

The Dramatist as Traumatist: Notes on a Play

by Guillermo Reyes

A friend asks a loaded question, “Why did you write this play?”

Was there a tinge of criticism in the subtext as in “why *the hell* did you write this play?” But ultimately, I decided it was an actual friend inquiring about the origins of the play and it was asked in earnest, not in the spirit of snark. We playwrights are sensitive to critics who use snark in their reviews. The play was “That Day in Tucson” and the question was in response to the agile, well-paced production in Reno, Nevada at Truckee Meadows Community College in April 2023, directed by Shea King, an up-and-coming young director featured in American Theatre Magazine’s article, [“Six Theater Workers You Should Know.”](#)

The play dramatizes the events behind the Tucson shooting of January 2011, specifically about how the young 20-year-old congressional intern Daniel Hernandez responded to the mass shooting and saved the life of congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords during a “meet your congresswoman” gathering outside a Safeway. The play—as produced today in the 2020s—has become a portrait of the gun violence that erupts almost everywhere in the United States on a weekly, sometimes frightfully on a daily basis. At a certain point, when actors or directors asked, I was answering the question with a touch of exasperation, “I’ve been left traumatized by the countless mass shootings in the United States, I had to write about one of them.” Though I didn’t personally witness this event, it’s as if I have had to live it and re-live it now for two decades whenever a shooting in El Paso, or Parkland, Florida, or Uvalde, all these communities we now know by name, occur with frequency. We are living under collective trauma, and that brings up the current conversation on trauma itself.

We dramatists can capture the trauma, but unfortunately, we are also forced to live it. It’s not just a mythical invention—the domain of the Greek gods such as in most Greek drama, or the recapturing of historical events in Shakespeare’s plays. It’s what we’re living with in a constant loop of tragedies that some people claim is simply what we have to live with if we’re to sustain the logic of the Second Amendment as an oracle of a Christian god that must never be touched. In the various areas of drama that I’ve delved into, I have found myself constantly referring to trauma as a form of drama, the way that real life trauma (my own, that of others) has influenced my work, but it also has helped me understand the psychology of the characters, and that of the playwrights who use it.

Would I have become attached to Tennessee Williams’ work without understanding his sister’s mental breakdown as it appears in *The Glass Menagerie*, or even more explicitly in *Suddenly, Last Summer*? The charms of Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* also pertain to the breakdowns or instabilities both in Williams’ sister and in his southern matriarch of a mother, but then there are those traumatic situations that pertain to his own life, which also influence the various characters, some of them male, others disguised as female, all in the service of him working ~~out~~ through his own issues. Williams internalized family trauma, and his own awareness of queer

identity, which at the time was stigmatized and criminalized, ~~which provoked~~ provoking his own personal struggles, which then ended up on stage as drama. By now, most audiences who see his plays will likely have an idea of Williams' family history and understand that, in part, he internalized the family history to dramatize a "traumatic" experience in which characters must suffer through their personal anguish and sometimes make deadly or adverse decisions. Watching Blanche DuBois deteriorate into madness and then being led to the mental facility leaves its own mark on our psyche. The recent book *Blanche: The Life and Times of Tennessee Williams' Greatest Creation* by Nancy Schoenberger poses the idea that Blanche is a survivor, that she'll end up running a flower shop somewhere in New Orleans and live out her life in peace. That's sweet, not always convincing. Seeing her led away to an uncertain future was never comforting to me, but alas, hoping for her recovery and that she's "getting help" in the mental facility might be the more salutary way of looking at it.

In the July 23, 2023, cover issue in *New York Magazine*, reporter Danielle Carr discusses the career of Dr. Bessel Van Der Kolk who was expelled as a professor from Harvard for delving into issues of trauma, particularly that of recaptured memory, his research dismissed as pop junk science. His findings ended up featured on Oprah and the Phil Donahue Show and the talk show circuit in general and turned into a lurid spectacle the doctor may not have meant it to be. People claiming on television that they recaptured memory about childhood molestation and leaving family members devastated with their accusations became part of a crude charade as if people's psychological struggles were meant to be aired for millions of strangers. Harvard shut down the doctor's trauma research, but he went on to write a best-selling book on the topic. I must admit, as a dramatist, I can't dismiss even the research into people claiming to be abducted by aliens (another type of research that Harvard allowed, but later retreated from) because no matter how outlandish, drama incorporates great levels of trauma, which is real to people, which may feature fantasies and outlandish claims like alien abduction. If we dramatists aren't open to such claims, then we're not the fabulists we're meant to be. Was Oedipus' marriage and procreation with his own mother not a metaphor of cruel fate—and would Harvard have shut it down if it were investigated as science? Dramatists can't afford to shut down the mythical world. It's how we construct our minds and our lives through works of the imagination.

