

Paradise How?

The Living Theatre's Erotic Revolution of Poetry, Pleasure, Play

Anu Bonobo

2008

"I'm an advocate of free love. What else can I say? I think people should do what they like, enjoy what they enjoy, and we should enjoy their enjoying what they enjoy."

–Judith Malina

(interviewed by Jim Feast and Steve Dalachinsky)

"The work of liberation from sexual repression must be a parallel of all revolutionary work and must take place during all revolutionary stages. But there comes a point at which no further progress can be made without abolishing standards that cripple the natural man sexually, and this point comes precisely when we confront the fundamental problem of violence.

"The Beautiful Non-Violent Anarchist Revolution will only take place after The Sexual Revolution because before that the energy is violent."

–"The Exorcism of Violence and the Sexual Revolution," from *Paradise Now*

Somewhere on the raging rivers of militant anarchist response to the more pious tendencies in the religious pacifist tradition, nonviolence got confused with self-sacrifice, the denial of desire, and submission to authority. Anarchist pacifism, however, distinguishes itself from the religious tradition in some interesting ways. Of The Living Theatre's numerous contributions to the depth and variety of anarchist culture, I'm most grateful for their joyful, intoxicating insistence that the anarchist revolution is beautiful and nonviolent because the revolution is inherently erotic.

Radical erotic values and prophetically intense visions are sensually stitched together in Julian Beck's poetic manifestoes and in the stories of the collective's decades of anarchic and amorous adventures (many recounted in detail in John Tytell's brilliant biography of the troupe, *The Living Theatre: Art, Exile, and Outrage*). Judith Malina's lifelong journey with the collective that continues today has also been documented in diaries, books, and countless interviews.

Of the group's countless plays, protests, and performances, *Paradise Now*—written and performed collectively between July 1968 and January 1970—remains emblematic of the collective's conjuring a convergence and cacophony of social, spiritual, political, creative, and communal bliss.

As I attempt to crystallize The Living Theatre's inspiration in essay form, my traces of ecstatic admiration and crude writerly approximations hope to convey the revolutionary generosity that *Paradise Now* and Julian's poetry visited upon a world ravaged by reactionary forces.

Having seen a documentary that captures actual footage of the event's last performance, having examined the book written down by Judith and Julian as if it were scripture, having studied the reviews and analyses from that



time, and having participated in various boundary-crushing hedonistic happenings of a similar spirit, my mind has its own imaginal map of what *Paradise Now* must have been like.

Experimental in every regard, it would be impossible to summarize every aspect of *Paradise Now* since it was an ambitious artistic endeavor about every aspect of non-violent revolutionary anarchist culture. In his 1972 book about the collective, Pierre Biner explains when discussing *Paradise Now*, “The Living Theatre strives to communicate the very taste of revolution.” That description sticks.

Not the theory of revolution nor the tactics. Not the tools of revolution but the taste.

Like the taste of a lover or of rose-petal ice cream, the honey on the tongue of tomorrow’s impossible possibilities promises, as The Living Theatre did in *The Living Book of The Living Theatre*, to “find out where each other is at so that physical plans can be made by collectives of people interested in affecting the type of consciousness necessary to replace movie images with human beings, profit with joy, guns with cocks, and a negative and destructive style of life with a positive and active celebration of being.”

A few months before the premiere of *Paradise Now* in France at the famous Avignon Theatre Festival, the collective was in Paris, and participated in the occupation of Theatre de l’Odeon during the May 1968 uprising. “Le Living”—as the French comrades knew them—witnessed and were part of the 24-hours-each-day-nonstop discussion and debate that Julian described as the “greatest theatre I’ve ever seen.”

This beyond-barriers principle of “theatre into the street and the street into the theatre” continued when *Paradise Now* shocked a more conventional crowd at Avignon, and right-wing hecklers doused the performers with pails of water. Le Living just treated the participation as part of the show, and at another performance that ended at two in the morning, sympathetic spectators joined the collective marching and chanting in the streets when the show adjourned. Due to tensions surrounding the censorship of another performance group, Le Living withdrew from Avignon in protest and provided its next performance of *Paradise Now* for free.

