

No money, no barter

no authoritarian control

Judith Malina
Hank Malone
Julian Beck

1968

On December 12, 13, and 14, The Living Theatre, an amazing theatrical community numbering over 35, performed three of the four productions of their repertoire: "Mysteries and Smaller Pieces," "Antigone," and "Frankenstein" ("Paradise Now" is the fourth) at the Detroit Institute of Arts. These productions were, to use Julian Beck's phrase, a revolution disguised as theatre.

After four years of self-imposed exile in Europe, The Living Theatre community has recently returned to the United States, beginning a six-month tour of the nation last September.

Inspired by Antonin Artaud's revolutionary ideas about the "theatre of cruelty," Julian Beck and his wife Judith Malina, began building The Living Theatre in 1948. Their efforts culminated in such now-legendary theatrical productions as "The Brig" and "The Connection."

As non-violent anarchists, the Becks have served 14 prison sentences over the years. They have also created a Revolutionary Theatre, a furious and exciting prophesy of the future. The following is an interview with Julian Beck and Judith Malina, recorded in Detroit on December 13.

FIFTH ESTATE: I hardly know where to begin. This is fantastic. I'm sure that every kind of question every kind of idea I would want to explore, will seem to you as redundant. I would like you to feel free to talk about anything you like, anything about the Living Theatre.

JUDITH MALINA: Well, let's talk about the revolution, not about the Living Theatre.

JULIAN BECK: Yes, the revolution is much more interesting than the Living Theatre.

FE: O.K., which revolution? I mean, there are so many revolutions these days... the Dodge Revolution...the...

JUDITH MALINA: Yes, about the "Dodge Rebellion"...The establishment is always doing that. Not only do they denigrate words, and concepts like revolution, but everything...they destroy the language!

(There's a three minute non-verbal break at this point, pausing to move around some equipment, mumbling, pointing, laughing, etc.)



On A-29, the legendary anarchist collective The Living Theater performs the "Code Orange Contata" in the streets (photo by Sunfrog)

FE: We're interested in hearing what you have to say about the Living Theatre and the revolution. I don't think you're interested in having us review your performances in Detroit.

JULIAN BECK: Yes. I think that reviews aren't really serving any purpose. The function of the critic, I think, is essentially destructive. It's really not a matter of selecting, or forming taste. It's a matter of containing or constraining the artist...not guiding, not teaching, not helping, not creating. The critic does not function that way. The critic is a recent phenomenon, essentially, in the world of art. He is really a phenomenon of the last...approximately...hundred, or hundred and fifty years. Essentially the critic is the product of the commercialization of art. He has come to the foreground, and serves, trying to simply...sell art.

FE: As a selector of the "right art?"

JULIAN BECK: Right. Insofar as the knowledge about, or appearance, of a book or a play or a piece of music is not sufficient, in a certain sense, to sell it. And so the critic is the product of the industrialization of art.

JUDITH MALINA: He's part of the advertising world.

FE: In a sense, perhaps the old literary critic of fifty years ago helped to create the modern advertising world...

JUDITH MALINA: It's best, I think, not to talk about it too much, because it dignifies it in a way that it shouldn't be.

FE: Alright, then let's change the subject. You understand, though, that we do have this "critic" problem at the Fifth Estate. We're working with words and advertisements. We're really involved in a word medium, and in a sense, we end up being critics, despite ourselves, despite our intentions otherwise.

JULIAN BECK: Words are probably man's greatest invention.

FE: You would insist on that?

JULIAN BECK: Oh certainly. The problem with language is that language is the expression of the brain. The problem is that we use only 10% of the brain. And the brain is very badly nourished. It's nourished by a body that's not used completely, where we use only about 30% of the body consciously. We feed the body badly with our food.

The brain, even though it is a spiritual thing, is nevertheless a biological thing which is nourished, in a certain sense, by what comes in through the stomach. So, biologically it doesn't function too well, and then, in addition to that, because we perceive so badly, because we've censored our feelings. Because we don't see or hear properly, or feel properly, because the process of civilization has made us into a feeling-less people, this great glorious magical computer, the brain, is being fed all the wrong information.

Consequently, the words that come out of it are essentially the wrong words. So we are looking in our theatrical work, which is our vocation, for a means to try to discover a means of expressing our understanding of ourselves and the world, without the aid of words, because somehow or other we are beginning to mistrust the language as we're using it. That does not mean...We don't intend to say that words, per se, or the greatness of words, is something that the revolution of man is going to do away with, not at all. We're just trying to freshen things up.

JUDITH MALINA: If they're a media, they're, in a certain sense, not the real thing. There's a kind of jargon, in other words, that robs words, language, and communication media isn't anything at all. Advertisement bleep-blop. That's the kind of thing we want to get rid of.

JULIAN BECK: ...or an intellectual process that is not supported by real feelingfulness. There's nothing wrong with being rational, but the fact is that our present state of rationality is a state of insanity.

FE: Then you're talking about words as an organic, rather than compartmentalized, expression of the human spirit.

