Theatre Beyond Space and Time

Reza Abdoh in conversation with Gautam Dasgupta

The brilliant, visionary artist Reza Abdoh (1963–1995) was an Iranian-born theatre director, playwright, and founder of his own theatre company Dar A Luz. Encompassing theatre, dance, literature, pop culture, video, and myth, his works include Bogeyman, Father Was a Peculiar Man, Tight Right White, and Quotations from a Ruined City, and were primarily seen in Los Angeles, New York City, and Europe. The PAJ Publications title Reza Abdoh, edited by Daniel Mufson, featuring essays on him and the text of The Hip-Hop Waltz of Eurydice, was published in 1999. His play, The Law of Remains, appears in the PAJ volume Plays for the End of the Century (1996). Abdoh’s work was so daring and original that the memory of his theatre productions, produced often in abandoned or site-specific spaces, has long remained for those who were fortunate to see his work, and then spread to those who never had that opportunity. Since Abdoh’s death, a documentary of his life has been made by Adam Soch. Reza Abdoh, a retrospective of the artist’s work, opened on June 3, 2018, at MoMA PS1 in Queens. The interview published here for the first time is from the archive of PAJ Publications. It was taped on April 7, 1994.

Let’s start off with the most embarrassing of our questions. You have often been referred to in the press as the bad boy, the enfant terrible of the American theatre. Do you actually see yourself as being deliberately provocative?

No. Not at all. The term enfant terrible is an observer’s perception. I never think of myself that way, and I certainly don’t set out to provoke. I think provocation is an essential element in any art form. But not to provoke in order to shock or alienate.

Your provocations in the pieces are not in the sense of alienating others, but are very serious interventions into the culture of the times. That does stand for a very deep-seated and complex response to the failures of the American culture and societal values. Could you be more specific as to what it is in the culture that compels you to respond the way you do?
Many aspects of the culture, really. What is most exciting about American culture, to me, is that within its framework of uniformity and homogeneity, there is actually a kind of an oppositional point of view, and always a struggle to create some kind of a perspective, a point of view—whether it’s artistic expression or political expression, or it’s life stance—that somehow questions the hegemonic structures or superstructures.

It’s something that, in America, is more a fabric—a part of the social fabric—than it is, for example, in some of the European countries. America is a sort of tapestry of many different races and many different cultures. But also, traditionally, because of a lack of a centripetal notion of culture, different races and different cultures have somehow worked at their own models. That, to me, is the most exciting thing about the culture. But, at the same time, there are some models—models of consumerism, models of mediated information, social hierarchical models—that I have deep-rooted problems with, and that in my work I question and raise issue with. I try to figure out if there are other models that can work better.

Now, of course, your status is both as an outsider and as one born of Iranian and Italian parents.

Right. I’ve actually been here about thirteen years now. I came here when I was only sixteen. Feelings of alienation and the question of identity were always a very important concern of mine, and also a feeling of belonging or not belonging, or a sense of being, and who you are in relationship to your work, in relationship to your friends, in relationship to the environment that you’re in, or with your family. Family structure has always been a major part of my work. Some of the attributes in my work are because of the dialectic that I posed myself as regards family structure, identity, questions of boundary, and home and country. These are things that I’ve always dwelled on. But here they came to the foreground because of necessity, and because I personally embarked on trying to explore and trying to discover the work. I’m not that interested in ready-made answers.

Well, let me ask you, now that the problem of identity is getting further problematized, partly as a result of the search for identity with multiculturalism and all of the various theories that are prevalent, I’ve always thought that the sole concern for identity can only lead the theatre back in time, to a sort of a “more realistic” frame, as it were.

I agree. A more safer frame. I think it’s a problem. But I don’t think it’s a problem with me so much, because I don’t believe in fixed identities. I do believe in shifting perspectives and shifting points of view, and shifting identity. I don’t believe in pressing for a fixed identity, because often times what that does, even though
it might be invigorating, is ultimately regressive and reductive. From a philosophical perspective, I don’t agree with that approach. We live in a very chaotic time, and people need safety nets. But that has never been something that I’ve felt comfortable with, or wanted to retain, in my own work or in my own life.

