

# PERFORMING ARTS

MUSIC CENTER OF LOS ANGELES COUNTY • OCTOBER 1995

CENTER THEATRE GROUP

THINKING ABOUT THE LONGSTANDING

# SLAVS!

PROBLEMS OF VIRTUE AND HAPPINESS

MARK TAPER FORUM

# Hello, Little Girl

by Meri Nana-ama Danquah

"People make their own history. Limits are set by the conditions of their social development." — Tony Kushner, *Slavs!*

The first time my daughter used the word "hate" in a complete and purposeful sentence, it was directed toward me. She was two and a half.

We had just taken a lengthy walk through a neighborhood park. It was one of my many attempts to instill in her at an early age something I did not acquire until my adult years, the appreciation of nature. As we approached the sidewalk, she shrieked, "Look at those pretty birds, Mommy." I tilted my head back, searched the sky and saw nothing. "Ooh, look Mommy," she said again with even more excitement. I looked again but this time at her tiny index finger which directed my gaze to a small patch of barren land filled with a flock of city pigeons busily picking away at the remains of a littered lunch. "Yuck!" I gasped. "Those aren't birds, they're pigeons. They're disgusting and dirty." The look she gave in response to that statement stirred up a shame inside of me too strong to forget. There were tears in her eyes. "They are not. They're beautiful." She paused a moment and stared at the pigeons as if she herself were now questioning the beauty she once thought she saw. Then she turned to me and yelled, "You're mean, Mommy! I hate you. I hate you!" As she cried, I pulled her to me and whispered, "You don't mean that, honey. I know you don't mean that." Despite those words, I was sure that in the purity and passion of the emotions brought on by my betrayal, she did mean it. I had sullied her painting of the world with my judgments and prejudices;

I had undermined the power she felt she had within her to discover and define her surroundings.

We have had many moments like that, my daughter and I.

Moments when I have questioned the knowledge I am passing on, when I was not so certain that the societal authority vested in me



L to R: Jonathan Fried, Jennie Reid Huston, and Barbara eda-Young.

Communism is... the true solution of the conflict between existence and essence, between objectification and self-affirmation, between freedom and necessity, between individual and species. It is the solution of the riddle of history and knows itself to be this solution.

—Karl Marx, Manuscripts (1844)

America is the country of the Future.

—Emerson, "The Young Americans," 1844

When, in the course of development, class distinctions have disappeared, and all production has been concentrated in the hands of a vast association of the whole nation, the public power will lose its political character....In the place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association in which free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.

—Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 1848

"One can't believe impossible things!" [said Alice] "I dare say you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes, I believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

—Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, 1872

The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. **WORKERS OF THE WORLD, UNITE!**

—Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 1848

Not in Utopia,—  
subterranean fields,—  
Or some secreted  
island, Heaven knows  
where!

But in the very world,  
which is the world  
Of all of us,—the place

where in the end  
We find our happiness,  
or not at all!  
—William Wordsworth, *The  
Prelude*, 1850

We Americans are the  
peculiar, chosen people  
the Israel of our time;  
we bear the ark of the  
liberties of the world....  
And let us always  
remember that with  
ourselves, almost for the  
first time in the history  
of the earth, national  
selfishness is unbounded  
philanthropy; for we  
cannot do a good to  
America, but we give  
alms to the world.  
—Herman Melville,  
*White Jacket*, 1850

The world is drawing to  
a close....What is left to  
the world of man in the  
future?....Technocracy  
will Americanize us,  
progress will starve our  
spirituality....Universal  
ruin... will be seen,  
above all, in the  
baseness of hearts.  
—Charles Baudelaire,  
*The End of the World*, 1851

This country, with its  
institutions, belongs to  
the people who inhabit  
it. Whenever they shall  
grow weary of the  
existing government,  
they can exercise their  
constitutional right of  
amending it, or their  
revolutionary right to  
dismember or  
overthrow it.  
—Abraham Lincoln, First  
Inaugural Address, 1861

Man loves to act as he  
likes, and not necessarily  
as reason and self-interest  
would have him do....  
His own will, free and  
unfettered; his own  
untutored whims; his  
own fancies, sometimes  
amounting to a madness  
— here we have that  
superadded interest of  
interests which enters into  
no classification, which  
for ever consigns systems  
and theories to the devil.  
—Fyodor Dostoyevsky,  
*Notes from Underground*,  
1864

No man here has any  
land to sell. He does not  
own it. We own it. And  
every head of a family  
shall have his land mea-  
sured out to him

by the parent-child/elder-youth power dynamic was either reasonable or, at the very least, fair. Undoubtedly, as a custodian, it is my duty to offer her guidance through these formative years. There are times, however, when I feel as though it is she who is taking me by the hand and escorting me through an entirely new universe with boundaries as fluid as language; a place where demons of hatred can be angels of hope holding the energy and desire for change, like wands of magic, in their fists.

It is a childish thing, I know. But she is a child, and for her the earth is not a battleground where all the dreams lie slain. I have walked her land before and when I scan the plane on which I now travel, often I wonder how or when it was that I left that place, and whether leaving was truly prerequisite to adulthood. How could I have so easily forgotten those times when pigeons and doves were indistinguishable to me? Anything that could soar with the sunlight saddling its back was a wonder to behold.

