

Mission Drift: Remembering Utopia

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As I sit down to write about *Mission Drift* on this cold May morning in New York City, the script has not yet been finalized. The Theatre of the Emerging American Moment (the TEAM) is about to head into its final weeks of rehearsal and development before the July premiere of the show in Lisbon. The company works collaboratively, creating their plays in rehearsal and through group writing sessions in the months between official development periods. With twelve minds churning at any one time, the work can shift dramatically from week to week until the script is finally “locked” (often within days of opening). It is a strange and fascinating way to work, producing complex, intricately detailed productions. Their process is based in a utopian dream of shared creation. Their relationship with this dream is not straightforward; reality intervenes and the road is difficult sometimes. In spite of the gap between this dream and their reality, however, the company remains committed to it. All of their work has been indelibly marked by it.

Because it is not yet opening night, I do not know which parts of the script will stay the same and which will change drastically before you see the show in Salzburg. I imagine the play will still contain the aspects of Capitalism and American History that have captivated the TEAM since the beginning of the work: the drive for boundless growth, the idea of the bonanza (effortless and victimless profit), the mark of the frontier and western expansion on American cultural identity (Cowboys and Indians). I am not certain, however, what specifics the play will contain. This uncertainty makes me focus on a small sliver of *Mission Drift*, albeit one that I think is very important. The final moment in the play has always involved a character returning from the west, and remembering the place they have come from with the words “It sort of feels—like there’s every possibility...” Different characters have said this line, and different actors have played those characters. In every case, however, the TEAM’s West has *not* been a paradise of opportunity. It is a desert filled with empty houses that are not homes, with foreclosure notices on the doors. As the actor speaks the line, however, I find myself trying to reconcile two opposing images: in spite of the world that is being remembered—which, of course, I too recall, having just spent the length of the play watching it be constructed—I imagine utopia on top of it and mourn for the distance between the world on stage and the land of endless possibility.

This is the third TEAM play which ends with an encounter with utopia. The first utopia is experienced by the characters; the second, they imagine; this third is the only one remembered. To describe the TEAM’s concern with “utopia,” the usage of the term must be tweaked; in American discussion, the word is often used to describe an imagined place and time in which social justice has been achieved; discrimination based on race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status has been eliminated; and equality is the status quo. It often seems to apply only to concerns of the public sphere. The TEAM’s utopia, however, is far more personal and private. It remains more social than pure ecstasy, but instead of being based in the righting of public wrongs or other public concerns, it is centered around emotional promises. The Oxford American Dictionary defines Utopia as “an imagined place or state of things in which everything is perfect.” The TEAM focuses its exploration of utopia on emotional perfection: their utopia requires none of the compromises of desire and experience necessary

in reality. It is a space in which our experience can be fully shared with others, and which our destructive desires cannot shatter. By describing utopia using emotional terms instead of language relating to social norms, the TEAM makes it impossible to find a path to this utopia.

The TEAM uses religion (particularly western Christianity) as a stand-in for more general forms of social regulation in the delineation of their vision of utopia. Religion has always been an integral part of the social fabric in the United States. While the church is separated from the state by law, Christian (particularly Protestant) teachings have long provided an analogous regulation of interpersonal relations to the ones enforced by the state. These two systems sometimes overlap: the most egregious example of this in current civic discourse is the debate on same-sex marriage. The objections to recognizing these unions are based in the Christian bible, yet they hold sway over the civic (and supposedly state-regulated) institution of marriage. Religion and religious iconography in the TEAM's works play on this overlap, using the constraints associated with religion to invoke social regulation in a broader context. This substitution of part for whole is used by the company to clearly outline the utopia they envision.

The company's first staged encounter with utopia occurs at the end of *Particularly in the Heartland* (2006). This encounter uses a religious context to expose the relationship between the TEAM's conception of utopia, ecstasy, and social regulation. The play follows on a year in the life of the Springer children, who are left behind when their parents are Raptured (or swept off in a giant storm—*Heartland* is ambiguous on this point). The play is bookended by Sarah, the oldest sister, encountering an otherworldly force that she believes will take her to a utopia (for her, closely related to Christian heaven—although given her romantic involvement with a pregnant female alien, that heaven may be slightly different than the one envisioned by the Apostles).

The first encounter lays the groundwork for comparing the TEAM's view of utopia to ecstasy. Both of these experiences are staged with Sarah (played by Libby King) standing on a table, swathed in a brilliant light. In the first instance, Sarah speaks to the thing she sees out over the audience: "I see you. I see you. I'm ready. I want to be filled with your light. Fill me! I'm ready. I'm so so ready for you. Take me." She is not taken. This experience is ecstatic rather than utopian: Sarah is having a personal encounter with a mystic force. Her words are a frenzied, repetitive staccato, functioning more as rhythmic expressions of desire than carriers of meaning. Sarah's concern is individual: take *me*, she says. A modern rendition of Bernini's *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, its exact relationship with utopia becomes clearer in the context of the second encounter.

The second experience expands beyond the personal to the social, drawing Sarah's siblings up with her. Sliding out of a whirlwind montage of dance and text, Sarah suddenly looks up and announces "He's coming!" She stands on the table and bursts into tears before running to gather her siblings. A moment of quiet occurs as she stands next to her alien girlfriend, and then with a "GO!" everything on stage explodes into action. The music morphs into a sustained chord, ringing and grinding, as the siblings crouch on the table. The three slowly rise, openmouthed, as the light grows brighter—and suddenly silence and blackness take over, and the play has ended.

