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Freedomland

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FREEDOMLAND. Written by Michael Gene Sullivan. Music and lyrics by Ira Marlowe. Directed by Andrea Snow with the San Francisco Mime Troupe. St. James Park, San Jose, California. August 25, 2015.

When the San Francisco Mime Troupe's (SFMT) *Freedomland* began, actors dressed as cops burst onto the stage and pointed their guns directly at the audience. Against the backdrop of the sunny park where the performance took place, the huge AK-47s felt almost campy, a tone that the cast carried throughout the musical. The weapons were laughably out of place in the park, the performance seemed to say, just as they are laughably out of place in the hands of the police. The irony of a nonthreatening theatre audience staring down the barrel of a gun sits in sharp contrast with the experiences of the many nonthreatening black men and women who have too often in this country faced police guns pointed at them.

Adding to SFMT's long history of activist performance, which began in the 1960s, *Freedomland* tackled the history of police brutality against African Americans. The piece drew explicit connections between the United States' ill-conceived War on Terror and the insidious war on young black men in this country, arguing that combat in the Middle East might be safer for many US citizens than life at home. For a theatrical performance it employed relatively little artifice and metaphor; *Freedomland* advanced its argument baldly and forcefully, using Brechtian techniques like song, double and triple casting, signs, and direct address. The performance skewered systemic racism through a straight-forward message and epic style that contrasted sharply with the sensationalism we see on CNN and the complex theories we might see in academia.

The piece follows Malcolm Haywood (Michael Gene Sullivan), a former Black Panther who talks big about "the revolution" but lately finds himself spending more time watching television than attending protests. When his grandson Nathaniel (George P. Scott) returns from Afghanistan, Malcolm is overjoyed to see him yet immediately asks when he's headed back to the front. When Nathaniel confesses that he is done with the army Malcolm is devastated. He worries not only about his grandson's safety as a black man in the United States, but also that they will not be able to successfully enact "the Plan" unless Nathaniel reenlists. "The Plan" is a vague notion Malcolm has developed to overthrow the government by infiltrating the military, and Nathaniel rolls his eyes every time his grandfather mentions it.



Lisa Hori-Garcia (Emily Militis), Michael Gene Sullivan (Malcolm Haywood), Hugo E. Carbajal (Cop), and Keith Arcuragi (Cop) in *Freedomland*. (Photo: Mike Melnyk.)

Nathaniel's idealism contrasts sharply with his grandfather's distrust of government, and he joins the police force instead, excited to serve and protect his community. Nathaniel's police training has him engaged in role-playing scenarios in which the enemy is always black and the right answer always involves shooting. While white trainees grow increasingly enthusiastic about shooting unarmed targets, Nathaniel has two options: to betray his ideals and join them, or to abandon his training. *Freedomland* persuasively demonstrates that Malcolm's plan to infiltrate the system is doomed from the start; Nathaniel will always be either excluded from the system or subsumed by it, but never a full agent in it. When Nathaniel inadvertently exposes his grandfather's best friend as an illegal alien, his loyalties are tested; by interfering in Lluís's (Hugo E. Carbajal) arrest, Nathaniel sets off a chain reaction that ends with his police colleagues shooting and killing him and his grandfather.

Violence against young black men, the musical argues, occurs not just with weapons, but also in the ways that racism and militarism combine to keep the oppressed marginalized and the powerful in control. The police chief and mayor bemoan the legalization of marijuana because, without pot, what are they going to arrest black folks for? And without black

felons, what can they use to scare white folks into voting for the mayor? The two concoct a fictitious drug called "snorf" and order officers to start arresting black men for selling it to young children. Unlike Malcolm, the mayor and police chief are able to execute their version of "the Plan," abusing their power and privilege with impunity. Likewise underscoring the symbiotic relation between racism and militarism, actors and stagehands dressed as cops exercised complete control over the environment, moving furniture between scenes with a precision that suggested connections among the wars on drugs, terror, and black men.

In many ways, Malcolm represents SFMT's evolution from a revolutionary to a nostalgic performance collective. It no longer draws censorship, and new audiences are unlikely to see actors arrested like founder R. G. Davis was during a performance of *Il Candelaio* in 1965. Apart from weapons, the props, costumes, and set of *Freedomland* looked dated; the nostalgic aesthetics underscored its subtle argument that we might view protest performance as a thing of the past, even if it remains as necessary today as it has always been. Given that the performance was free—a standard practice for SFMT's performances—the audience included middle-class liberals, as well as the homeless men and women who lived in

the park. While SFMT can no longer claim the same radicalism it was known for during the 1960s and '70s, producing activist theatre in public spaces not only for audiences who agree with the message, but for populations who are largely ignored or feared, remains a rare and progressive undertaking.

SFMT's original mission was to teach, direct toward change, and be an example of that change. The didacticism of *Freedomland* might be disappointing to academics and artists interested in performances that push formal boundaries or political radicalism, but there was something remarkably refreshing about theatre that sought accessibility on multiple levels in order to advance an argument vital to the survival of many Americans. At the end of the performance, Malcolm and Nathaniel arose from the dead to sing directly to the audience, "How can we live in a world like this?"—a sentiment, like Black Lives Matter, that is both obvious and profound.

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