Is that part of the reason, perhaps, to move away from hierarchical structures, or from anything that tries to achieve a certain fixity, or a certain stability? Is that perhaps why you may have moved away from staging plays and pre-existing texts that you had done earlier on in your life?

That was part of the reason, especially because I needed to discover other aspects of my psyche in relationship to larger schematic conditioning that I felt I had been subjected to. So I needed to discover my own work in a different context other than traditional classical texts from Europe, which I had worked on. But that doesn’t mean that I don’t value their content or their place in history, or what they have to teach us about the human condition.

You’ve been quoted as saying that you can’t create in a vacuum, and that the context of plays is very important to you. When you did Peer Gynt, King Lear, or Medea, how did you go about re-contextualizing those texts? Did they address your personal concerns?

Yeah. For example, for Lear I was obsessed with debunking myths of fatherhood, and I was obsessed with, and preoccupied with, the trajectory of patricide, deicide, and regicide. That triumvirate sort of entity was something that I was really dwelling on at that point because of the revolution in Iran and the displacement of my own culture, and myself within the context of my culture, and my struggle with my faith, and my struggle with fatherhood, my own father, the whole notion of patriarchy.

These were all philosophical, ideological, and emotional problematics that I was trying to come to some kind of an understanding through forming a trajectory, in order to grasp somehow my own pain and my own confusion about them, but also to let it reflect more of a macrocosm, a larger issue. I did King Lear when I was very young, but, at that time it provided exactly the kind of accurate and, in a sense, timely context for all those issues. At that same time, my father passed away, and without me really resolving a lot of emotional remains. So, to respond directly to your question, King Lear provided that context for me. Other issues that, from a personal perspective, I’ve had to deal with, were through an aesthetic that somehow reflected it. Some of the classic texts still, some more so than others.

Identity, certainly, in Peer Gynt.
Oh, certainly, identity. Peer Gynt I did at the time when I was just fourteen. I could not see clearly who it was that I was. The journey that Peer Gynt goes through is something that I not only could identify with, but I could somehow parallel.

Tell me, did your having moved away from staging pre-existing texts and various sources for theatrical events also result from artistic maturation? We’ve talked about various personal aspects that somehow tie these very much to that period in your life. Have they also set artistic principles?

I believe so. But the thing is, though, I haven’t really created boundaries. I’m going back to a classical text this year. I’m going to be doing some Shakespeare and some Greek tragedy. I haven’t devised my evolution as an artist to preclude working with classical texts again. But, in a sense, the evolution that I have experienced in the past ten years of working necessitated my moving away from pre-existing texts to creating my own texts, so that I could read certain contexts, social contexts, people contexts, aesthetic, and spiritual contexts, in a different way. That process itself wasn’t pre-empted by an existing superstructure in a Brechtian sense. That might have had something to do with my artistic maturation, or my maturation as a human being. It was a necessary evolutionary process. But that does not preclude my affair with pre-existing texts. I’m now going back again, re-examining some of the classical texts and working with them. It was an important part of the stages of my development as an artist.

Outside of the way that you thematize the work you’ve done prior to these texts of recent years, in terms of the visual or theatrical styles, was that at all a shift?

No. I have become somehow clearer, I think, about the visual language or the subtextual language, or some of the traditions that I use, for example. I don’t have a holier than thou attitude in theatre. I don’t shy away from using all media. I don’t shy away from using all tradition. I always question it and create the dialectic within it. In Tight White Right, for example, I used vaudeville. I used lazzi. I used the cabaret, Borscht Belt television, minstrelsy, even Ta’ ziyeh, which is an Iranian form. I have become clearer about the kind of emotional, intellectual, and visual impact that I’m looking for. So, in a sense, the evolution has also affected me that way, where I’ve become somehow less timid. I’ve become more daring in some way, I guess.

Is this also partly a result of the collaboration that you had with members of your companies who’ve been with you for a number of years?

Yeah. We have developed a language together where it might seem cliché, but it’s a shorthand, in a sense, where there is not the question of justification or
of questions that are in the matrix which exists in a normal sort of situation in theatre, where you hire a cast and you do the work.