Back in the United States in September of that year to begin a tour primarily of colleges and universities, *Paradise Now* made its American debut in New Haven, Connecticut at Yale University. With an overflow crowd of more than 600 people—and many of them as well as many of the cast tripping on LSD—the orgiastic event exceeded its European infancy when, as described by Tytell, “the actors in bikinis and G-strings began to grapple in a communal embrace, they were joined by almost two hundred spectators, many of whom were partially or totally disrobed. Most of these were still naked when, at the end of the play, the actors and several hundred members of the audience streamed out of the theatre, Judith mounted on the shoulders of a Yale student named Tom Walker who would later join the company.”

Not surprisingly, this magical parade did not find a kindred euphoria in the police it met, and many people were maced and arrested. These kinds of confrontations with cops were not uncommon throughout the career of what Julian told a journalist around that time was “a revolution disguised as a theatre.”

In a recent interview conducted by Jim Feast and Steve Dalachinsky for a book on the Jewish Lower East Side edited by Clayton Patterson, forthcoming from Seven Stories, Judith recalls the day in court after the New Haven incident:

“A prosecutor asked Julian Beck, ‘Were your genitals exposed when you were arrested?’

“Julian said, ‘Well, possibly.’

“And the prosecutor said, ‘Well, were you aware of your genitals?’

“Julian rose in full Julian Beck dudgeon and hit the pulpit there. ‘Sir, I am always aware of my genitals.’

“That was a very nice moment. We accept the court as a theater provided by the state for us to perform in and we usually do a good job.”

Naked longhairs on acid taking over venues to incite an audience via political rants infused with insights from the I-Ching fit the tenor of the times when a radical left-anarchist milieu tested psychedelics and produced Yippies, Diggers, White Panthers, Armed Love, Motherfuckers, and Weatherpeople. But many critics in the theatre scene preferred the Broadway version of hippie flesh found in the monumentally popular *Hair*—which even I could enjoy at the time, and I was only a toddler.

According to Tytell, “The critics were terribly offended by physical nudity as well as by a naked declaration of purpose that they deemed naive. They had decided the bodies were ugly, disregarding Judith’s view that the human form was inherently beautiful and anyone could be a sublime artist.”

Inspired by the thinking of Wilhelm Reich, Herbert Marcuse, and Norman O. Brown, The Living Theatre espoused a sexual revolution as the prerequisite for all other revolutions. During “The Rite of Universal Intercourse” section of the show, the unresolved tensions are situated in Jerusalem and expressed in the refrain: “Fuck the Jews. Fuck the Arabs. Fuck means peace.” In the book version, notes explain that in the rite “the division between actor and public diminishes. This diminution of the division between actor and spectator becomes an image for the disappearance of the division between Arab and Jew.”

When audience members participated in the “body pile,” this group-grope segment frequently included simulated sex. But some performers took things further. Judith recalls, “In this people pile, they hugged and embraced and some actors even made love with the audience. I didn’t, but some people did. And we couldn’t do that today. And that’s really a tragedy of our time that you just can’t make love to anybody anytime without worrying about certain health and certain inhibitions. The times are bad that way for sexuality.”

In his book, Tytell reports, “Jenny Hecht, for example, believed she had to be as generous and open as possible in order to convince anyone of her revolutionary stance, and consequently, she would give of herself as often as she was asked. This was clearly beyond all theatrical precedent.” Although this radically transgressive and intimate behavior was mostly consensual, it’s unlikely that all touch during the countless performances of *Paradise Now* was without any coercion.

The clear utopian imperatives of freedom and equality in pleasure assume a feminist component to the sexual revolution. As many critics of the period have noted, opportunistic and sexually aggressive men often took advantage of the freedoms of the period, and this, in part, helped push the occasional feminist collusion with the backlash against sexual freedom that arrived with AIDS and the right-wing evangelical movement in the 1980s.

Reflecting on these performances in *The Life of the Theatre*, Julian remarks on how these performances themselves are “a trip, a state of being” where “ravings and raging” unleash “the creation of psychic changes that penetrate the armor of the mind.” So, while the mainstream fancied Hair and its melodic meditations on masturbation, long hair, and hashish, *Paradise Now* was a bit too confrontational to just let the sun shine in. It required “tantrum, flipout, flashout, agony, wail” before reaching “reconciliation” and “rapture.”