Whatever we might think of the doctor's seminal book, *The Body Keeps the Score*, one thing we cannot accuse him of, is not harboring enough drama in his work, and in his career. We are living in an era of trauma, and Dr. Van Der Kolk's belief that trauma isn't simply provoked in our minds, but it also affects the entire body as it reacts physiologically to it. This finding adds one more layer of complexity. I am not an expert in this field, but my sense is that the discussion of trauma accompanies well the drama that we, "the dramatizing community," constantly seek to evoke on stage. We don't need degrees in psychiatry to know we are fascinated by characters who act boldly on a stage, provoking a reaction, sometimes violent, sometimes simply oppositional, to their various needs and wishes, lusts and ambitions and delusions that humans harbor. We watch closely whether or not the character will achieve a crucial, irrepressible aim—seducing a lover, conquering a country, defeating an enemy, or suffer a breakdown and a fall from grace—and we often wonder what leads people to yearn for big effects, for accomplishing the impossible, or for at least aiming for something grand, sometimes equivocal, tragic, outrageous, as Ridley Scott's latest film on Napoleon promised in the trailer, which alone provokes a feeling of excitement and (for me) anxiety. The actual film delivered on some of it, but perhaps wasn't mythical enough as it was too long and tedious. Too many contemporary leaders from Trump to Putin suffer from the delusion

of power and in the nuclear age (think Oppenheimer), such ambitions add to our own on-going trauma over the threats over our entire planet when leaders unleash violence and issue nuclear threats.

In the U.S. today, I know that certain types of news evoke a physical response: the constant mass shootings of people. The idea that any community will gladly sell a semi-automatic weapon to a mentally unstable person already puts me on edge. When a young white man in El Paso went shooting at a local Wal-Mart to specifically kill Latinos (“invaders,” as he called them,) that hits home even further. It becomes personal. It’s the tragedy of targeted genocide, which harks back to the Holocaust or to more ethnic cleansings like the ones in Rwanda or Serbia-Kosovo.

On January 8, 2011, the events hit home in Arizona.

The news broadcast the event for several days, but the media also uncovered a hero, someone to lionize, and that came as a surprise to the young intern Daniel Hernandez Jr. who wasn’t expecting it. Moreover, he wasn’t expecting to get “outed” as the gay Latino intern who came to the rescue. One thing is to be called a hero, another is to have perfect strangers on the internet commenting on your personal life, people defending it, others attacking it.

When I spoke to Daniel about writing a play, he asked me to stick to the events that he portrayed in his book, *They Call me a Hero*. Everything else in the play, news reports, a portrait of the shooter Jared Loughner, Gabby Giffords’ recovery and other issues, are something I elaborated on with my own research. But what stuck out most was Daniel’s own courage in putting up with the trauma. If anything, his book reveals a couple of incidents that I felt contextualized his own personal trauma leading up to the event. He grew up as an intellectually curious boy who got his parents to buy him a subscription to the *New York Times* when he was a kid. His schoolmates taunted him as gay for reading the *New York Times*. More crucially, once he went to high school, he insisted on taking a class on first aid emergency procedures in which the students could earn a certification. The teacher told him, “It’s all girls, you know.” The idea was that the class attracted girls only, and he was the only boy in it who cared about emergency procedures, and he put up with that again, knowing he’d be called gay once again for taking such a class. His own health took a turn when he was diagnosed with hyperthyroidism which could turn around and attack the body with its opposite hypothyroidism, any of which could become fatal. He dropped out of the University of Arizona in order to recover from it, and when he returned to school he was offered an internship position with congresswoman Gabby Giffords. It started officially after the winter break, but he was asked to come help before he officially started on January 8th. That’s when his training in emergency procedures kicked in, the moment the bullets started flying.

The play became about him ultimately and his ability to save the day because he had the training to come to an injured person’s rescue. Behind the violence of the events, stood out one “unlikely” hero, someone you wouldn’t suspect. That’s how the story comes with its own uplift. It reveals how a young man, barely 20, could save the day. And ultimately, that was the only way to deal with a traumatic event, by finding a saving grace.

Tragedies like the ones we’ve seen everywhere in this country constantly force its victims to improvise, to rise to the occasion whenever they can. At Parkland, we heard the story of an armed guard who did not run into the fray to save the day and was sued for failing to do his job. But the Parkland students became active in promoting gun legislation. The fray is caught in David Hogg’s memoir, *Never Again*, co-written with his sister Lauren who was also witness to the Parkland

shooting. The siblings jointly reveal their involvement in the events and their eventual activism to fight back against gun violence.

The Dramatist in me became a Traumatist in this sense: I have worked through the trauma of certain events but also constantly seek to work my way out of it. I don't believe we should surrender to the traumatizing events, but work through them to seek a path out of the darkness. After all, Dr. Van Der Kolk's book is about healing. If that's pop psychology for our times, it can be turned into drama, and as far as I'm concerned, drama is a cathartic art form, one of the ways in which we countenance the trauma of living in perilous times.

I hope I have answered my friend's question to the best of my ability. And my ability is that of the dramatist, the only way I can summon the darkness to guide my path back into lightness.