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Kill the Messenger: Why the Living Arts Reflect the True State of a Democracy

A play in one short act

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(Briggs stands motionless on the stand. He stares off, caught somewhere between exhaustion and bewilderment).

NOTARY: (Holding out a Bible to Briggs) Do you solemnly swear that the testimony you will give before this court will be the whole truth and nothing but the truth so help you God?

BRIGGS: I beg your pardon, I'm not...

NOTARY: Not what? Of a Judeo/Christian persuasion? Think you can pull a fast one by refusing to swear on the Holy Bible? We can bring in other books you know. Koran, Bhagavad Gita... We got 'em all in the back room. You name it, and I'll bring it out. Everyone's equal under the law. That's what this is about, isn't it?

BRIGGS: Well, that's my question... What is this about? Why am I here?

PROSECUTING ATTORNEY: Your claim, sir! Your reckless statements! Your negligence in defaming our state of democracy by equating it with your own demise.

DEFENDING ATTORNEY: Objection, your honor! The trial has not even started, and already the Prosecuting Attorney is badgering my client.

JUDGE: Overruled. That was public criticism. Your client should be used to that sort of thing. Do you swear to... blah, blah, blah.

BRIGGS: *(Unsure, but feeling no choice)* Yes, it is my job to always tell the truth.

PROSECUTING ATTORNEY: We shall see about that. State your name and occupation for the record.

BRIGGS: Joseph Briggs. I am an artist.

PROSECUTING ATTORNEY: *(Mockingly)* An *Ar-teest*. And what exactly does an *Artist* do, Mr. Briggs?

BRIGGS: I'm not sure I can speak for every artist, but I try to serve as a... well a kind of mirror. I create a reflection of nature, of society... of ourselves.

PROSECUTING ATTORNEY: Well, I own many real mirrors... in my home, my office. I have several just on my car. I depend on them when I drive. Don't you think they do a far better job at "reflecting" than you ever could?

BRIGGS: Those mirrors are utilitarian. Art functions on... a higher level.

PROSECUTING ATTORNEY: What you mean is the mirrors in my car are *useful*. The so-called mirror you provide is not.

BRIGGS: A rear-view mirror reflects everything that is behind the car so that you may back up safely. Such a mirror makes no choices in what it reflects. My mirror is selective. Its purpose is to isolate an element of life so that it may be examined for its beauty... or for its flaws.

DEFENDING ATTORNEY: Your honor, we are here to deal with the issue of my client's statements about democracy, not the nature of art!

PROSECUTING ATTORNEY: They are inseparable! This man has claimed that the sorry state of the arts in America is a direct consequence of *(He reads from a file)* "the decaying state of democracy in this land." Before we can dismiss this outrageous statement, we must first establish exactly what this man believes art and democracy to be and how one affects the other.

JUDGE: Continue. But make it brief. This is a short play.

PROSECUTING ATTORNEY: Thank you, your honor. So *you* decide what beauty or "flaw" to examine.

BRIGGS: Yes.

PROSECUTING ATTORNEY: And what gives you the right to make such decisions?

BRIGGS: *Everyone* has the right to make these decisions.

PROSECUTING ATTORNEY: Yes, but not everyone puts these decisions on public display and expects people to pay for them!

BRIGGS: I don't necessarily...

PROSECUTING ATTORNEY: And when the public refuses to pay, either directly or through their hard-earned tax dollars, you have the audacity to relate it all to the state of our democracy! And just how do you define "democracy," Mr. Briggs?

BRIGGS: Equal rule by the people. One person. One vote.

PROSECUTING ATTORNEY: That's it? No philosophical treatise? No poetic flight of fancy? Seems to be hardly an "artistic" response.

BRIGGS: I have often responded more artistically...in art galleries, on stage, in concert halls, but you're right; you would need to purchase a ticket for that.

PROSECUTING ATTORNEY: (*In contempt*) Thank you, Mr. Briggs. Councilor? (*The Prosecuting Attorney sits as the Defending Attorney rises.*)

DEFENDING ATTORNEY: Mr. Briggs, how exactly do you back up your claim that the state of a democracy is somehow reflective of the state of the arts in a society?

BRIGGS: History bears it out. In the most un-democratic societies artists have always faced the highest degrees of oppression.

DEFENDING ATTORNEY: And why is that?

BRIGGS: Because of the nature of art we just spoke of. The artist is always in a state of observation. We cannot do what we must do if we are not constantly examining the world around us. That is our inspiration. And when one focuses intensely on any one object, sound, person, society...government, one cannot ignore all the imperfections that become apparent. Art is also sensual. It appeals to the senses, which in turn, appeal to the emotions. Oppressive regimes want to control the emotions of the populace, so one way they work to achieve this is to commandeer art. The artists who do not conform, who do not abandon what they see for what the government tells them to see, are oppressed...driven out of their work, exiled, arrested...or worse.