*When you did the Lear or Medea, were you working within a similar situation, or was that not in the tradition?*

No. That was more in that tradition. But, also, I had formed my own theatre company when I was very young. The members of that company were all older than I was. But we were still part of a company. That doesn’t mean that the company is a fixed idea, or that it doesn’t change. There are other members who come in, other members who are not involved in every project. It’s constantly shifting but there’s a core group who remain, basically, and do the work from project to project. The same thing I had when I was younger. The obligations are very different, and now I’m much more aware of what it is that needs to be done, and the conditions under which it needs to be done. At that point, it was purely to discover who we were.

*So then, is the recent work more the result of a personal odyssey, or is it now beginning to be more the culmination of a joint venture with the personal lives and obsessions of members of your company weaving in and out of your own intentions?*

I think the personal lives of the company members always does. I leave room for that as well to be reflected in the work because I believe in that. I believe the work is alive. You know, it’s like exposed electrical wires, in a sense. If you leave room for that involvement, where their personal lives also enter into this equation, then the work becomes even more disturbing in some way, and more powerful. But there is also a kind of a superstructure itself that operates, which is that each work has a certain tone and a certain inner life, inner landscape, and a certain objective that might be political or social or philosophical. The work is ultimately about ideas and physicalizing those ideas. Sometimes the personal lives of the people who are part of this process becomes more relevant, depending on what those ideas are, and sometimes it becomes less so.

*The title, Tight White Right, for instance, was this at all in response to the riots in Los Angeles? Was it a response to the personal request for identity, or was it more a reaction to a psychical manifestation of events?*

I think it’s inevitable that the kind of work that I’m interested in creating has to be also a response to the social and cultural occurrences and processes that surround the work itself. I respond to that myself. But there is also other, more philosophical and more abstract conditions and ideas deep-rooted in the culture.
of the west and east—and north and south—that I’m personally engaged with in discourse, in dialogue, in the aesthetic, that I need my work to reflect. In a sense, it’s a combination of the two. It is partly a response to the actual event and it is partly removed from it. It’s neither nor, in a sense, but both, I would say. I try to examine or explore, or de-mythicize, certain ready-made concepts or ideas in order to replace them with other models.

With Tight White Right, was it at all in your mind that with the theatrical arts you were perhaps responding to the controversies engendered by the Wooster Group’s production of Route 1 and 9, due to their use of blackface?

I think they are there in the netherworld of my psyche. But the work itself wasn’t at all a response to that. It had never even occurred to me. I had been personally always effected by minstrelsy shows and by blackface, or by cultures where dye and paint—in primitive cultures, for example, where there was defacing, misshaping of the body, re-contextualizing of the body, excoriating the body. These are subjects which I have been obsessed with for the past five years. In Bogeyman, for example, there was a great deal of that.

These are certain traditions, certain forms, certain cultural attributes and certain aesthetic tools that I felt I needed to confront, to explore, and to utilize in order to create the fabric that I was after. Whether the Wooster Group used it, or whether Jelly’s Last Jam used it, it’s just like a pool of information one utilizes in order to question the matrix of my self.

In Tight White Right, and in all your pieces, you address the horrors in society, but especially as refracted through the media. Do you think the media and all sorts of mediations in our culture are responsible for the mess, including the mess of identity that we all suffer?

I certainly don’t think of media as a Nietzschean superman concept where it is beyond reach, where they basically do what they want to do. I think mediated information and mediated images and meditated language, as processed through the tools of the mass media, are laden with a great deal of rhetoric and subliminal ideas that are evidence of a kind of a power struggle, to subjugate rather than to enlighten. Now, I don’t necessarily pass a value judgment on that. But I think it’s important that one breaks that conditioning for oneself, especially if you can question it and examine it. I’m not a kind of anti-television or anti-media maverick in any way. I believe that there’s certain mediated information and meditated imagery that is very potent, not just because it informs us, but the way it dis-informs us. That’s a very important byproduct of being an observer of it.
So you’re much more interested in how culture is mediated, but also in the way that it is produced. It’s closer to the Foucauldian notion.

Yeah, like a Foucauldian notion. Exactly.