JULIAN BECK: Yes. And in that organic sense, there's nothing wrong with using words insanely.

FE: The Living Theatre is associated very much, these days, with the notion of revolution. You mentioned, when we began..."The beautiful non-violent revolution." Is that the kind of revolution different from the kind of revolution you see going on in the world today?

JUDITH MALINA: Our revolution is different from violent revolution, and it's different from forms that are authoritarian.

FE: Would you ever endorse violence?

JUDITH MALINA: I don't think so. The revolutionaries certainly endorse violence, many of them do, many of them don't.

FE: Then you have a special meaning for your notion of revolution?

JULIAN BECK: It's a non-violent anarchist revolution, because it's a revolution against all violent things. That's the aspect of civilization we want to do away with. We view the civilization as a violent civilization. We view economic exploitation as a form of violence. Authoritarian control is a form of violence. Obviously, militarism is a form of violence. The whole money system is a violent system. The educational system is a form of violence. The class system, these are all various manifestations of violence. So our revolution is counter-violent.

FE: Let me change the focus for a moment. Simone de Beauvoir once said that when she was in the libraries of Paris reading the work of some philosopher, it would all make systematic sense to her as long as she remained in the library reading, but then once she would walk out on the streets of Paris, she said, it would all shift and change, she lost all her comprehension of what she thought she understood so clearly. Life seemed to destroy ideas. Do you think, similarly, that when someone experiences the Living Theatre, that they can "carry it with them" out on the streets?

JUDITH MALINA: I think it goes the other way around. I think we in the Living Theatre have to try to express what the people in front of us need, and want. We have to serve our audience, what their needs seem to be.

FE: Is your audience always revolutionary?

JUDITH MALINA: Are you? I mean, there's only individuals in front of us. And there may be several individual human beings in front of us, and each of them has a need. That's why I say, are you? What do you need? What do you want? That's what we want to find out, and what we have to serve. We don't have a concept we bring to you. Do you want a world like this? We have to enact your problem. And your problem is always an individual you. It may be multiplied many times, but certainly the social situation that we're in gives us our material. It's not a question that when someone comes into the Living Theatre that we have some specialized notion that we want to put forth.

FE: Some people, whom I spoke with in Ann Arbor about your performance of "Paradise Now," seemed to feel that the experience of "Paradise Now" was a different kind of experience from their usual street experiences. They seemed to feel that in coming to the Living Theatre they were coming to a theatrical event, an experience largely unique in their lives. They came into the theatre, experienced "Paradise Now," and then went back to their Ann Arbor lives afterwards...

JULIAN BECK: Then the theatrical performance has failed. It cannot succeed until it changes what's happening in the streets. The problem with literature and with the theatre of the intellect is that one sees a play, then one goes off to think about it, and it does not effect you as a being, physically, emotionally, spiritually. Let me put the problem this way. If there are three billion people in the world, one could say that there are three billion people who think that it's bad to kill, that you shouldn't have wars, and you can carry this on to many different levels. But nevertheless, there are wars, and people approve of them, and find reasons for justifying them, or going along with them, and so forth. Because they are intellectualizing! What we're trying to do in a piece like "Paradise Now" is to change people's relationships to ideas so they can bring the ideas into life. Art is sterile, thought is meaningless, spirituality is useless until they become actuality. Actuality means acting, to act, to put into action. I think that what we're learning, as far as the revolution goes, is that you cannot put ethics into a system that is essentially not ethical. I think people are beginning to realize this.

Now, for instance, we understand that we cannot put Christian ethics or eastern ethics, Buddhist or Hindu ethics, into a capitalist system. Or into a monarchist system. Or into a bureaucratic socialist system. I think that the revolution that is happening today is one that is deeply concerned with not only the exterior change but also the interior change. That is, each individual by himself has to go through his revolution, but his revolution cannot succeed if the revolution outside of him isn't also happening. The two have to go on at the same time. That's what we've come to learn at this particular stage. People simply want, now, a change, and they don't want merely a change in power control.

I think the Marxist-Leninist revolution was a revolution based on the notion that the state exists because there are class antagonisms, and the state exists in order to control the exploited class, and in order for the exploiting class to maintain control. And then the Marxist-Leninists felt that if the exploited class took control...if you had a dictatorship of the proletariat, then the proletariat would dictate to the bourgeoisie, and the bourgeoisie would then become the exploited class.

FE: Perhaps something like Orwell's *Animal Farm*?

JULIAN BECK: I think what our revolution seeks is a destruction of all the classes! And this is not simply an old fashioned parson's way of thinking.. It's an actuality. It's what we want!

FE: Do you feel that the elimination of all classes is in the design of human nature? Don't you think that men will always devise newer and subtler forms of class-consciousness and class exploitation?

JULIAN BECK: I think that people have a relationship to all things. The vibrations go out, the metaphysics extend. I think that people have a natural feeling for other people. Animals have a feeling for their kind.

FE: What kind of world do you ideally envision?

