentially realistic. But it does work very hard to shed new light on the theatre as a place where actors and...
audiences can consider “the intrinsic relationship between personal agency and what’s socially important” (Fox 2001b). The International WOW Company is a six-year-old intercultural theatre company whose operations and 60-person membership extends from New York to Thailand, Taiwan, Indonesia, and Japan. While the IWC’s aims are political, founder Fox and his collaborators do not engage in activist theatre. Instead, they choose to address the political through the personal—creating scripts that, as New York Times reviewer, Bruce Weber, wrote of IWC’s 2001 Soon My Work, function “not just as protest document but also as dramatic literature” (2001:E5).

The company’s intent is to “redefine how theatre works,” challenging what Fox sees as the hermetically sealed world of avantgarde art. The role of the actors in the company is to “write, not be written for”—though the scripts are mostly written by Fox and Ogawa (Fox 2001b). While their collaborative scripts tend toward the autobiographical—WOW’s world according to WOW—the company’s goal is intrinsically socially motivated. In The Bomb, WOW moves from the biographical (of Oppenheimer) and political (the atomic bomb and 9/11) to the personal (dating after 9/11). WOW strives to “create a political dialogue [between actor and audience] of what isn’t being said” (Fox 2001b). Defining himself as a “‘globalization baby’ fighting against globalization,” Fox views theatrical performance as “people in front of people. It’s what makes it the best medium to figure out what is truth” (2001b). The truth Fox offers in the initial run of The Bomb is about survival.

The barrenness of the set—comprised only of benches, mattresses, the occasional small prop or set piece moved on and off, and the always-lit red EXIT sign upstage center—feels bleak and contrasts with the intimate details of the realistic dialogue. It is a bleakness that reflects the emptiness of humanity after the bomb...and the suicide bombers.

Fox and the cast of The Bomb use this barrenness to their advantage, moving from one historical context to another through the first act: the first scene’s “Our Town” morphs into a French art scene that is a veritable ménage à ensemble, which then merges into the Holocaust, and finally, into the Oppenheimer monologue. All of these time travels are accomplished via the soundtrack—a startlingly original mix of country, world, hip-hop, and classical music created by IWC’s Andy

1. Aya Ogawa as Oppenheimer in a celebration of the “success” of the atomic bomb (projected onto the screens in the background) in act 1. Oppenheimer holds the neck of his wife, Kitty (Maha Chechlauoi), while his mistress, Dr. Jean Tatlock (Magin Schantz) reclines in the background. (Photo by Ryan Edwards, Aaron Mostkoff Unger, and Josh Fox)
Gillis—and costume changes that reflect the time period and emotional setting of each scene, and simply rendered scenic devices. For example, during the first act’s rendition of the Holocaust, a cattle car on the way to a death camp is depicted simply by a rectangle of light, some sound effects, and drably dressed actors crowded together. The intended victims stand and then, responding to the sharp sound of gunshots, fall onto mattresses placed just barely offstage. The fiction of the mattresses strengthens the realism of the horror represented.

At the start of act 2 the audience is confronted with a man sitting at a desk, computer keyboard in front of him, scrutinizing an imaginary monitor, tormented over whether or not he should press the button on his mouse. Should he attach his name to a petition regarding the rights of Afghani women? He stutters to his young female assistant:

**TIM**: I mean, the idea of signing my name to it. It’s my name. It’s mine. It’s only my name. My name. And it’s on me. And it’s on my, on my...driver’s license and it’s on my business cards and and my stationary, my desk, my name plate and it’s and it’s on my voicemail, and it’s it’s it’s mine and I think that’s enough things for it to be on.