Yours is a theatre of sensory overload, and that—combined with your insistence on fragmented and fractalized narratives, and the hectic pacing and pop energy—makes you a quintessential artist of a technological and socialized age. I’m also inclined, perhaps for the same reason, to see in you someone who could perhaps only come out of the California ethos. Is that misreading you?

I don’t know if it’s misreading me. The California ethos is, again, a perception, a conditioning, that is either real or it isn’t. From a personal point of view, it’s my response to the many cultures around me, and to the multifaceted and omni-dimensional chaotic and sometimes very stale world around me, reflecting that and questioning it. Also, it is articulating a universe that, in a sense, has its own laws, that has its own kind of perceived parameters and inner workings, that at once appears familiar and alien. That is just a kind of aesthetic engagement I have with my own search, in a sense. Now, that might seem to some to be somehow protected from the current media barrage. That is one way of looking at it, and it’s as valid as any other way of looking at it.

Los Angeles, especially, has always been considered as the great postmodern city or a sort of hypertextual city, a decentered city.

Yeah. It is.

But also, of course, with the myth as being the last frontier, as it were. Once you go beyond California . . .

You fall into the sea.

Of course, since the idea of frontiers and boundaries plays such an important role in your work, what are your thoughts on looking at the city in this context?

The idea of simulation plays a very important part in my work, in the Baudrillardian sense. Los Angeles is something that is at the forefront of all political and philosophical conditioning. It’s something that you can’t avoid. It’s inevitable to question as an artist. The simulation of pleasure, the simulation of pain, the simulation of the dominant culture. On and on and on and on, and even the freeways, even the physical setup. The movie studios and the cultural fractalism and cultural fragmentation are part of the setup of the city. If you are interested
in contemporary culture, it’s unavoidable. Especially if you’re a social critic of it, if you’re trying to understand it and grasp it, and come up with other models. Then you have to confront it. You have to understand it. You have to come to some kind of terms with it, and understand its language and understand its meanings, you know?

I’m not a pure aesthete. I’m more interested in exploring things as well, even though I believe in a kind of refined purity of art. But I think the arts have to question, have to explore, and have to be at the edge of the cultural evolution and social evolution. Otherwise we’ll be so alien from the other structures that we’ll never reflect them, and we’ll never question them, and we’ll always be taking a sort of back-peddler position, of trying to understand but never really understanding it. It’s like we’re never the social framers, but always the ones who have to bear the baggage somehow. I refuse to be playing that role.

People could also argue, of course, that in some sense your work is also in the tradition of East Coast or European artists. Whether it’s Artaud, Mnouchkine, Brook, Pintilie, or more formalist American avant-garde movements or touchstones, like Jack Smith, Gertrude Stein, Richard Foreman, Happenings. Do they provide a different framework than the California influence?

Well, the social-political constructs, as diverse as they are in this country or in the globe right now, exist beyond time and space, in a sense. I’m concerned with the same things that I’ve been concerned with for the past few years, except I also respond to the environments that I’m in. They really affect my work, strangely enough. I’m not the kind of artist whose work is filled with references to others, even if it might seem that way. What inspires me is not so much other art forms or other people’s art, or other people’s understanding or exploration of formalism, even though that teaches me, even though I learn from those processes.

What inspires me is the cultures outside of that immediate boundary. Literature, for example. People in the street, people I come in contact with, supermarkets. These are actual circumstances, events, occurrences, chance meetings that inspire my work, rather than references to other formalist work, even though, structurally, I’m engaged with that. Even though I try to grasp it. I try to find a trajectory that connects me to another tradition, that connects me to a kind of a schematic. But, nevertheless, I’m more engaged, I’m more involved, I’m more concerned with actuality and the metaphysics of that actuality. What links it to something other than itself.

In terms of the specificity of environment, did you choose the space before you even decided what you were going to do in Father Was a Peculiar Man?
I sort of knew the physical attributes that I was after, and I had walked in the meatpacking district a number of times before I even thought about the *Father Was a Peculiar Man* project. But the more I got to understand and walk through this area, and grasp its behind-closed-doors reality, the more the piece became what it was.