Having seen Sarah's individual experience of whatever the presence causing the light might be, the expectation with all three siblings on the table is of a communal ecstasy—a fulfillment of desire which would not remain locked within the individual, but would be shared among many. This, then, is a utopian experience. The religious context surrounding it, however, has implications beyond the straightforward statement "utopia is shared ecstasy." Ecstasy makes an uncomfortable bedfellow with doctrine, constantly overflowing into experience outside of accepted laws and norms. Given the fact that this visitation occurs in spite of the doctrinal waverings of the children (see the final moment with Sarah and her alien girlfriend, for example), it can be seen that this promise of utopia overpowers the laws that supposedly create it. As such, it is a utopia of emotional design, not one based in social regulation.

Earlier, I said that *Heartland's* encounter with utopia is experienced within the narrative. This is not entirely true; *Heartland* ends before the children are or are not taken up to whatever utopia lies behind the bright lights. The audience's experience of the utopia, if it exists, is entirely induced by the actors' expressions of expectation. This is the closest a TEAM production comes to explicitly portraying this experience of social ecstasy. The next encounter occurs in a far less immediate setting: it is described, instead of projected by the actors. What it loses in immediacy, however, it gains in explicitness.

In *Architecting* (2008), this encounter with utopia cements its impossibility. Contact with this vision comes through the imagination of Carrie Campbell, a young architect who spends the play grappling with the seemingly contradictory demands of the past and the future. Throughout the play, she circles her desire to build a particular utopia, only finding words for it in the final moment. This imagined utopia exists outside of the realm of social regulations; in fact, its defining characteristic is the way it makes room for behaviors which are normally highly constrained:

[It will be a] memorial. Something – a...vast building. A cathedral. [...] There will be masses for the dead. [...] Everyone saying, "I'm sorry I'm sorry I forgive you I'm sorry." There will be confessions. People will leap out of their seats – people will run up and down the aisles CONFESSING. [...] People will scream and weep, you can scream and weep, and you can butt their heads against the walls of this place – the walls won't give. And you can pray in any language that you choose. Or (*the vision is breaking her heart right now*) ...or you can just curl up outside, and go to sleep. It will be enormous. ENORMOUS. This cathedral. This memorial. This place. [...] There will be no replica. For the builders will all be dead, and their formula too.

Once again, the encounter with utopia surrounds itself with religious symbolism: it will be a cathedral, there will be masses, there will be confession. However, even while taking on the forms of religion, the utopia described evades its bonds. Acts that are very tightly controlled within religion spring up anarchically in this newly built cathedral. People confess to—and forgive—each other, obviating any need for an initiated priesthood. Anger and sadness and destructive impulses are expressed openly and publicly. Even exhaustion is allowed. By using the forms of Western Christianity but not the behavioural codes that usually come along with them, this utopia provides space for the ecstatic and emotional experiences associated with mysticism without demanding a non-human power; instead, it is a human communion, an imagined space in which we need nothing other than each other. The word "mystic," with all

its connotations of intense emotional experience, comes from the Greek *muein*, meaning “closed eyes and lips.” The picture painted in this utopia is of an emotional position entirely opposite to this: instead of shutting other humans out, this utopia asks us to keep our eyes and mouth open, letting others in. This utopia of shared ecstasy exists outside of even the deeply emotional part of religion’s bonds.

By imagining a utopia outside of the realm of social regulations, however, the TEAM has also imagined a place with no clear path to access it. Religion provides a set of guidelines for behavior and action which might lead to heaven. Utopias based in achieving social justice or equality or other words related to regulating interaction between people imply (at least in a simplistic form) steps-to-be-taken: achieve equal pay for equal work, or outlaw discriminatory behaviors, or provide equal housing opportunities. A utopia whose goal is to make room for our less savory impulses *outside* of social norms, on the other hand, offers no such prescriptions. This emotional utopia, no matter what we do, promises only to remain achingly out of reach.

I return, now, to where I began: the remembered utopia at the end of *Mission Drift*. Remembered utopia—funny phrase. How can someone remember what doesn’t exist? What the character at the end of *Mission Drift* remembers as endless possibility is not the world she came from, but the dream that drove her there. The play’s intense drive west past the frontier and push to build and grow is not explained until this final moment. Suddenly, the world of empty houses stranded in the desert becomes a symptom of a utopia pursued, of a search for stepping stones to endless possibility. Utopia lends breath for a moment to the word “home” but then finds the idea too constraining and pulls away. Its allure remains potent, but *Mission Drift* once again brands it as inaccessible. The TEAM knows that this utopia cannot be reached, that any attempt to get to it will involve trying to box it into rules and norms from which it will always, inevitably, escape.

Of course, there will be more to *Mission Drift* than this utopian wasteland, just as there is more to *Particularly in the Heartland* and *Architecting* than ecstasy and unbuildable cathedrals. There will be humor, and cynicism, and relationships. There will be fragments of speeches from dead politicians and dead priests. There will be a song about babies. I have chosen to focus on the encounters with utopia in these three plays, however, because I believe that they are small pieces of what I earlier called the company’s utopian dream of shared creation. Among all the strange and complex details that get layered into a TEAM work in the process of its creation, the pull to utopia and the mourning of its inaccessibility are part of an honest exploration of what it is to try to create collaboratively. These moments mark the commitment to the dream, and the sadness of the distance between here and utopia.