

An Imagination's Calculus

(Five non-related thoughts and people and events in my life that when combined through an imagination's calculus equal my play 'Everything Beautiful')

I. AMERICAN WAY

Just outside my hometown of Grand Rapids, Michigan (which is also the setting of the play, as well as most of my plays) is the corporate headquarters for the multinational direct sales company Amway, short for 'American Way.' According to a cult expert, Amway 'sells a marketing and motivational system, a cause, a way of life, in a fervid emotional atmosphere of rallies and political religious revivalism.'

Many years ago, after great personal hardship, to support herself my Aunt Fay became one of Amway's 'distributors,' peddling beauty products and a way of life in our neighborhood.

'Everything Beautiful' is dedicated to her.

A door to door cosmetics saleslady is an easy target, an American archetype ripe for ridicule. If my purpose was to make my aunt look ridiculous I wouldn't have dedicated the play to her or now discuss her life explicitly. Although I should preface that statement with the fact that for the better part of my life I thought of Fay as a punchline. Pathetic. Her life a farce. In her world, selling cosmetics was pretty much the highest possible achievement of human nature. When life gave her a shit sandwich, Fay would make it sound like she was dining on caviar with the Grand Duchess of Russia.

But a gift of getting to be a playwright is the opportunity to empathize with people unlike myself. And as I've gotten older, as I've endured serious loss and setbacks, watching how Fay treats her struggles with a smile took on a strange sort of dignity.

'Everything Beautiful' began as my attempt to find compassion for Fay's life.

II. MR. CHALMERS/ARISTOTLE

For some reason still unfathomable to me, my high school Latin teacher Mr. Chalmers (who appeared as a serial rapist in my other play published in this magazine) had our class memorize portions of Aristotle's 'Poetics' and repeat them aloud as a group. As a 15 year I intoned 'tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in

separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions.’

What the fuck?

Why would a teacher at a public high school in a small Midwestern town have his bored Latin class memorize large chunks of Aristotle?

Whether it’s unconscious priming or not, the last few plays I’ve written have all observed the three unities defined by Aristotle, unities of action, time and place.

Is that just a nerdy wank? Why write plays that occur in real time in the same place? Who cares besides your stupid Latin teacher?

Good questions, thank you for asking.

Here’s my thing: theater has very few advantages over film and TV, and Aristotle’s unities help accentuate theater’s unique virtues, none of which is more important than having a group of warm bodies in the same space witnessing real people tell a story without commercial breaks. A play told in real time necessarily gains weight and momentum the further it goes along, and having written plays not abiding by the three unities, I would argue that Aristotle’s goal for the drama, ‘pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions’ is easier to achieve using the Greeks’ rules of form. I’m not trying to say I’m Sophocles, but I can at least write under the same rules, sort of like how I can use the same tennis racquets as Roger Federer but probably won’t win Wimbledon.

Mr. Chalmers is retired but I should probably say thank you (and say sorry for having him appear as a serial rapist in that other play, as far as I know he never raped anyone, let alone a number of people).

III. CHILDHOOD STREETS (the imagination’s home)

As a kid my friends and I played hopscotch on a court we scratched with chalk into the asphalt street in front of my house on a quiet suburban street. When we meet Cookie she enters singing and playing hopscotch in front of a house on a quiet suburban street even though her feet are screaming. She takes off one high heeled shoe, it’s filled with blood, she dumps it out. She takes off the other shoe, it’s even more filled with blood, she dumps it out. Cookie then puts on a huge smile to go knock on a door to sell beauty products. By placing this absurd image in my imagination’s home it’s easier for me to emotionally ground heightened circumstances.

IV. BEING THERE

As a senior in high school I watched the 1979 movie ‘Being There’ starring Peter Sellers. It didn’t behave like anything I’d ever seen before, the tone was so strange, the comedy was so understated, I was hooked.

At the end of the film, while the main character literally walks on water, we hear an offstage eulogy, quotes from the life of the newly deceased who was a very rich industrialist. ‘When I was a child, I was told God created man in his own image. That is the moment I decided to manufacture mirrors.’ At the outset of writing ‘Everything Beautiful’ that line jumped right back into the forefront of my brain unbidden by me and seemed the perfect reason for Cookie to sell cosmetics, to reflect God’s love.

(A SIDENOTE ON CREATIVITY WHICH IS ACTUALLY THE POINT OF THIS ESSAY)

There shouldn’t be any magical hocus pocus about creativity, people who talk about inspiration as coming from somewhere beyond are just trying to make themselves look cool and exclude mere mortals who have to work at their art. Creativity is just little stuff combined in a previously non-existent pattern. A line from a movie. A Latin teacher. A game of hopscotch. A creepy cultish direct sales company. Tiny pieces accrue and if you lie in wait long enough, (I waited over twenty years for this play) they attract to each other, divide and reproduce to make a work of art, whether it’s a poem, a song, or a painting. The trick and maddening part of trying to be an artist is the necessary discipline to lie in wait.

V. SISYPHUS/WOMAN ON A MOTORCYCLE

The final conscious element of ‘Everything Beautiful’s formation, is a philosophy class I took as a teenager taught by the first woman I’d ever seen wear a leather jacket or ride a motorcycle (I lived a pretty sheltered life in a very conservative town). Although I don’t remember her name, I remember that she had us read Albert Camus’s ‘Myth of Sisyphus,’ and maybe because I thought she was so badass or because my 14 year old brain was so ready to make sense of the lack of inherent meaning in life, it remains one of my touchstones for how to think about the world.

Camus argues that Sisyphus and his eternal boulder pushing is perhaps the greatest model for modern man to find meaning in the tasks of his own life

“Living an experience, a particular fate, is accepting it fully. The absurd man wants to find out if it is possible to live without appeal. He says yes to his fate and his effort henceforth will be unceasing. There is no higher destiny to say a hearty yes to your adventure.”

This same yes became Cookie’s essential mantra. By the end of the play she’s blind and dragging the body of her dead daughter while still trying to sell cosmetics to pay for a proper burial. Even then she smiles and says yes.

It’s easy to call her attitude ridiculous, and while part of me agrees, the bigger part respects Cookie, and my Aunt Fay, for their will to not just endure through everything, but to say a big hearty yes to the adventure.

Every day I’m lucky when I remember to say the same.