



Political Stagecraft

Allan Buchman's Culture Project is redefining political theater with raw documentary-style productions that want to be more than plays. By Jesse Green

The debut of a new show at a nonprofit theater is always an occasion for schmoozing donors, not so often for flinging dirt in their faces. But at the opening of "Amajuba: Like Doves We Rise" at Culture Project in July, both things happened. For half an hour before curtain (though there was no curtain), Allan Buchman cruised the crowded lobby of the former lumberyard on Bleeker Street, shaking hands with people who seemed less like theater

Photograph by George Duncan

types than refugees from a workfest: the Democratic fund-raiser Gail Furman; the political-talk-show host Patricia Duff; the United Nations official (and former would-be first sister) Peggy Kerry; and, somewhat rightward of the rest of the room, the real-estate-tycoon-turned-publishing-magnate Mort Zuckerman. To each, in turn, Buchman talked up the play and the forthcoming Impact Festival: a \$1.2 million fall project that would either make the company's future or sink it. But Buchman, who has sometimes called himself Culture Project's artistic director and sometimes its executive director and sometimes (as his hero Joseph Papp did at the Public Theater) simply its producer, didn't seem worried; wearing sneakers and a pink shirt untucked over chinos, he looked as if he might be captaining a luxury vessel over smooth seas on a cloudless night.

The dirt came later. At the climax of "Amajuba," after the five actors had re-enacted terrible scenes from their childhoods under apartheid in South Africa's townships, one of them started shoveling heaps of "river sand" (actually red dirt from a construction site near 10th Street and Avenue C) across the stage. The effect, abstractly gorgeous but also congruent with the play's themes of buried grief and resurrection, quite literally altered the audience's vision and (because the dust went everywhere) its breathing too. Coughing all the way home on the subway, I thought that seemed like an apt definition of good theater, or at least the kind that Buchman is trying to revive at Culture Project: something that changes how you see and how you internalize the world.

This kind of political theater has been all too rare in New York in recent years — certainly on Broadway and at the major uptown nonprofits, but even in its natural habitat downtown. There is agitprop, of course, directly and often ham-handedly advocating particular positions; since 9/11, much of what you can see below 14th Street is straight-up progressive cheer-leading, cathartic more in the manner of a rally than of classical drama. There is the Public, which this summer directly tackled the theme of war in three different works. And there is plenty of theater that through the prism of invented character and plot means to address social and even governmental realities. But somewhere between the anti-Bush cabarets and the "artistic" plays, Culture Project has carved out a niche by offering first-person and documentary accounts of real life right now.

Perhaps because left-leaning New York audiences crave an alternative to news coverage they find "objective" in all the wrong ways — that is, centrist and unimpassioned — several Culture Project shows have done very well, extending their runs and even touring or trans-

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"Amajuba: Like Doves We Rise": Culture Project's recent theatrical study of apartheid, complete with real red dirt.

ferring to larger theaters. But Buchman (he pronounces it "Bushman") would produce them anyway; they're the only plays he really likes. He has little interest in anything that requires the unpacking of metaphors to make its point. He'd rather just make the point. "We want to be conducting reconnaissance in the battlefield of social issues," he told me.

So the play is not the thing — or not the only thing; the productions that have established Culture Project's identity over the last few years barely fit within conventional definitions of the word. "The Exonerated" was basically a staged deposition, expertly redacted from the testimony of death-row inmates who were later found to be innocent of the crimes for which they had been sentenced. "Guantánamo: Honor Bound to Defend Freedom" was a journalistic collage based on accounts of British citizens held without apparent cause at that notorious detention camp. And then there were the one-woman, multicharacter transformation acts: "Belfast Blues," Geraldine Hughes's autobiography of life in violent Belfast, and "Bridge and Tunnel," in which Sarah Jones portrayed 14 New York poets trying to domesticate their adopted language and country. Though technically fiction, "Bridge and Tunnel" felt more like *cinéma vérité*, even when it moved to Broadway.

