

“Watch me and learn about yourself”; What Ritual Theater might be all about

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Ritual Theater is a fusion of two worlds, “ritual” on the one hand and “theater” on the other. They are performance styles and approaches that are in constant discussion, and sometimes outright argument. Ritual Theater is neither one nor the other – ‘ritual’ or ‘theater’. It is, and must be both, to truly be itself. In developing ritual theater projects the performers and crew must understand the component parts, while always working to integrate the two into a seamless whole, all the while struggling to develop a language that incorporates both at each moment, making ritual theater a constantly evolving path.

Ritual and Theater are both human constructs. Rituals are the ways in which we order, codify and come to terms with our universe and define religious and social customs. The word ritual comes from the Latin *Ritus* – rite – meaning “a prescribed form or manner governing the words or actions for a ceremony” and more specifically “a ceremonial act or action”. Ritual can be defined as a set of actions done in one or more prescribed ways, created and performed by an individual or a community for the purpose of defining, changing or become one with the self, the larger community and/or the Divine. Rituals may be civic, secular or religious in nature. Rituals come in all shapes, sizes, colors, races, languages and styles. The only limitation on ritual is human need and imagination. Rituals are new and old, momentary and timeless. Rituals are a deep and not always understood part of how we as humans relate to the world around us.

Where most Ritual is active and interactive most theater is passive and observational. Theater is both the place in which a performance is presented and the dramatic performance itself. The Greek root word for theater *theatron* means “a place for seeing”. In theater we watch collections of actions, which together tell stories, convey ideas and usually entertain a community of people. Theater may speak to the passions of a person’s heart or call into question the current power structure of a government. Theater can educate and it can sooth away pain. Theater has the ability take us away from the ordinary or to tell us of the extraordinary, but mostly it reminds us who we are, where we came from and suggests possibilities for were we might be going.

Ritual Theater is the intersection between the active and the passive. Between watching a performance and being a part of it. Where theater can tell a story about the creation of the world, ritual can walk you through it so that you experience the moment in your own being. Not only do you become a part of the process, the process becomes a part of you. It works on you, adjusting you, shifting you- transforming you and the world around you. Ritual Theater is the place of the Tarot card Temperance, which is the archetypal representation of balancing, blending and patience. It is the blending of disparate elements, the tempering of steel to mold its shape. Ritual Theater is very much a tempering process. It is the place of magic and mystery, of what happens between action and reaction. The moment when we think we know what will happen, but in truth anything is possible.

*I am that moment*

*you strike the match  
before the flame flares.<sup>i</sup>*

In its capacity of tempering and blending, Ritual Theater is also the moment when the *sacred* and the *profane* (as the Anthropologist Mircea Eliade calls the world of spirit and the world of human kind) come together, blend, join and form something more than either can be on their own. It is this blending of the sacred and the profane which enables Ritual Theater to be so effective in transforming individuals and the world. By working in both realms, and with the knowledge and symbols of both worlds, Ritual Theater activates not only the thinking mind of the Ego or Work-A-Day Mind, but the symbolic mind of the Inner Self or Id allowing transformation to occur. Ritual Theater calls upon all of the tools of theater to enact a story of transformation, and all of the tools of ritual to reach the heart of the human psyche. Through dynamic story telling, words and symbols are woven into images, using light, color, scent and sound to touch the unconscious level of human thought. It is from this deep place, below all of the activities and worries of the conscious daily mind that real change takes place. Work-A-Day Mind is the part of ourselves which is most resistant to change and to the "unknown", the one most tied to who we are right now. To make change we must go past this level of our consciousness, deeper down into the shadowed, less familiar regions of thought, that close to primal part of ourselves which thinks in pictures and hears in symbols. The Inner Self does not give a fig about paying bills or taking the car to the shop or doing homework. The Inner Self is interested in the pretty colors of sunset and the lyrical melodies of bird song. Patterns can be imprinted in this deepest layer with the help of ritual. When we access this level we are touching the core of our thought and feeling process. Change from here; change within the purview of the Inner Self will be deeply felt and long lasting. Changes here will ripple out to all layers of our lives and eventually to the lives of others.

With most theater we perceive actions and words and sounds with our intellect. It is possible to soothe the worried jitters of Work-A-Day Mind and settle back to watch the show without analyzing every detail of what is being seen. This is the "willing suspension of disbelief". For the duration of the play, we the audience, have agreed to put aside our doubts and awareness of what is "normal" or "real" and believe what the actors choose to show us. We may acquire information about historical or fantastical events through this process. Hopefully we will take these new seeds of knowledge back with us into our lives to think about, to retell the stories to our friends and family and perhaps use these seeds to make change in our lives.

With most ritual we enter into an interactive relationship with symbolic systems of myth and imagery. We willingly step beyond Work-A-Day Mind and actively seek to make contact with the deeper part of ourselves in order to tap into the Inner Self's ability to perceive and work with symbolic imagery. We want to see beyond the normal business of putting out the trash and folding the laundry. We strive to touch the most abstract and primal of all thought forms, the Divine. For the majority of the ritual we are unconcerned with what is "normal" and "real", and try to touch what we see beyond the every day. We may acquire information about the past, the future or even the present, we may learn about a cubby-hole within our psyches which we had not known existed. Hopefully we

will take these new seeds of knowledge back with us into our lives and plant them within the soil of ourselves and our daily lives, and as these seeds grow we will harvest them and share the abundance of our efforts.

With Ritual Theater we are trying to combine these two ways of experiencing the world, the consciousness of Work-A-Day Mind on the one hand and the Inner Self on the other. By combining these levels of consciousness and accessing both we can teach both to weave positive change in our self and our world, without either feeling slighted or maligned in the process. We have an opportunity to help change how people see themselves and the world we share. For me, this is the core purpose of Ritual Theater – to make lasting change that can help us heal ourselves, each other and ultimately the problems we have helped create in the world.

After all you're careful planning and research, Ritual Theater is a moment in time - that takes a crew of ten or 110 to create – and then it is gone. It is ritual that says “watch me and learn about yourself”. It is theater that insists that life and art are a connection with Spirit and with humanity. It is an experience that you can share, even in a darkened theater, and go beyond the edge of the universe or into your own heart. In Ritual Theater the audience and the artists become co-creators in the story and the magic.

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<sup>i</sup> Shultz, David from his monologue as the Temperance Card for “Oracles from the Living Tarot” 2001