DEFENDING ATTORNEY: Can you give the court some examples?

BRIGGS: Perhaps one of the best would be what happened to art and artists under Hitler's Nazi regime.

DEFENDING ATTORNEY: He was an artist himself, was he not? A man whom one might think would be sympathetic to your cause...except that he evolves into a fascist. Fascism is a political system based on authoritarianism, where the individual is subordinate to the needs of the state, where the basic definition you gave us of democracy cannot be satisfied.

BRIGGS: Yes, I believe that is true.

DEFENDING ATTORNEY: And if you would, please tell the court Hitler's stand on art after he consolidates his hold on power as Chancellor of Germany?

BRIGGS: Perhaps Hitler's words would say it best: (*He takes out a small notebook from his coat pocket, finds the page, and reads*) "The cleansing of our culture must be extended to all fields. Theatre, art, literature, cinema, posters and window displays must be cleansed of all manifestations of our rotting world and placed in the service of a moral, political and cultural idea." (*There is a great deal of murmuring from the people observing the proceedings.*)

JUDGE: Order! Order! This is all very interesting, Mr. Briggs, but how does such a statement truly affect artists or their art?

BRIGGS: All art—visual, theatre, music—had to serve one central purpose—to unify the Arian people and glorify the Third Reich.

JUDGE: And if it did not...

BRIGGS: In most cases the artwork was removed at best, destroyed at worse. Those who created this work met the same fate. The great German artists of the day—Otto Dix, Emil Nolde, Max Ernst, and many more—were suddenly regarded as degenerates rather than geniuses. What works the Nazis did save were placed in a traveling exhibit called the "Schandausstellungen," or the "Exhibition of Degenerate Art"—a show specially designed to make their work appear incomprehensible and depraved.

PROSECUTING ATTORNEY: Your honor, we all feel pity and remorse for these poor, unfortunate people, but this proves nothing except that Hitler had a dislike for this particular artistic movement, and because he had complete control of the Government, he was in a position to abolish it. Now, if we wish to argue about personal freedom, then this is relevant. But we are dealing with this man's statements about democracy. By his very definition, he has left individual freedom out of the equation!

JUDGE: Do you wish to alter your definition, Mr. Briggs?

BRIGGS: No, your honor. You can still have a form of democracy with limited personal freedom. What suffers is the *quality* of that democracy. What Hitler did was remove art, theatre, music...any artistic form that provoked the viewer to interpret what they were seeing or hearing. The very act of interpretation is subversive to an authoritative government, because the interpretation cannot be controlled. If the art is reflective of politics or society, then politics and society are thrust into question.

JUDGE: So what did Hitler replace this “degenerate art” with?

BRIGGS: With art that was not subject to interpretation, with art whose message was simple and direct—German men are strong and masculine! Adolf Hitler is a knight in shining armor!

JUDGE: Was this phenomenon restricted just to the political far right?

BRIGGS: No, your honor. Stalin did almost the same thing. In 1932, he decreed that all art must conform to “Social Realism,” which rigidly required “realistic” portrayals of Communist values. The margins of interpretation were reduced to a minimum. In one of the most famous paintings of this genre, “Praised be to the Great Stalin,” one can see that the goal is to infuse a sense of elation and awe associated with Stalin while ensuring that the piece is viewed in a state devoid of any personal, societal, or political reflection.

PROSECUTING ATTORNEY: Yes, we’re all quite impressed by your command of art history, Mr. Briggs, but what does any of this have to do with art and the state of democracy in America TODAY? Fine. You have proved that if you are an artist living under a totalitarian regime and your artwork has the potential to make the populace reflect on the true state of their condition, then the art and the artist will likely suffer. But I see no evidence of such persecution here in America, or France, or The United Kingdom, or any other country where democracy is doing quite well, thank you very much.

BRIGGS: The artist may not be persecuted to the same extent, but the artist in the U.S. is just as oppressed, and this oppression is the sign of a dying democracy!
(The courtroom erupts into angry shouts at Briggs for this defaming remark. The Judge pounds the gavel.)

JUDGE: Order! Order! Mr. Briggs, I must remind you that you are under oath!

DEFENDING ATTORNEY: *(Meekly standing and raising his hand)* Your honor, is it too late to change to an insanity defense?

JUDGE: Sit down Councilor. Mr. Briggs, I will give you the opportunity to retract that statement.

