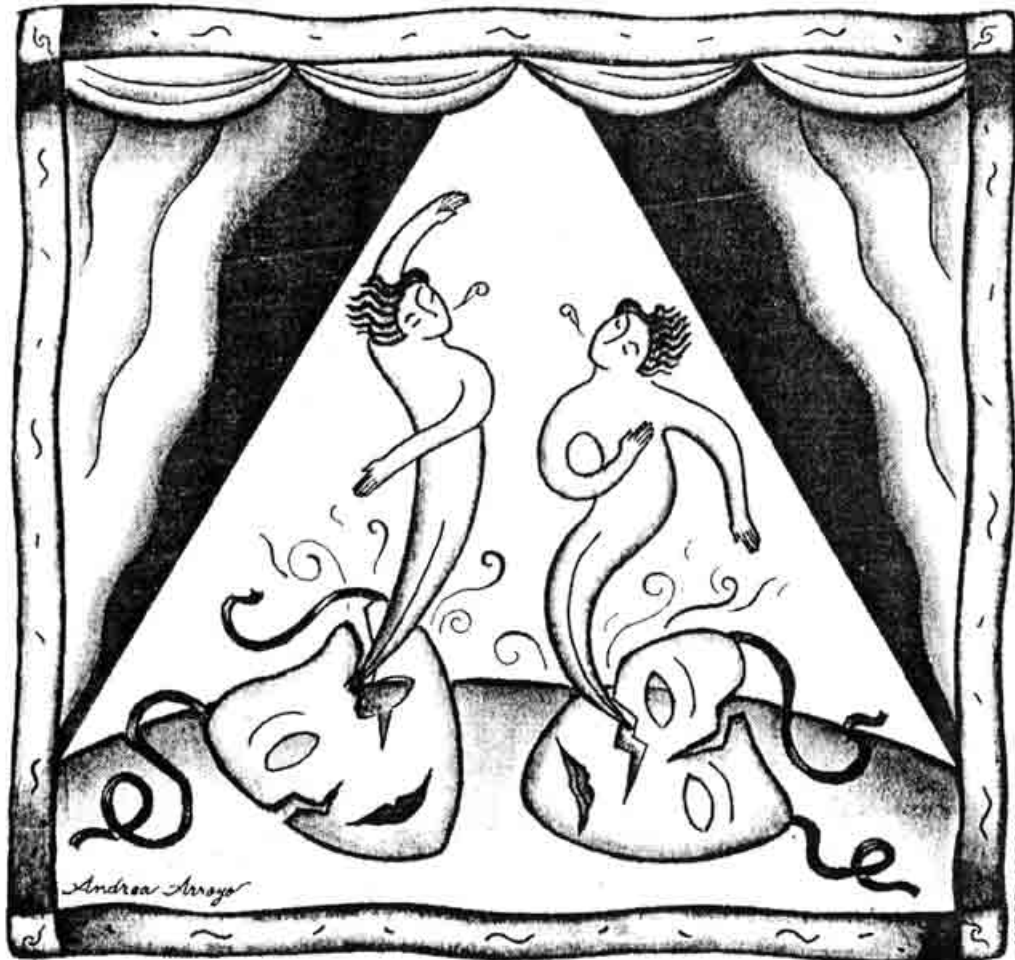


# Radical Theater in a Conservative Era



## RIPENESS IS ALL

*How can a radical theater exist in a conservative era?*

*In conjunction with the 36th annual Obies, the Voice asked this question of several of the younger members of the Downtown theatrical community—playwrights, directors, performers, critics, and artistic directors who will play a major role in determining the course of the American theater until the next century. By radical, we mean both politically and aesthetically, and by conservative we mean all the forces—the Bush administration, the far right zealots, the Broadway merchants, the Uptown critics—who are the enemies of creativity. Richard Caliban, artistic director of Cucaracha Theatre, opens by setting the subject in perspective.*

THE VILLAGE VOICE

May 21, 1991

**What is radical?** *Radix*, working on the roots, propagating, transplanting, weeding out, shredding and burning, cultivating and nourishing. In this day and age, what is the root problem? Human hegemony over nature, humans destroying earth's power of regeneration and sustainability. Who are today's exploited? The rivers and forests, oceans, atmosphere, and most every species of animal and plant that lives and breathes. But how do we fit in?

First of all, we are not inhabitants of Planet Earth, or cotravelers on a Spaceship Earth. We are just as much "the planet" as are the waters of the Atlantic Ocean. We are born of the same elements as the mountains and seas. The salt that runs through our veins is a legacy of our ancestral beginnings in the sea, our blood retaining almost the same proportion of sodium, calcium, and potassium. Our lime-hardened skeletons, "a heritage from the calcium-rich oceans of Cambrian time" (Rachel Carson), mirror the shells of the sea, and mineral formations accumulating and dissolving continually. We can still identify with earth as the same as ourselves.

Deforestation is not just a threat to an environment. It is, in fact, an abrasive scar on our own lungs, as the earth is our body. Poisoned groundwater is not around us, it is within us, sooner or later. The original human hubris, arising from dualistic thought, is that we are other than, or separate from, the earth.

What is the enemy? Ignorance and the greed that feeds off it. So what can theater, or any art, do? In many cultures, today and at least since the upper-Paleolithic, music, dance, and visual expression have had a role of intermediating between humans and other life forms. We must deal with the roots by asking questions and offering experiences and dreams of the continuum of life forms. What are the boundaries of humanness, between human cultures, and between us and other species?

How can a radical theater not exist? In every species, there is an instinct for survival and sustaining its genetic material. When pollution is life-threatening, or when a community such as the arts is under threat, things become clearer as the roots are exposed.

Just as in many a stage of evolution or extinction, the social and biological climates are under deadly attack. We must seek nourishment where we may, and affect conscious, inspired evolution as a species. We may or may not have allies in Washington or Albany,

— but we should find others in the oceans, treetops, and topsoil. There are places to find roots. A radical agenda for survival? Compassion and genetic diversity.

—Ed Herbst