A popular performer with whom this kind of rhetoric resonated was the lead singer of The Doors. When Jim Morrison saw *Paradise Now* at the University of Southern California on February 28, 1969, its radical interactive impact immediately captured his imagination. The next night, The Doors were scheduled to kick off a tour at The Dinner Key Auditorium in Miami, Florida. After a day of drinking, fighting with his partner Pamela, and missing flights, Morrison arrived at the gig really wasted (even for him) and rather late to meet disgruntled bandmates, frustrated fans, and disagreements between the band’s management and the promoters.

With 13,000 people crammed into a venue intended to hold half as many people (only possible because the promoter took out the seats), it was a tense, hot night in Miami. As vividly depicted in Oliver Stone’s 1991 biopic about the band, Morrison’s inebriated attempt to transform a Doors show into the kind of radical naked revelry he’d experienced with The Living Theatre the night before did not go very well. The band couldn’t finish the show, Morrison was charged with various crimes related to his lascivious behavior, and the band’s tour was cancelled with its career in limbo.

While some critics would like to dismiss Morrison’s debt to The Living Theatre and attribute everything about what is known as “The Miami Incident” to the drunken excesses of a sex-obsessed egomaniac, Morrison’s libertine lifestyle already had a philosophical basis influenced by Rimbaud and Artaud, Nietzsche and The Beats. Days after the Florida fracas, Morrison was back in California to spend time with The Living Theatre in the Bay Area. Along with poet Michael McClure, Morrison “actively participated in performances of *Paradise Now* at the Nourse Auditorium” according to Tytell. The day after the Nourse performances, Jim met Julian at the office of anarchist poet and City Lights publisher Lawrence Ferlinghetti. At that meeting, Morrison learned of The Living Theatre’s financial challenges and the next day gave Julian \$2500 to help the collective get back to the east coast.

A shallow survey of all the nudity in the context of a vegetarian lifestyle and a philosophy of nonviolence, it might be easy to pigeonhole The Living Theatre’s erotic politics as too Edenic and effervescent. Or, to put it another way, folks might consider their sexual statements steeped in a heterosexual privilege of the vanilla variety. But as revealed quite openly by the details disclosed in Tytell’s biography, Judith’s diaries, and Julian’s books, things were much more layered, complicated, and interesting than that.

Although married to Judith with whom he had two children, Julian's primary sexual urges were for men. He called himself homosexual "up to the waist" and "down to the neck." Before Hanon Reznikov (see obituary, Summer 2008 FE) became a partner to the couple in theatre and life, both Judith and Julian had several different lovers.

Tytell devotes a considerable amount of ink to divulging the most intimate aspects of a particularly intense sado-masochistic affair that Judith was having while the troupe was living and working in Brazil. According to Tytell, erotic experimentation traversed into serious political themes addressed by The Living Theatre onstage. Tytell summarizes the kind of material they were delving into: "the essential masochism of the people supported the sadism of leaders who only expressed their collective will and whose power came from the support of those whom they oppressed."

Julian addresses both the erotic and the political aspects of this issue quite passionately when reflecting on the troupe's production of Jean Genet's *The Maids*: "The first time I put on the black silk panties I got a hard-on right away. I felt humiliated in the garter belt. It felt good. I became a prisoner in the high heeled shoes. I had hot and cold flashes. I was delirious. I wanted to bow down and be stepped on."

Later in the same passage, he speculates on the political implications of S/M relations: "In my own quest for reciprocal male love, I seek to recover body warmth from the ice age of industry. It becomes part of my revolt. If the relationship is sado-masochist, it is born in some ways out of the feelinglessness of an ice age; and Sadism/Masochism are mechanisms for feeling something, even if it is pain. But feeling the pain, as Artaud conjectured, could open the door to other feelings, which may account for the link between masochism and altruistic love of which Judith speaks. Altruism is revolutionary. As is love."