His ambivalence and paranoia predate our “War Against Terrorism” neurosis about what a name means in the face of racial profiling. While his nearly mute assistant—who soon reveals herself to be “really really high”—concur with his argument, Tim convinces himself that he agrees with everything in the petition and wants to sign. But he still can’t bring himself to actually push the button. Tim’s dilemma at the keyboard is in itself an ironic gloss on the critical dilemma of the nuclear age: whether or not to “push the button.” Tim asks his assistant to push the button for him. Prolonging the intimate tension between them, he asks her for a date, again privileging the personal over the political. In her marijuana-induced giddiness, she replies, “Now?” and he answers, “Well...no, it’s 8:46 in the morning now.” It’s 8:46, the moment of impact on 9/11 (Fox 2001a).

The sound of a bomb or airplanes or buildings imploding paralyzes and vibrates the bodies of everyone in theatre. Dust-covered characters cross the stage in silence—a slow, limping passage. They clutch briefcases, cell phones, and other talismans of 9/11. Whether from the makeup on the actors or Fox’s incessant smoking in the back row, the air smells of ash.

Characters from one scene reappear in others, “recast” as other characters but not doubled or disguised in their reemergence. This recasting creates a narrative flow of archetypal portrayals of familiar characters from everyday life, butting up against the question of whose name is on the petition. Is anonymity possible when one enters a name on a list? A person’s name is, more or less, unique, an identifying symbol, something to be guarded. But the individuality of the characters onstage is undercut by the recasting: one character is literally the same person as another.

In the first run of *The Bomb*, Fox kept the story in New York, a kind of latter-day *Our Town* (Van Gelder 2002:E5). As I watched one Saturday night in the winter of 2002, I felt unexpected tears come to my eyes. I saw myself in the characters and heard the echo of feelings I hadn’t given voice to in the aftermath of 9/11: “Where are you?” “Do you think it’s dangerous? [...] The air. Do you think we should be breathing?” “Where am I supposed to find a good bar north of 14th Street?” (Fox 2001a). The second act of the first run was an exposition, development, and recapitulation of personal experiences on the day after, focused primarily on the relationship between individuals—talking, eating, fucking, surviving.

In the second run, however, Fox introduced a decidedly Western perspective on Afghanistan through the narration of an Afghani film, which Alanna delivers
to one of the many post-9/11 one-night-stands who literally leap from offstage into her bed. An onstage television flickers from the news to the Afghani movie. The last of the men mocks the film, the girlfriend’s narration, and her withdrawal from the supposed reality of the news into a world of fantasy and hope. When he asks at one point what is going on in the film she replies with utter seriousness, “It’s a magic carpet, you fucking asshole” (Fox 2001a). This line brings the second act back from an exposition of ethical questions—what it means to portray Afghani culture—and reminds every spectator that The Bomb is itself a magic carpet that travels through space and time, you fucking asshole.

The second version of The Bomb should end with its penultimate scene: throughout the stage space, a half-dozen or so chess boards are balanced on benches, pairs of opponents straddling the benches to face off. All the characters from act one return to focus on a “bleeding homeless woman,” the actress who played Oppenheimer recast, who taunts an insurance salesman (the Reverend in the first scene’s small town) about his lack of power in foreign affairs.

AYA (recast Oppenheimer): (Crosses arms over chess board) OK. So. You’re the U.S. I knock out both your towers. What do you do.

BOB (recast Reverend): I bomb the shit out of you. You’re dead. You haven’t made a videotape in a while.

AYA: Very clever, but. I have anticipated this move so I skipped town a week before 9/11. I’m in Russia buying uranium.

GINA: Once you have a subcritical mass of uranium a monkey with a sledgehammer could set it off.

AYA: While you’re busy checking for nail clippers on airplanes, then I take your queen.

BOB: You can’t do that. You don’t have the uranium.

RAVI: It doesn’t matter, Bob.

AYA: I wait for security to die down, I get a guy whose whole family’s been killed

2. Aaron Mostkoff Unger as Flying Man, following the attack on the Twin Towers in act 2. Unger delivers a monologue on his personal take on 9/11, suspended in the act of falling, while ash-covered onlookers pass by or watch silently. (Photo by Ryan Edwards, Aaron Mostkoff Unger, and Josh Fox)
on one of your bombing raids on Kandahar, or Baghdad or wherever, I train him in hand to hand combat, and get him to ram a plane into Indian Point.