The genre confusion will continue at the Impact Festival, which runs for six weeks starting Sept. 12. Billed as "a citywide arts festival focusing on human rights, social justice and political action," it features the usual Buchman mix (he calls it a Chinese menu) of earnest first-person storytelling, current events and drawing-card celebrities, including Dylan McDermott and Suzanne Vega. A centerpiece of the festival is Eve Ensler's new play, "The Treatment," about interrogation and torture, military and interpersonal; other works — not just plays but also films, dances, concerts and art exhibits — address unjust incarceration, failed U.S. drug policy as seen by former addicts, homeland security and the Israeli-

Palestinian conflict (with Israeli and Palestinian actors). "Mental Missiles," a revue by the composer Elizabeth Swados, will, in this context, constitute light entertainment.

If it's surprising to find a theater company producing a festival at which one of the anticipated highlights is a series of weekly debates at the New York Public Library, perhaps it makes more sense when you learn that Buchman, who is 61, was not until recently a man of the theater. Blame Napoleon's piano for making him one. Until 1993, a few years before he started Culture Project, Buchman was one of the country's leading importers and restorers of fine keyboard instruments. Among the highlights of that career, he told me, were restorations of Keith Richards's Ibach and Richard Wagner's Bechstein.

But when Napoleon's Sheraton-style piano came up for sale around 1990, he was thwarted by the terms of a 1988 embargo meant to protect African elephants; if he wanted to bring the emperor's instrument into the U.S. for restoration, he would first have to ruin it by stripping the veneer off its keys. (A letter he wrote to President George H.W. Bush, pointing out that piano restorers were even more endangered than elephants, got him nowhere.) The embargo, since modified, put a huge dent in Buchman's business, as did the first Iraq war and the uncertain economy. The situation, Buchman said, "was not conducive to even rich people spending \$100,000" on objects many of them could not play.

Over lunch in a downtown Chinese restaurant, where his concept of dessert was a cup of green tea, Buchman told me that the problem with pianos was not just financial; it was really, for want of a better word, spiritual. "If I made a fantastic discovery with a piano," he said, "it would create a tremor that would hardly be felt by anyone." What was once a mass-market product had become elitist — a word Buchman accompanied with a half-sour grimace. "I wasn't accomplishing what would make me proud as a participating human being," he added. "I wanted to be part of a tradition that would have a role in the future."

It takes an amazing kind of optimism to refer to the tired old theater that way, but Buchman said it wasn't so much optimism as desperation that led him to become a producer.

Buchman was born Sidney Blume on V-J Day but was soon adopted (and renamed) by a middle-class couple in Meriden, Conn. He later had three daughters with a woman about whom he doesn't say much else. The first was born when Buchman was 20 and at loose ends, having dashed his family's hopes for Harvard and dealing with "some erroneous charges with regard to possession of marijuana." That baby was placed for adoption; she recently contacted Buchman for the first time and told him that she was a mortuary-affairs officer in the National Guard. In 1968, a second child, Jhardene, was born, though she preferred to be called Chitra. Next came Tara — named, Buchman hastens to add, after a Hindu goddess, not the fictional antebellum mansion. Tara is now a restaurant manager in Westport, Conn., but Chitra's life proved turbulent. In her teens, Chitra became anorexic,



"The Exonerated," a 2002 drama (here with Jill Clayburgh and Jay O. Sanders), told the stories of wrongly convicted death-row inmates and put Culture Project on the map.

bulimic and alcoholic. Faced with "the injustice of a child's helplessness," Buchman says he tried everything he could think of to save her, but "any form of intervention I employed turned out to have a result that was the opposite of what I intended." In time, Chitra became H.I.V. positive, and in 1993, at 25, she died.

"I lost my daughter and business within a few weeks," Buchman said. "It was not terribly different than a crucifixion."

At the time, Buchman was still living in a huge loft on East 91st Street that had housed his piano business. To keep it (and himself) occupied, he rented part of the space to the Riverside Shakespeare Company and held some "salon type" events of his own. Gradually it dawned on him that the theater, lashing the abstractions of art to the reality of social interaction in a dark room, might help him "make something better" of the painful experience that had been "entrusted" to him. In 1996 he inaugurated the Culture Project (the definite article was dropped only recently) with a summer festival he called Women Center Stage. "I wanted to find a way to sustain Chitra after her life," he said. Political theater was a way of literalizing empathy for others in pain.