BRIGGS: I stand by what I say. The reason the artist in this country is not openly persecuted is because the American people make it unnecessary. It’s not a question of intolerance, but indifference, and it is through this indifference that we see the relevance to the state of our democracy.

PROSECUTING ATTORNEY: Your honor, this man is making a mockery of America, our sacred form of governance, and this court!

JUDGE: Briggs, I am going to give you one chance and one chance only to explain yourself.

BRIGGS: Your Honor, perhaps the best example I can give you is the through the life of Augusto Boal.

JUDGE: Augusto who?

BRIGGS: Boal, a theatre artist from Brazil who....

PROSECUTING ATTORNEY: Objection, your honor! Nazi Germany! Communist Soviet Union! And now Brazil?! What’s next? An example from Mars?

JUDGE: Overruled. I’ll hear it, but it better be good. I’m missing “Dancing with the Stars” for this.

BRIGGS: Boal started his career in Southeast Brazil during a brief quasi-democratic period in the mid-fifties. Over the years, he became less and less satisfied with the theatrical art he was producing. His plays then began to examine more deeply the politics and society of his audience. As Brazil returned to a state of strict military dictatorship, his theatre company, as well as most others, was shut down. Not to be deterred, Boal invented something he called “invisible theatre.” His troupe of actors would decide on a subject they wanted an audience to grapple with, for instance, the inability of much of the populace to purchase healthy foods. They would create roles and rehearse key lines and moments and would then go to a public place, like a grocery store, to perform the play. Here, one of the characters would gather food to buy and then get in line to pay. Once the cashier had rung-up the sale the actor/character would announce that she could not pay. The

other actors would join in the ensuing conflict with key lines designed to get everyone in the market involved with the problem. At the height of the debate, it would be announced that what everyone had just taken part in was just a play! As imperceptibly as it had begun, the actors would disappear, just before the authorities would arrive! Boal went on to create an entirely new theatrical form under the banner “Theatre of the Oppressed.” This was an approach where social and political issues would be explored in a completely interactive method, utilizing the audience whom he renamed spectators. One could say that he invented a completely democratic form of theatre wherein the audience decided on issues and possible outcomes of the play. He was eventually arrested, jailed...and tortured in 1971. Boal was exiled to Argentina, eventually finding his way to France. He wanted to continue his work, but what need had the French for his artistic invention? As far as he could see, the people of this democratic society knew nothing of oppression. He then made an earth shattering observation—The French were just as oppressed as the Brazilians! In Brazil, the oppression came from men with machine guns standing on the street corner. What he discovered with the French was that they were oppressed by men with machine guns in their heads. In Brazil, the external oppression made his audiences hunger for truthful reflection and self-expression. In France, the absence of external oppression led to the internal guards of apathy. They conformed, not because a dictator was threatening them to conform, but because they lacked the need or desire for socio-political self-examination. And that is what art does at its best.

PROSECUTING ATTORNEY: What art does at its best is entertain us! And it is entirely democratic, because I vote with my money! And if your incomprehensible avant-garde play, modern abstract art, or a-tonal classical music doesn't entertain me, then I don't have to vote for it. I withhold my money, or I encourage my legislator to cut your measly government funding and you thankfully go away.

BRIGGS: I am not the first to say that art isn't always easy, but neither is maintaining the quality of a democracy. Is it a coincidence that the birthplace of western democracy was also the birthplace of western theatre? These two are connected, because that same ancient Greek society that sought the ideal of rule by the people recognized the need for personal and societal self-re-

lection and understanding through theatrical art. They saw it as so important that they paid to have it produced for the people.

PROSECUTING ATTORNEY: But attending the theatre was a religious act, not a political one!

BRIGGS: But the plays enacted stories that put into question all aspects of Greek social and political life as well as their religious convictions. This was all done through the telling of their great Myths. Myths are always wrapped up in a swirl of symbolism and metaphor. Art is symbolic and metaphoric by its nature. Whatever has been created is subject to interpretation, and because of this, it stimulates thought, debate, and dialogue. When a society is only interested in art as entertainment and escapism, then we are seeing the self-imposed exile of thought that Boal witnessed. Art can help train us to think, to interpret, and to reflect. Will a society that runs from these qualities in its art do the same in their democracy?

JUDGE: Enough! I don't like the way this play is ending. It's preachy and imbued with righteous self-importance. Besides that, Kafka did this sort of thing far better anyway. I sentence you to an eternity of irrelevancy with little possibility of parole. May god, or whatever you artists believe in, have mercy on your soul. (*The courtroom empties. Briggs sits for a moment, alone. He takes out his note pad and begins to draw.*)

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