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Common Ground or Killing Quicksand?

David Richman
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How do you negotiate with people who are trying to destroy you? What do you do when they lie to you? What do you do when they hate you? Theatre can help us find tentative answers to these terrible questions.

I am having a conversation with someone. We disagree about almost everything. The key words in these sentences are "conversation" and "almost." The fact that we are talking with each other, not shouting at or trying to kill each other, tells you that there are important things on which we do agree. Each of us sees the other as basically truthful. Our minds are not yet completely closed. We can be persuaded by evidence and argument. And since we have been educated at UNH, we know how to gather evidence and marshal argument. We also agree that the problem we are trying to solve is critical, and that failing to solve it will be worse than whatever each of us has to give up in order to reach agreement that works. When we reach agreement, if we do, we will be congratulated on having achieved "common ground."

But what about the people with whom one cannot, and indeed ought not, seek common ground?

What about the haters, the liars, the fanatics who will never be reached by evidence and argument? What of those who want to make problems worse, because the chaos and confusion will give the problem makers a clearer path, they think, to the power they crave? What of those so deeply buried in the sewers of prejudice that any evidence you bring to the conversation will only plunge them deeper into their hateful fantasies?

I think it's fair to say that we have heard some

lies, seen some of hatred's excrement, right here in New Hampshire during this political season, and that we will hear and see more between now and the next election and beyond. With one exception, I won't repeat any of these lies and fantasies, because to repeat such things is to lend them credence.

Instead, I will talk about a few of the lies uttered and hatreds acted upon by characters in some of the world's most important plays. When people in plays lie, we in the audience know they are lying because we are made to know and understand the truths those characters are trying to override, distort, or circumvent. Listening to and analyzing the lies told in plays may help us to know when and how we are being lied to in public—or even in private life.

Let me spend a few moments with Shakespeare's King Richard III, one of the great virtuoso liars. In establishing his false claim to the English throne, Richard spreads lying rumors about his young nephews, the true heirs to the throne. He tells one of his campaign operatives to spread rumors that the late king Edward was an insatiate womanizer, and that Edward's bastard sons are not legitimate heirs. In a public speech, Richard's campaign operative builds on the original lying rumor as if it were true. He is putatively speaking to Richard—but his actual audience is the London populace, whom he is persuading to choose Richard as their king. It's a political speech aimed at a mass audience. "You say, that Edward is your Brothers Sonne,/ So say we too, but not by Edward's Wife." In this play, first performed in the last decade of the sixteenth century, Shakespeare is writing a sort of handbook for political campaigning in the first decade of the twenty-first. Spread a

lying rumor about the persons you seek to destroy. Keep repeating that rumor as if it were true. Quite soon, masses of people who don't know the truth and who want to believe you will embrace your falsehoods and will propel your candidate to victory. That's what happens in Shakespeare's play. Richard's reign is not a happy one.

Before leaving this play, which you can study in any number of Shakespeare courses (offered by the Theatre department as well as the English department), I want to draw attention to one more of Richard's many lies. Richard is a killer as well as a liar, and one of his victims is the Earl of Hastings. Here is a small piece of Richard's conversation with the Lord Mayor of London in which he explains why he had to kill Hastings. Note how Richard's lie is mixed with a little gratuitous religious and racial hatred.

What? thinke you we are Turkes, or Infidels?
Or that we would, against the forme of Law,
Proceed thus rashly in the Villaines death,
But that the extreme perill of the case,
The Peace of England, and our Persons safetie,
Enforc'd us to this Execution. The murdered
Hastings, Richard argues, posed so grave a threat to safety and peace that his death became a necessity. One almost hears the phrase "national security" ringing through Richard's words.

In "Othello," another Shakespeare play, you will meet Iago—as thoroughly evil a figure as Shakespeare ever drew. Many of the play's characters hate Othello and resent that he, the supreme general of Venice and a black man, has authority over them. They hate him more because he marries a white woman. Iago is diabolically skilled at making the white woman's father and several other Venetians believe lies about Othello—and in making Othello believe the lie that Desdemona, Othello's new wife, is having a sexual affair with a man called Cassio.

Tell me but this,
Have you not sometimes seene a Handkerchiefe
Spotted with Strawberries, in your wife's hand?
. . . such a Handkerchiefe (I am sure it was your
wife's) did I today See Cassio wipe his Beard with.

Now we in the audience know that Iago has the handkerchief in his pocket; he plans to plant it on Cassio. So Iago is flat-out lying. But there is a little truth mixed with the lie. Othello's wife doesn't have the handkerchief. Cassio will soon have it. If you mix a little truth with the lie, the lie becomes far more powerful.

The hatred of many of Shakespeare's Venetians for the black General Othello may be profitably compared with the hatred of many Americans for the black President Obama. Just as Iago persuades Venetians to believe the lie that Othello uses drugs and witchcraft, so more than one counterpart of Iago persuades Americans to believe the lie that Obama was born somewhere other than the United States. In the play, we know that Iago is lying because we are made to understand the entire truth of Othello's life and situation. The playwright educates us. In the world outside the theatre, when we are being lied to, not about Othello but about Obama, we have an absolute obligation to educate ourselves. We can start in this particular case by reading Janny Scott's biography of Stanley Ann Dunham, President Obama's mother.