Dog-eared copies of the Vedas and Upanishads lie open among the stacks of scripts in Buchman's deliberately ungrand office. He says he hasn't missed his morning meditation more than a handful of times in the last 35 years and has committed himself "to a religious path that encourages celibacy." So it's no surprise that he takes a spiritual rather than a psychological approach to even his employment history. But I can't help thinking that in addition to enlightenment he was also hoping to find in the theater a way of making interventions in reality that might work out better than they had with his daughter.

It quickly became apparent, though, that 91st Street wasn't the place to do it. "On the Upper East Side, if an interesting person walked by it would be a notable experience for a week," he said.

Though there were plenty of interesting people walking by the lumberyard at 45 Bleeker, Buchman could not at first afford to reach them. By the time the 199-seat first-floor theater was ready in 1999 (a 99-seat basement space opened in 2002), the company

was too much in debt to produce anything resembling a season. For its first two years downtown, Culture Project was mainly a landlord for outside productions, some apt and some not; this balanced the books but did nothing to establish a theatrical identity. Nor was it how Buchman had intended to do business. He had chosen the name Culture Project to suggest that art could be "a natural resource, like a redwood, sustaining itself and accomplishing something worthwhile in the process." He did not want it to be a beggar but a provider. He wanted to find a way of doing theater that addressed current headlines head on — and, ideally, made headlines too.

Now he had the place; he had the philosophy; all he needed was the work that would fill and embody them. In 1975 Papp got lucky with "A

Chorus Line," which made the Public a national name and flooded its coffers for years. Was there a kind of "Chorus Line" out there for Culture Project — one without music or glitz but with a cutting-edge progressive slant?

The solution began to take form when Jessica Blank asked Erik Jensen out on a date — to a death-penalty conference. (Jensen says he would have said yes even if she'd proposed knee surgery.) Not long afterward, in May 2000, they came to Buchman with the idea of interviewing wrongly convicted people who had served time — sometimes years — on death row, then transforming the interviews into a kind of oral-history play. Buchman knew the pair only as actors but said the idea was the kind for which his theater existed; he promised them seed money on the condition that a draft be ready before the presidential election that November. He wanted to make "a pre-emptive strike."

Buchman's \$1,000 investment paid for the first in a series of very frugal road trips and resulted in three Monday-night readings, starting that Oct. 30, of "The Exonerated." An expanded version returned as a full production in 2002; featuring Susan Sarandon, Tim Robbins and David Morse, it soon became a kind of "Hollywood Squares" for dozens of lefty celebrities, including Mia Farrow and Richard Dreyfuss.

It's easy to belittle political theater as preaching to the converted; in his rave for "The Exonerated" in *The New Yorker*, John Lahr wrote that "arguing Off Broadway against the death penalty is like pushing at an open door." True, but Buchman planned to preach to the unconverted as well, by "engaging the media in such a way as to make a high return on our investment." That meant celebrities but also advertising; during the 18 months that "The Exonerated" ran at Culture Project and the additional 6 months it toured, Buchman spent almost \$2 million plugging it — an expense he sees not as a budgetary drain but as part of the point of doing the show in the first place. The advertising was "a public-awareness campaign" on the issue of the inequalities of the criminal-justice system, reaching many more people than

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the play ever could. In effect, the theater was subsidizing the political message — quite a switch from the normal model, in which governmental bodies subsidize theater. The high point of that campaign (and, Buchman says, of his life) was a special performance of the play for Gov. George Ryan of Illinois in December 2002. A month later, Ryan commuted the death sentences of or pardoned all 171 inmates facing the death penalty in his state.

"The Exonerated" put Culture Project on the map, establishing its voice and modus operandi. Buchman used similar media-leveraging techniques in 2004, rushing "Guantánamo" into production in time for the Republican National Convention in New York. When, a few weeks later, Archbishop Desmond Tutu agreed to play a small role in the play, and to lead discussions afterward, the prelate's appearance made front pages around the world and helped raise public awareness about military torture. "People listen to talking heads all their lives," said Michael Ratner, a Culture Project board member and the president of the Center for Constitutional Rights, which represents many of the Guantánamo detainees in their actions against the U.S. government. "You can read op-eds, debate these things at universities for hours and a kid will still come up and deal with it as a purely intellectual matter. But get a torture victim in the room, get a playwright to make it into an emotional experience, and you tap into the craving we have to understand what other people go through. It's hard to get that kind of bang for the buck any other way."

