

Judith Malina (1926–2015)

Co-founder of The Living Theatre

Lorraine Perlman

2015



Conversations with Judith Malina rarely ended without her advocating “the beautiful nonviolent anarchist revolution.” Strategy to realize it always followed. Her efforts to achieve this ideal resulted in her arrest for civil disobedience in twelve different countries.

She and her husband Julian Beck established The Living Theatre in New York City in 1947 when they were in their 20s. Cultural foundations offering support were non-existent. Despite the constant shortage of physical space to rehearse and perform, they produced plays by radical playwrights like William Carlos Williams, Antonin Artaud, Paul Goodman and Tennessee Williams.

Catholic Worker pacifists like Dorothy Day and anarchists like Goodman greatly influenced both Judith and Julian. Their half-century of committed activism still serves as a model.

Judith's first public protest was directed against nuclear weapons. In June 1955, at a Lower East Side NYC park, she was one of ten who refused to take shelter when sirens required everyone to do so. A decade later, this tiny public rejection had expanded to millions marching against atomic bomb production and testing.

Judith was a vegetarian. Animal Liberation was not a goal she focused on, but you did not feel comfortable eating meat in her presence.

Nineteenth century anarchism provided theory for The Living Theatre's call for a General Strike for Peace in 1962. When police on horses stormed the protesters/strikers in Times Square, Julian's ribs were broken and his lung punctured.

In 1963, after federal tax enforcers blocked the doors of their 14th Street theater and Judith and Julian were tried and found guilty of seven counts of felony, the Living Theatre company regrouped in Europe. Their politics and their art were welcomed. At least, at first. As the 1968–9 uprisings sweeping the continent disturbed the forces of order, police repression extended to the theaters. Administrators cancelled contracts. Governments deported the actors.

"Paradise Now," the Living Theatre's signature work, evolved during these tumultuous years. Julian and Judith later wrote down the outline and crucial elements of the play. To start, "The voyage is a vertical ascent toward Permanent Revolution." The first spoken words are "I am not allowed to travel without a passport." Indignation ignites determination to loosen social restraints, leading to unity of actors and audience who leave the theater in order to publicly liberate themselves.

Back in the United States in August 1968, the Living Theatre presented this richly nuanced work from coast to coast. They adapted it to the local setting and social protests.

Judith became a Wobbly in the 1970s. Several of us from Detroit went to Pittsburgh to see them and the opening of the "Legacy of Cain." It was performed on a large outdoor structure of several stories. On the mimeographed program (enhanced with the IWW logo) the Preamble announces, "We propose to visit six places where the power of Cain is felt and to enact there public acts in the name of the people's pain."

Among the questions dealing with the House of Death: "Who were Cain and Abel and why did one kill the other? What was the result?"

In the House of the State, we are asked: "What is government? What is patriarchy?" In the House of Money, "What's the Golden Calf? Who bows down? Who refuses? Is money violent?"

In the House of Property: "What is property? Is it violent? Who owns your labor? In the House of War: "Who dies for what? What is cruelty? What is sadism? What are the choices?"

Finally in Act 6, we reach The House of Love: "What is the source? How did it begin? Who dominates? Who submits? Am I your slave? Who ties up whom? Who cracks the whip? How can we undo the knots?" (Note that Cain's power is not absent from the House of Love.)

Julian died in 1985. Judith kept The Living Theatre alive helped by the love and commitment of Hanon Reznikov, a long-time member of the collective. Physical space was still a problem, but rehearsals continued in lofts and finally, in 2000, a potentially permanent home was secured on Clinton St., on New York City's lower east side.

Living her principles did not make life easy. Money was always a problem. When the company traveled, housing and food had to be procured. She and Julian had two children. Roles in commercial films such as appearances in "The Sopranos" or "Dog Day Afternoon," or in theater productions brought occasional economic relief. So, Judith's response to a provocative stage hand on a California movie set had implications for their budget.

The exchange took place as the first Gulf War was warming up. As the cameras were about to roll, Judith, on stage with Anjelica Huston, was handed a small American flag. Judith said she panicked. Her response: "Don't give me that without giving me a match to go with it." She was not hired for the sequel to this Addams Family film.

On one of my visits to New York to discuss Black & Red's publication of Judith's poems (*Love & Politics* appeared in 2001), I was pleased to join The Living Theatre and friends at a Times Square protest-theater against an impending execution. "Not in My Name," expressed our grief and outrage at murder by state decree.

Judith and her collaborators studied and practiced freedom. One of the numerous mantras heard in their "Paradise Now" play has a unique intensity for me:

to be free is to be free to change

Lorraine Perlman lives in the Detroit area where she publishes and distributes Black & Red titles including Judith Malina's book of poetry. She and her husband, Fredy, cooperated in political actions with The Living Theatre in the early 1960s.

Painting Flowers on the Sidewalk: Tompkins Square

When the clubs came down on Tompkins Square,
I remembered the Times Square Police Riot
At the start of the '60s,
And how Julian cried "Shame!"
As they rode in on horses,
Till they broke his ribs...

Not one of those Tompkins Square cops
Is old enough to remember
The police riding in on horses, swinging.
But I remember how, when it struck my head,
I saw red splash, I thought: "Roses!"
Roses shattering into full bloom.

Wherever you've been hit
Paint a flower on the sidewalk,
Because there the seed of your blood
Has been planted in the asphalt,
And there the seed of your blood
Will blossom and burst through the stones.

Then the streets
Will be covered
With flowers
And the police...
What police?

—from a collection of Judith Malina's poems, *Love & Politics*, published in 2001 by Black & Red, Detroit.
Available at blackandred.org.

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