Like *The Life of The Theatre*, Julian Beck's other writings are frank, erotic, and utopian in the sense that poets like Rumi, Blake, Whitman, and Ginsberg are, but he isn't usually talked about as a poet or studied by the scholars of poetry; sadly, most of his books haven't even been kept in print. In *Living in Volkswagen Buses and other Songs of the Revolution*—one of his few texts still circulating—Beck outlines the philosophy that his life was one long, unfinished poem. "I am always writing this single poem," he announces in the preface, and then in song "103," he declares

i am examining the meaning of poetry
i am trying to make everything into poetry
i begin with soup
i begin with the body
everything must be poetry

Indeed, a poem can be "a broom for the brain and the lungs," and a poem about poetry is often erotic by nature, like masturbation. So, he concludes "103" with the following lines

defending poetry
when i was seventeen
and my cock rose stiff and bright as the moon
when i wrote poetry

With fragrant echoes of Whitman and Ginsberg, Beck's erotic metronome beats with the same strident sensuality that defined *Paradise Now*. In "113," he mentions mouths that "lather with hunger for harmony," and in "128," he expresses his love for the past by "sucking at the musk of its armpits/getting high on its groiny fumes."

In a brilliant poem about "lingerings," "the extended cock lingers in my mouth I am tasting the arms/uplifting the body of god." Of all the homoerotic images available for poetry, there's something simultaneously generous and absolutely hot about the poet's page being full of religiously-toned prick praise, describing a mouthful of dick. A few other poets—James Broughton, Antler, and Allen Ginsberg come to mind—have conveyed a similarly innocent, anarchic, and ecstatic gay spirit.

In “120,” he announces who he is in Whitmanic fashion: “Julian the anti-patriarch/who is for everything.” Back in the preface, he privileges his anarchism among the everything: “The poem encompasses a continually redefined analysis of the world and of life on it from a pluralist, anarchist point-of-view. And because anarchist and pacifist thought are still in development in me as well as in the world, the all-encompassing nature of the poem, being dependent on this analysis, is not yet clear.”

With “songs” written in the late 1970s and early 1980s and published after his death, *Living in Volkswagen Buses* breathes bright with the same radical power as his earlier work. Only occasionally does the reader catch a whiff of the disappointment that Beck must have felt in the face of a world that did not embrace the Beautiful Nonviolent Anarchist Revolution in a wider way before he died. But even if people did not love anarchy like Julian did, Julian never stopped loving the people, his faith in humanity always unwavering, because we are a “species intent on holy perfume.”

The playful and poetic practice of pleasure faces two threats: one from those in the radical milieu who would mute its centrality in anti-authoritarian culture, another from the perpetual popular appropriations that turn it into an eccentric, apolitical diversion at best, or into an exploitive hyper-pornographic commodity at worst. Those who advocate for the precept of pleasure need loyal allies, loving defenders, and lusty exemplars.

We certainly can thank The Living Theatre when we realize that four decades since the first performance of *Paradise Now*, despite the permanent backlash against the freedoms claimed by freaky countercultures everywhere and always, radical experiments in public sex and sensuality continue to promote peace and expose the uglier perversions of endless war, economic domination, and ecological decimation.

for Judith

—Anu Bonobo, Pumpkin Hollow, August 2008

A Brief History of The Living Theatre

Founded in 1947 as an alternative to the commercial theater by Judith Malina and Julian Beck, The Living Theatre has staged nearly a hundred productions performed in eight languages in 28 countries on five continents—a unique body of work that has influenced theater the world over.

Touring Europe in the mid-1960’s, they evolved into a collective, living and working together toward the creation of a new form of nonfictional acting based on the actor’s political and physical commitment to using the theater as a medium for furthering social change.

The Living Theatre has continued to perform in non-traditional venues around the world free of charge to the broadest of all possible audiences, using participatory techniques that enable the audience to first rehearse with the company and then join them on stage as fellow performers.

fifth Estate

Anu Bonobo
Paradise How?

The Living Theatre's Erotic Revolution of Poetry, Pleasure, Play
2008

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/379-fall-2008/paradise>
Fifth Estate #379, Fall, 2008

[fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://www.fifthestate.org)