JULIAN BECK: A social structure in which people...in which there is no money, no barter, and no authoritarian control. A community where people are working out their basic problems together. A society in which people are no longer dominated by mammon, and no longer dominated by money, and consequently begin to lose that greediness that has become part of our civilization as a result of ten thousand years of capitalist civilization.

A civilization that flourishes on monetary exchange is going to make its population very greedy, very desirous of material things, and center all thought on material well-being and material growth. What we realize today is that in order to supply the fundamental needs that we have, to house ourselves, to feed ourselves, to take care of ourselves, say, medically, to have certain comforts...that if the working force of the world were to work at productive labor about a tenth of the time, that they could manage to work about once every ten days, not even once a week, and not to be produced, so that it could be freely distributed and freely taken and used by everybody, and the rest of the time of your life you would use for going on to the next development in man...maybe sitting around doing nothing, maybe meditating, or fucking, I don't know...experiencing the world and yourself and your life. Maybe that way we could all come to a joy. There is no joy in this world! It's simply impossible these days.

FE: To change the subject somewhat, who are your favorite people, favorite ideas, artists, mentors, that kind of thing?

JUDITH MALINA: There's something wrong with that, outside of the personal preference, like wanting to make love to one man more than another. I think that's sort of abstract, to set up hierarchical lists.

FE: I'm thinking mostly about important ideas or people who have influenced you and the development of your ideas about revolution and the Living Theatre.

JULIAN BECK: That sort of thing smacks of cultism, especially when you begin to publicize it. I think there's already a dangerous amount of cultism anyway.

FE: Your theatrical format has changed a great deal during the last few years. You did a lot of changing, I suspect, while in Europe, in Provence. Was that change devised spontaneously as a result of ideas within your group, or was that change influenced by things discovered outside your group?

JULIAN BECK: I think that for many years in the United States we were very hung-up on form, and trying to change the form of the theatre. I think that's important because that has a certain cultural-assault value. But, for instance, in the United States, all this time, Judith and I were anarchists and pacifists but never gave a full statement of our political ideas in the theatre. We always wanted to form a kind of community in the theatre but we never really did it while we were here in the United States. Frankly, I think that was because of our personal inability to cope with the problem, but also, I think, it was part of the nature of the times, and our own society, which forbade, pretty much, the mixture of politics and art. It was a very subtle form of repression, but very powerful. This certainly existed throughout the United States all through the forties and the fifties, and very viciously. When we left the states, and found ourselves in Europe, and we were no longer living inside the commercial theatre form that had contained us in the U.S., we were free to become a community.

And we were free to begin to express ourselves in the theatre as far as our ideas went, concerning economics and politics and social re-structure, and metaphysics. And as soon as that happened, curiously enough, I think we began to experience certain breakthroughs in form itself. But while we were restricting ourselves to messing around with form, it always remained form, and never went beyond that value.

FE: You seem to be saying that your big change came in the broad area of "content," the change in "content" subsequently altering form.

JULIAN BECK: Yes. Once we became a community, it changed our thinking, and it changed our relationship to art, and our relationship to the rest of the world.

FE: It was an organic change, then, rather than some gimmick which altered some aspects of form or content.

JUDITH MALINA: I think the thing we were most affected by were the days we spent in Paris during the revolutionary days during the occupation of the Odeon in which we participated. I think that the fantastic enthusiasm and hopefulness and beauty of that whole thing was such an incredible high that we're still riding it. Our sense of what happened in France gave a real hope that the kids are really working at really revolutionary action...suddenly that outburst of the joining-in of the workers, and the enthusiasm, in spite of the obvious and inevitable crushing of the first wave of the revolution, which was expected, and which was taken in its stride because everybody knew how it would happen.

Where it would come from: from the old left trying to protect its political strength, it was quite clear. But the wave of strength, the wave of enthusiasm was so great that I don't think anybody who was there in Paris, looking down the avenue and seeing like 50 thousand kids with red and black banners, black kids, Asian kids, French kids, marching down the street chanting in unison..."We are all German Jews," you could get so carried away it could keep you high for the rest of your life. And keep you a revolutionary the rest of your life, because you got a taste of where it could go. The next time will be better because now we know what was wrong that time. This revolutionary fervor was just the greatest thing that could happen to anybody.

FE: Are you planning on remaining in the U.S.?

JULIAN BECK: We go back to Europe in April.

FE: I mean, do you have any plans to "get out" permanently?

JULIAN BECK: We dig moving around very much. It gives us a sense of freedom. When you're an alien you are somehow less confined by the laws and mores of a country, so we like moving around. At the present time, we intend to continue moving around. I don't think we have any notions of settling. For instance, back in New York, or in any city in the United States or in Europe. Just keep going. And I have no doubt, it's very likely, that various countries will soon begin to close their doors to us, and when that happens, we'll figure out the next stop.

FE: Thank you very much for the completeness of your remarks. Are there any final words you want to put in here before the tape runs out?

JULIAN BECK: Free the streets.

FE: Beautiful.

fifth Estate

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