Both "The Exonerated" and "Guantánamo" were successful in those terms, but neither turned out to be Culture Project's "Chorus Line" financially. Buchman said that much of the proceeds from "The Exonerated" went to the six exonerated individuals who were portrayed in the play; they eventually shared nearly \$1 million. Blank and Jensen got far less (though they did marry), and Buchman nothing more than his \$70,000 salary and the modest apartment on the fourth floor of the theater's building, where he lives like a shopkeeper above his shop. Culture Project ended up with about \$50,000 profit, not nearly enough to secure its footing. Its annual budget — \$2 million last year, compared with \$14 million for the Public — remains small and sometimes wishful, based as it is on resources that aren't automatically renewable: 65 percent of income comes from ticket sales. Most of the rest comes from foundations, which have generally been interested in the issues being addressed, not in theater at large. In any case, the fiscal year recently ended was Culture Project's worst yet. Was there really no place in New York for what Buchman calls "a human rights organization with an important theater agenda"?

Exactly the time, then, to bet the future of that organization on its most ambitious initiative, one meant to be for Culture Project what free Shakespeare was for Papp at the Public: as Buchman puts it, both "a signboard and reason to exist."

"It's how we hope to achieve critical mass," he said. "How we hope to become an institutional part of the annual New York terrain, like the TriBeCa Film Festival. And we hope it will make it easier for funders to support us going forward, because they will finally get to know what we do."

Maybe. But funders usually like groups that do one recognizable thing. Buchman's plans are literally all over the map. "Allan wants to

make the institution successful outside of New York," Colin Greer, the board president, told me recently, "and I use the word 'institution' advisedly. It's the board's job to develop strategies to discipline Allan's imagination." For the most part, though, the board — only three of whose nine members have theater experience — has not so much disciplined Buchman's imagination as stoked it. This year the board approved Buchman's Tickets for the People initiative, which will give away 30,000 free seats to improve audience diversity during the coming season. And the Impact Festival is going forward with, as of late summer, only part of its financing in place.

Buchman admits he's mostly making things up as he goes along. What's amazing is how many people he can persuade to join him out on his limb. Partly that's charisma; Jessica Blank calls him "a Joe Papp for the 21st century with a yogi twist." Partly it's a longing some people feel to be part of at least a hope for change — a hope that seems to have disappeared from the political system, let alone the arts. In any case, it's a charm that works better on some people than others. Staff members who want clarity and organization (and a nondingy office) quickly become frustrated and leave. Others, like Lauren Saffa, who finally got the title of producer after three years (naturally, Buchman dislikes titles), will literally do anything to stay. As we talked about programming and lines of responsibility, Saffa was happily minding an oven in which dirt was drying after a performance of "Amajuba." To the true believers, Buchman is more of a father figure than a boss; Saffa calls him "our crazy captain in a terrible storm."

But for traditional theater types, Buchman can seem ominous. What is he suggesting about other theaters when he says Culture Project only happens to be a theater? Are other theaters less noble? When he insists on doing work that's topical, what is he suggesting about classical work? That it's reactionary? Buchman has tried to make clear that he's not judging anyone else's choices; he's merely doing something different. But his radical commitment to content over form can nevertheless be disturbing to those who love the forms. It can seem anti-art. His ascetic style, too, can be read as a comment on the cushy emoluments other theater people expect as a reward for surviving in an impossible business. It's hard to imagine another producer who would abandon a Lotus Elan sports car on a Village street with its keys inside, just to rid himself of a worldly distraction. Admittedly, Buchman later regretted it and bought another; but that one was destroyed when a garage lift collapsed. He now has no car.

If there is a feeling of renunciation in such acts, perhaps it's because Buchman, through the theater, is seeking his own kind of exonerated. His daughter's death is never far from the agenda — an agenda he said he might be willing to die for. When he told me, after cracking open a fortune cookie, that he wants Culture Project to be not just a "social-justice arts conservatory" but also "a compass, heading in a direction we're proud of as moral individuals," the political really had become personal. Or vice versa. "Anyway," he added, chuckling, "this work is the only chance I have of getting into heaven." Then he fiddled for a moment with his fortune, a quotation from John F. Kennedy that I'm pretty sure he had stage-managed: "We must never forget that art is not a form of propaganda; it is a form of truth." ■