One of the things we learn from Shakespeare's plays is that people ignorant of the truth, like the Venetians in "Othello" or the Londoners in "Richard III" can be easily persuaded by lies. One of the things we learn at UNH—perhaps the most important thing we learn at UNH—is to search for truth: to look for, examine, and weigh evidence; to analyze argument. "Not to know the truth is just stupid; to know the truth and call it a lie is criminal," writes the great German playwright Bertolt Brecht. Not to know the truth

is more than just stupid. It's dangerous. If you don't know the truth, and if you don't work to find the truth, you will more readily believe the lies that today's criminal counterparts of Richard III and Iago are eager to tell you. Great plays like those of Shakespeare and Brecht can help train you in discerning lies from truth. And great plays can do more than that.

It's easy enough to find liars among the people we disagree with. But no country, no religion, no political party has a monopoly on truth: and neither does any country, religion, political party have a monopoly on lies, hatred, fanaticism.

It requires unusual courage to recognize the perfidy in those with whom we agree, those we love, or in ourselves.

American playwright Tony Kushner demonstrates such courage. His "Angels in America" takes as one of its subjects our country's deep-rooted antipathy to homosexuals. ". . . what AIDS shows us is the limits of tolerance, that it's not enough to be tolerated, because when the shit hits the fan you find out how much tolerance is worth. Nothing. And underneath all the tolerance is intense, passionate hatred." Kushner's play also depicts despicable hypocritical behavior in his play's gay protagonists. Roy Cohn, a powerful gay lawyer, dying of AIDS, must continue to lie about his sexuality and his disease. Here is part of the conversation between Roy and his doctor.

Roy. I have sex with men. But unlike nearly every other man of whom this is true, I bring the guy I'm screwing to the White House and President Reagan smiles at us and shakes his hand. Because what I am is defined entirely by who I am. Roy Cohn is not a homosexual. Roy Cohn is a heterosexual man, Henry, who fucks around with guys. . . . And what is my diagnosis, Henry?

Henry. You have AIDS, Roy.

Roy. No, Henry, no. AIDS is what homosexuals have. I have liver cancer.

Louis, another of the play's gay protagonists, abandons his long-time lover, also sick with AIDS, and begins an affair with a gay man who, attempting to repress his sexuality, has married and betrayed a woman. So the play tells the interweaving stories of three gay men who betray themselves, each other, their families, and their community.

Kushner also suggests one way in which even people who hate each other and lie to each other can find a sort of common ground. A black drag queen called Belize becomes Roy's nurse. Roy and Belize hate each other; for Belize, Roy is the polestar of human evil. Yet Belize gives Roy good advice about AZT, the only drug at the time that may have been effective against AIDS.

Belize. Watch out for the double blind. They'll want you to sign something that says they can give you M&M's instead of the real drug. You'll die, but they'll get the kind of statistics they can publish in the New England Journal of Medicine. And you can't sue 'cause you signed. And if you don't sign, no pills. So if you have any strings left, pull them, because everyone's put through the double blind and with this, time's against you, you can't fuck around with placebos.

Roy. You hate me.

Belize. Yes.

Roy. Why are you telling me this?

Belize. I wish I knew. Pause.

Roy (Very nasty). You're a butterfingers spook faggot nurse. I think ... you have little reason to want to help me.

Belize. Consider it solidarity. One faggot to another.

What Belize doesn't tell Roy, but what the audience comes to find out, is that when Roy dies of AIDS, Belize will be able to take the stash of AZT that Roy has been hoarding and distribute it to many people who have Roy's disease but not Roy's clout.

Before Belize takes Roy's hoarded stash of AZT, he insures that Kaddish, the ancient Jewish prayer for the dead, is recited over Roy's body.

Louis. I can't believe you'd actually pray for Belize. Louis, I'd even pray for you. He was a terrible person. He died a hard death. So maybe A queen can forgive her vanquished foe. It isn't easy, it doesn't count if it's easy, it's the hardest thing. Forgiveness. Which is maybe where love and justice finally meet.

As this scene suggests, theatre can point us to perhaps the strongest remedy against hatred and against falling prey to the lies haters tell. But before we praise theatre too strongly, we'd do well to remember that perhaps the most devastating hate crime in the history of the United States was committed by an actor.

Iago's hatred of Othello, the intense passionate hatred of gays against which Louis warns, is possible because the hater sees the object of hatred as something other than human. In Kushner's scene, Belize begins, with difficulty, to recognize Roy's humanity.

The fundamental theatrical act is an act of moral imagination—an act that enlarges the mind. When you perform a theatrical role, when you attend the performance of a play, when you read a play, you must enter into the life and feelings of someone who is not you. The basic question that all actors must ask is: what would I do if I were

that character in those circumstances? When you enter into the thoughts and feelings of another, your stance toward that other becomes ever more complex. The absolute lack of feeling for the other necessary to hatred is no longer possible. You won't so readily believe Richard's or Iago's lies; you won't so readily enter into the hatred Kushner depicts, if you begin, however tentatively, to see that Othello, Hastings, Edward's non-bastard son, even Roy, are fellow human beings—and that you may have been mistaken about them. Unlike the fanatics to whom the liars and haters appeal, you will begin to be persuaded by evidence and argument.

For Shakespeare, the greatest and most praiseworthy virtue is always sympathy with the sufferings of someone who is not you. "O I have suffer'd with those that I saw suffer."

So perhaps, as I enter into difficult and painful conversation with that person with whom I disagree about almost everything, that person and I should switch roles; each of us might enlarge our minds, increase our capacity for moral imagination, by entering into the other's thoughts and feelings. Of course, it won't be easy, but as Belize teaches us, it doesn't count if it's easy.