You refer to your work as cathartic, or in apocalyptic pronouncements suggesting that, through your art, a much-needed—and this is your word—“purging” should occur. Do you believe that audiences will be purged and cleansed of evils inherent in the society?

I don’t know if my objective is to “cleanse” society of its evils, because I have essentially a sort of Manichean belief in the world. I don’t believe that one is good and the other is bad, but that we are all good and bad, and that we are all . . .

. . . beyond good and evil.

In a Nietzschean sense. That really makes us who we are, and makes us as a species have potential. But the term purging as sort of catharsis that somehow surfaces whenever people talk about my work, is a kind of de-demonizing that takes place that allows one to come to a contact, a meeting ground, with the demons that exist in the collective unconscious and in their personal psyche. I don’t mean it to seem pedantic in the sense of purging in order to feel comfort. In fact, I’m against that, completely. Comfort, I think, is one of the worst tranquilizers that exists. I don’t like to be tranquil. This is not the time to be tranquil. I think of purging in a sense of propelling one to action. Propelling one out of passivity, in a sense.

*I think that the time is right once again, as we enter the close of the second millennium, the Christian millennium . . .*

Exactly. I always say that to people when they talk about the millennium. It’s, like, my culture has been forgotten.

*Now, more and more, as we’re entering another fin-de-siècle period, which last time around gave birth to all new artistic movements, starting with Symbolism, and to works of art that dealt with eschatology, I suspect that will make a comeback again, given all of the millennial angst. I wonder what you feel about it. Is it something that concerns you?*

I think, as you put it, this eschatological engagement is something that’s very real right now. You know, we’re trying to grasp a sense of apocalypse, or a sense beyond that. It’s something that really is a very important part of understanding our culture right now, and by our culture, I mean the global culture. I don’t mean
just the Western culture. Certainly, in my own work, that’s something that I’m engaged with continuously. But it’s not new. It’s something that has been going on for centuries. Ever since the Enlightenment we have had a tug of war between the rational and the irrational, the dark forces and the light. This is a dialectic. A paradox that has been part of our collective psyche for centuries now.

But now, as you said, it is brought to the foreground. The struggle to understand who we are and where we’re going is something that is very real, and what forces govern us and what models we need to come up with that function more usefully to us as a people. These are ideas and thoughts that need exploration and discourse. The more we engage in it, the less likely it is that we’ll be alienated from it.

Could I ask you a few questions about the body, the sexualized, and desexualized body which, in some sense, is center stage in most of your work? Do you feel the body is the site on which the conflicting ideologies of our time are being played out?

I do. I do. The problematics of body versus the equation of subjugation power, for example, is something that I’m very engaged with. This disrobing versus hiding are ideas that have been part of the philosophical discourse for centuries, and now it is possible, in the past thirty years, to examine them also in an extroverted fashion, where you actually give physical life to it.

But it’s something that we have been engaged in dialogue with for centuries. In ancient texts from India, from Iran, from China, the question of body, the excretion of the body, is something that has always pestered us, right? Because we have always had a kind of a holy attitude toward the body, but without really linking it to anything other than religion: the self-reverence that we have felt about the body, and the kind of disruption of attitudes towards the body, when we see a body that is derelict, that is in a state of deterioration, that is terrorized. We have objectified bodies in literature, in media, in our art. That is a process that, in a sense, is part and parcel of creation, of simulation, of artifice. It’s interesting to me to try to de-objectify, to try to de-calcify, in a sense. It’s a struggle that I have continuously in my work.

In some sense, I think that is why so many contemporary artists, including yourself, have rejected these cultural deviations of the body, and have tried to turn the body inside out. I mean, virtually, the innards are out. The body’s inside has now become the body’s outside, and that is the only pure self that remains.

Exactly.
I think that’s the only way out, in some sense now.

I think so too, because it is a physical terrain. That physical terrain, you have to excavate. It’s an important part of my work and, I think, of a lot of artists who came of age in the past two or three decades. That issue became something one could deal with, whereas before, references could only be made to it.

I want to ask you about what’s happening now, of course, with Salman Rushdie.