JOE: Which for some reason is still operating.

JASON: New York City is evacuated. Hundreds of thousands die.

BOB: The U.S. will nuke you right back.

AYA: Where? You don’t know where I am.

BOB: We’ll nuke Saddam Hussein.


ALL: Chicago, Seattle... (Each cast member shouts the name of a different city.)

AYA: I am justified because you started it.

BOB: You started it.

AYA: You started it.

BOB: You started it.

AYA: It doesn’t fucking matter who started it, Bob. You lost, white boy, 500 million pieces.

[...]

DEB: We’re at critical mass. The balance of power will be restored. It’s scary to think that we might not be in charge any more. But there are other things that are scarier.

MAGIN: The world doesn’t work the way it used to. We are getting dangerously close to it never working again. You’ve got to start thinking about something other than your life. This is not about you. The future is not secure. Because you’re not even this guy (indicating King). You’re this guy. (Everyone reveals pawn.) (Fox 2001a)

Such is the moral of this story. Everyone is a pawn, everyone plays the role of Whitey.

Once that is understood and accepted—that what we take for knowledge and fact is actually ignorance and presumption in disguise—it is possible to reenter the Garden, to return to a state of innocence. The Bomb concludes with the characters from act one’s small town lying onstage looking out at the audience, naked but covered by pillows. Alanna says, “We’re gonna figure it out, we’ll figure it out yet, I can feel it,” and the lights fade as Sophie, on the bed behind Alanna, leans over to kiss Alanna on the forehead (Fox 2001a).

This return to the innocence and promise of “our town” is hopeful—but ironic and unbelievable. As I cross the stage and pass beneath the red EXIT sign into the world of media propaganda and survival stories, I am dissatisfied with the resolution offered in both the staged and live versions of the real world. Is this the contradictory truth Fox wants me to entertain? That I ought to see the possibility for reconciliation and salvation while living in a world that seems to render it impossible? Or is it a promise that The Bomb isn’t over yet, and that part of what remains to be figured out is how this play will continue to evolve along with the people it represents? It’s the representational aspect of the personal in The Bomb—the familiarity Fox writes into the script—that echoes within my offstage life, that
keeps it with me after I exit the hot theatre into the hotter summer air. Like the song “Return to Sender,” which enters with Oppy and lingers as both soundtrack and metaphor through the rest of the play, The Bomb promises to return, either through another run or through the questions that remain for the spectator after The Bomb.

References

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Satanicide

Katharine A. Brehm

It’s dark, smoky, and loud in here. I push my way to the front where Devlin’s leg is riding the back of a sound monitor. My friend Ali presses by whooping and reaching for Devlin’s body. I scream. He glares straight at me, points a finger and snarls, “If you can’t quiet down I’m going to have to take you backstage after the show and give you a private performance.” Aleister Cradley jabs his spandex-covered legs into the air as skull-toting Tiki torches shoot sparks out the tops of their heads and the shrieking electric guitar, deafening bass, and blinding cymbal crashes tear into Satanicide’s “United We Fall!”

Popular on the current New York music scene, this irreverent, demonic death-metal turned glam turned cock-rock band spawns a certain mood in their performances that supports not only their raucous music, but also a wildly funny, exaggerated stage show with improvised audience embellishment.

Strutting around the stage, occasionally licking a finger and stroking the outline of a large sock stuffed inside the crotch of his glittering black leggings, the Baron Klaus Von Goaten brandishes leather-studded straps on his forearms, a silver half-mask, and long, swinging, black cape with a shiny, red lining. The Baron has “actually convinced the band that he’s German, but nobody else. In the same way that Aleister has convinced the band he’s straight, but everybody else knows [he’s