

The Theatre of Politics: Politics as Oscar Broadway

Written by Patricia Sohn

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PATRICIA SOHN, NOV 2 2018

In today's atmosphere, it seems appropriate to talk about the theatre of politics. By "theatre", I mean, in part, the World War II-era nomenclature of European theatre, Russian theatre, or Japanese theatre. That is, domestic politics itself has become a theatre, a war front. By theatre, I also mean something close to Erving Goffman and David Kertzer. That is, politics has also become theatre as in passion play. How do we use language and other forms of self-presentation to position ourselves – symbolically, ritually, politically, and in terms of assertions of (moral, social, cultural, religious, irreligious, economic, or political) power – against our opponents for the passion play of the current election cycle in the U.S.?

I would like to suggest a new character, a very dramatic guy named Oscar Broadway, as best to personify this moment in U.S. politics. That is, many politicians today angle for camera opportunities, particularly if they can do so before CNN or Fox, more than they do for the quiet, solitary, hard, detailed, and perhaps tedious work of doing the country's business in their offices. And we, as a public, eat it up. So, we are no less guilty than they. That is, politicians today address politics as Broadway and strive for Oscars in their performances. Indeed, they may be forced to do so because it appears to be what some significant portion of the public actually wants. I wish, only, that they (the politicians) would break out into song and turn it into a musical here and there to break the tedium of sensation(alism).

Moving back to Goffman and Kertzer: How do we use self-presentation in order to position ourselves as the most righteous and moral candidate, party, campaigner, voter, or ideological position? The opponent is painted with the face of Satan. We paint ourselves in the white robes of Angels. Our costumes are rather rigid forms in which we stand, constrained from any ability to work together for the greater good. We all have to exist here whatever our ideologies (or other traits). Politics as passion play does not contribute positively to coexistence, or to any sense of commonality beyond the level of the individual and his or her immediate close contacts.

I am afraid that we have yet again moved into an historical moment best characterized by a theatre of the absurd in which meaning and value is thrown out the window in favor of some third alternative about which no one yet agrees.

One hardly needs to be reminded of the veritable whip-lash to which the U.S. public has been subjected in the past few weeks before this year's November 6th mid-term election.

Early in October, the U.S. population was bombarded with press accounts about whose high drama even Shakespeare would be proud. Saudi Arabian journalist Jamal Khashoggi was reported missing from the Saudi Embassy in Turkey and assumed dead. The rush to judgement was unusual and immediate. Press accounts have ranged from bizarre to incoherent. Few reports have addressed the incident with normal distance, neutrality, or willingness to await the results of investigations. Fewer still have considered the issues of more typical *modus operandi* in the region. That is, Middle Eastern states do not typically assassinate people with public theatre, dismember their bodies (à la Osiris himself), and hide them in a public official's home. (On those few relevant occasions, the more common pattern over the past 50 years or so has been the very quiet and private use of untraceable drugs inducing heart attack.) The public spectacle option found in this case is more typical of non-state actors, or of those not acting on the state's behalf. On the other hand, some reports indicate that Jamal Khashoggi's body still has not been found, although Saudi Arabia "admitted" under pressure that Khashoggi did die in the

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consulate. Others have, nonetheless, reported that a perfect “body double” (see image at this link) did leave the Saudi Embassy in Turkey in changed shoes. Could it not have been a “body double”? Could he be alive? In our press’ race to indict Saudi Arabia and demand that it take responsibility for a supposed death in the absence of a body, I have not seen any of these possibilities explored with any seriousness. The situation was used by the press on all sides, on the other hand, in its various forms of advocacy across the political spectrum in regard to the upcoming election.

More recently, a man who appears to have wanted more than anything to be seen and heard allegedly sent pipe bombs to at least thirteen or fourteen politicians in the Democratic Party, or significant supporters thereof. The incident stands as a rather shocking reminder of the extent to which being deeply divided may contribute to revolutionary fervor among some number of individuals at the grassroots level.

And, on Saturday, a politically-motivated lone gunman who reportedly spoke of wanting to kill Jews killed at least 11 people at a Synagogue in a university community in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The killer reportedly did not vote for Trump.

We are getting perilously close to violence in the streets. Outside the theatrical realm, bloody revolution or civil war is just that: bloody and awful. And, as Samuel Huntington once told me, revolution is most bloody and awful for the weakest among us. That is, it hits the hardest the very people that we *all* claim to want to support.

Finally, in as much as your local, state, or national politicians and officials have turned into Oscar Broadway, tell them to shape up, get off their high horses, get back into the office, and work with their electoral opponents to fix this theatre of politics. It is dangerous stuff with which to be playing.

About the author:

Dr. Patricia Sohn, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Florida. She is co-editor (with Simone Raudino) of *Beyond the Death of God: Religion in 21st Century International Politics*, (University of Michigan Press 2022); and author of *Judicial Power and National Politics: Courts and Gender in the Religious-Secular Conflict in Israel* (SUNY Press 2017 and 2008).