It is very strange. The process that he’s going through, of being perceived a certain way by a culture that feels itself victimized, traditionally, and colonialized, is reflecting on his own sort of presence as an artist, and his own role as an artist. I hope, for the sake of all of us, you know, that this ruling will come to an end. That they will cease to seek his head, from a purely secular, humanistic perspective. But, at the same time, there are no easy answers. I can’t say that the culture that is terrorizing Salman Rushdie is a culture of brutes. Because it isn’t. At the same time, I feel, as an artist, engaged in this very real danger to another artist. It’s a real ambivalence, at least for me, emotionally, even though I despise that sort of cultural terrorism. I think it has no place in evolution, and it disrupts it, if anything.

The language of terrorism and the language of observing terrorists is something I really have a problem with, personally, in the same way that Genet writes about that very eloquently. I have a problem with the colonialist and the hegemonic structures writing about terrorism without understanding the source of it, without engaging in dialogue that examines the source of it, and that easily categorizes certain forms of behavior or attitudes as terrorist influence as brutal, or barbarian, because it makes it easy to control it. It’s a function of control, basically.

Is this something that you will deal with in Quotations from a Ruined City? Because that would be the first time that you really engage your culture in a very direct way. One of your cultures.

One of my cultures. It will be the first time. There’s always a sense of it in all of my work. But I think this one will have very direct involvement with that. I’m nervous about it.

I missed the Ta’ziyeh reference in this.

It’s not very direct at all. I mean, the continuous notion of wailing, or self flagellation, or the kind of declaring one’s faith, in order to become part of it, in
order to sort of put a stop to it, kind of a downward spiral, but at the same time, embracing it. That effect is in Ta’ziyeh, it’s ancient.

As perceived from the standpoint of homosexuality, there is a certain martyrdom in the sexualized body, and you have to kill a body, which is your essentialist body, so you actually can enter the public sphere masked. So you suffer a death while you are living in society, and then you have your own sort of deaths in private, and in an odd way, you go through two deaths, as it were. So, homosexual culture would precipitate an obsessive concern with the body, regardless of the current issue of AIDS. I’m speaking of this conflation of death and the body. What are you thoughts on that?

I think there is truth to that, but it all depends on the choice, the conscious choice, you make, and how sober you want to be about it. I often am very sober about the choices that I make as an artist. I don’t make them carelessly, because they resonate very profoundly.

The martyrdom syndrome, the Sebastian syndrome, I think it’s something that is very real for a queer consciousness, because traditionally there has been this construct, which has basically created a boundary for the body of the homosexual, and for the psyche of the homosexual, and for the culture of the homosexual. That boundary has at once provided the safety net for it, because it has managed to find its own niche, to find its own home. But, at the same time, it has threatened it into practical nonexistence in certain ages. It has threatened it underground, and now within the past thirty years, I would say, there has been a kind of a resurgence of an understanding of that consciousness, which doesn’t really have to do with self-inflicted martyrdom, but has to do with understanding that context, and understanding that history, and not shying away from it. Embracing it, and trying to come out of the victimized role into the role of a player, to the role of a model-maker, a paradigm shifter, whatever you want to call it.

Traditionally, artists who have been queer—Proust, many, many, many writers, painters, filmmakers, theatre practitioners—whether consciously, or subconsciously, have not had the discourse to engage their sexual identity directly in their work unless they were specifically dealing with that. But with the political climate of the past thirty years, and a certain liberation that has taken place, now artists are more anxious, in a sense, to engage their sexuality and their sexual identity in their work. Not because it distinguishes them in any way, or not because it’s reflective of their self-inflicted exile, but because somehow those differences make it clear what the work is, rather than point out the differences in any way that alienates one from the other. At least, that’s my reading of it.

*Staging of the differences, as it were.*
Yeah, exactly. In some sense.

*Of course, the artist of the past who truly perhaps led the way is Pasolini, who had the courage to have done what he did.*

Oh, absolutely. Without a doubt, without a doubt. He went for it and I admire him. He’s a great model to follow. The important thing, I think, is to not let fear cripple you into non-action. It’s important that a work of art has the breadth of belief and principle and vision, because the work of art is not decoration. Decoration is what you put on your wall, you know what I mean?

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