I remember as a young girl sitting on the stoop in the scorching heat of a summer afternoon and listening to the grown-up folk chat. Sometimes they talked about the weather, its shifts and haphazard swings. Other times it was politics or family gossip. More often than not, regardless of the topic being discussed, they complained and griped about how times were not what they used to

be. “Back in our day,” they’d tell me, “this was a safer and happier place. We didn’t have all these drugs and wars. Folks concerned themselves with living, not dying or killing each other off. It’ll take a miracle to make things right again.”

Of course, little of what they said made much sense to me, a child without immediate worry, one whose future hung like a fruit on a vine, ripe for the picking. What I saw through my girl-child eyes was the promise of possibility — something obviously not present in their mournful visions. But with the same command and predictability with which the seasons change, time passes. Children grow. During that time of my growth an inexplicable fear, as gentle as dew, descended on my flesh and seeped gradually yet consistently into bone and marrow, between tissue and blood, throughout the large valleys and small crevices where idealism and youthful fantasies were once stored. I learned, in that fear, to see the world as a cruel, dangerous place with little chance of salvation and to see myself as powerless in the face of all that.

Miracles are difficult to comprehend or, for that matter, to explain. That is, if you believe in them. Becoming a parent did not make me a believer in miracles, per se. It was merely an invitation to my own rite of passage back into a vulnerability I had once abandoned. A conscious surrender to that vulnerability altered my

adult perception. The parallel universe which I traversed as a young girl did not cease to exist, I simply stopped seeing it, stopped holding myself accountable for the creation of my present and my future and thus, for the present and future of my daughter. As the years unwrap the gift of motherhood which has been given to me, it becomes apparent that the complexity of the lessons I must teach my daughter as she



John Campion and Calliope Thorne.

attempts to shed the innocence of her child-world will be based on the simple principles which she is now teaching me. I must find some way to be able to give back to her, when she needs it, the world she is now sharing with me. This is the continuum of life. There is a responsibility which I feel I now have to her — and to our future generations. Surely there will come a time in the confusion and pain of life when the language of healing, of the history she has already written, will become as foreign to her as hieroglyphics. By making certain she has the tools within her heart to decipher them, then she too will be able to remember that once upon a memory she stared at the huge, gaping wound of a world the adults handed her, and she chose to acknowledge that there was, indeed, beauty there — if only because she said so. That faith, the ability to believe in miracles, to see beauty in unexpected places is nothing less than the work of love.

“And love is profoundly reactionary, you fall in love and that instant is fixed, love is always fixed on the past.” — Tony Kushner, *Slavs!* ■

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L to R: Jonathan Fried and John Campion.

## 20th Century Russian and Soviet History

- 1905** Bloody Sunday: failed revolt against Czar
- 1917** Russian Revolution
- 1921** Lenin's New Economic Plan (NEP) instituted
- 1922** USSR officially formed
- 1924** Stalin assumes control
- 1928-33** First 5-Year Plan: 5 million peasants deliberately starved to death by Stalin
- 1940** Leon Trotsky assassinated in Mexico on Stalin's orders
- 1941-45** WWII: 20 million Soviets die at German hands
- 1945** The Yalta Agreement partitions Europe; the "Iron Curtain" is created
- 1949** First Soviet A-bomb exploded
- 1953** Stalin dies; Khrushchev becomes Party Secretary, calls for reform
- 1957** Sputnik is launched
- 1962** JFK outbluffs Khrushchev in the Cuban Missile Crisis
- 1964** Khrushchev replaced by Brezhnev as First Secretary
- 1968** Soviet tanks crush budding rebellion in Czechoslovakia
- 1979** USSR invades Afghanistan
- 1982** Brezhnev dies; Andropov becomes General Secretary
- 1984** Chernenko succeeds Andropov; dies within 13 months
- 1985** Gorbachev becomes General Secretary, heralds reform
- 1990** Gorbachev becomes President of USSR
- Jun 1991** Yeltsin elected Russian President
- Aug 1991** Failed coup attempt
- Dec 1991** The end of USSR as a geopolitical entity; Gorbachev becomes largely irrelevant to Russian politics

— all he needs and can take care of.

—Brigham Young, Declaration to the Mormons on arriving in Utah, 1847.

From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs.  
—Karl Marx, "Critique of the Gotha Programme," 1875

Will you love your brothers or sisters likewise when they have a sin that cannot be atoned for without the shedding of blood?... This is loving our neighbor as ourselves; if he needs, help him; if he wants salvation and it is necessary to spill his blood on earth in order that he may be saved, spill it.  
—Brigham Young

To [the revolutionary], whatever aids the triumph of the revolution is ethical; all that hinders it is unethical and criminal.  
—Mikhail A. Bakunin, *The Revolutionary's Catechism*, 1870

The old world must be destroyed and replaced by a new one. When you have freed your mind from the fear of God...then all the remaining chains that bind you — property, marriage, morality, and justice — will snap asunder like threads.  
—Mikhail A. Bakunin, *God and the State*, pub. posthumously, 1882

"Don't use that foreign word 'ideals.' We have that excellent native word: 'lies.'"  
—Henrik Ibsen, *The Wild Duck*, 1884

Inciting to revolution is treason, not only against man, but against God.  
—Pope Leo XIII, 1885

Without a revolutionary theory, there can be no revolutionary movement.  
—Lenin, *What Is To Be Done?*, 1902