

Hope: An Artist's Statement

Peter Rothstein's musical *All is Calm: The Christmas Truce of 1914* has firmly placed itself on the podium of my favorite theatre shows I've seen for one major reason; It shows the potential for humanity to do good in the midst of terrible, terrible tragedies. Certainly, the performance by Rosebud Theatre in 2023 was incredible for other reasons too. There was a stunning set, beautiful music, an excellent team of performers, and tear-jerking letters from real soldiers from the first world war, which all enhanced the experience. But these are the cherries on top. What really matters to me is what the show had to say: Humans can do what is good.

We live in a world that is hurting. I've put effort into avoiding looking at the news lately, since many reports and articles demonstrate humanity's power for evil, cruelty, and hatred. These range from larger wars, to citizens of Canada, which should be a peaceful and welcoming country, complaining and rioting about their leadership. People find themselves on the streets, blaming a few select people with more power and privilege for their sub-optimal situation. A friend of mine reached out recently, saying he truly wished to have the richest people in the world killed. There are massive parts of humanity devoted to despair, playing the blame-game religiously.

When I first learned of the 1914 Christmas truce, I was immediately obsessed. Here, among all these other stories of the world being bitter and hateful, was a tale of a similarly dark period in history, but with a twist; These soldiers decided to play nice for Christmas. Upon further investigation, I came to understand even more significant parts of the story. For example, this truce being in direct defiance of the commanding officer's orders. Or how many soldiers, when later looking down the barrel of their weapon at a friend instead of an enemy, chose to accept punishment rather than shoot at the people they now knew. This is, in my opinion, one of the greatest demonstrations of humanity's ability for good, and a story that I will treasure and share for the rest of my life.

This theme of hope is something that I've held to for a long time. I think it largely comes from two different sources. First, my faith. I've been raised in the Christian Reformed Church, and two things I've known since the very beginning are that "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so," and that "God created Man in His own image." As an image bearer of Christ, and if my God is one of love and forgiveness, then shouldn't my own life carry those same values? Really, since God created the entire world and all of humanity, then we all have that kind and compassionate nature rooted in us as part of our basic being.

The second source for this is connected, but distinct. Throughout my early schooling, in elementary and junior high, I was the subject of more than my fair share of bullying. Why, I don't know. But it was real, and it hurt a lot. But through it all, the adults in my life kept encouraging me to remember something; these classmates who were giving me a hard time were struggling themselves. The harsh treatment they dealt to me reflected the treatment they'd been raised with, and they didn't know how to deal with it properly. Somehow, despite being driven to terrible lows in my mental health, I found myself sympathetic towards my tormentors. I tried to see them as I believe God does, and tried to share the same forgiveness He would show them. It wasn't easy, but it kept me going.

Now let me provide a little contrast to my position. Recently, I watched *Three Sisters* by Inua Ellams at Obsidian Theatre. Unfortunately, I wish that I could have had the three and a half hours that the show lasted back. Honestly, it felt like the story was actively trying to operate against what I look for in a show. The story was set in the civil war in Nigeria. Horrible atrocities abound, and the world is practically ending for most of our characters. It's a perfect situation for them to step up and do the right thing. Instead, most characters did the opposite. Many members of the focal family end up fighting each other. Several relationships are strained due to infidelity. We hear about armies making moves that are frankly monstrous. And nothing good comes from any of it. The side of the conflict we're supposed to root for surrenders, despite things looking promising earlier in the play. Two characters fight each other over a petty squabble, and the loser shoots the victor dead while his back is turned. It ends with one of the three sisters simply sitting outside her ancestral home, which has been stolen by the government, crying. There is no hope. For anyone. Aside from an attempt to turn their home into something of a hospital, there are no notable examples of characters really doing the right thing to fight this tragedy. It's an exercise in despair, and I found nothing likeable in it. What was the point? What lesson could be pulled from this? If there's no chance of anything improving, why share this story? I haven't yet found an answer to any of those questions.

I have found those answers for different shows. Not long ago I played the part of Jim O'Connor, The Gentleman Caller in Rosebud's production of *The Glass Menagerie*. At first, I had many of the same questions. What I saw was the story of Laura, a young girl who was shy and nervous. One day, after struggling to have anything resembling a life, her childhood crush walks in. Things begin to improve, she's slowly coaxed out of her shell, it seems like she'll finally realize that she has wings to spread... And then my character reveals he's engaged. He apologizes for the kiss he gave Laura. He takes it all back, tips his hat, and walks out the door, followed shortly by Tom leaving his family, never to return. I knew I didn't understand the play fully, but what I did understand was antithetical to what I cared about. After discussing it with my instructors, searching for that glimmer of hope I cling to so desperately, I found it. It wasn't *in* the play. It *was* the play. The hope is that despite making mistakes and tearing his family apart, Tom is breaking the cycle of men leaving in his family by acknowledging what he'd done, being haunted by it, and trying to make amends. There it was. There was my hope. That Tom would do better. And suddenly I liked working with the play so much more. I could give more of me to it, without reservation. Finding the hope was the key to letting me into the show.

I've had someone mention that they think what I really like in theatre is a happy ending. While that is a reasonable conclusion to take based on the position I'm building, I do disagree. Take, for example, the ending of *Hadestown*. When Orpheus turns at the last moment to look back at Eurydice, everything falls apart. The entire reason he has travelled to Hadestown was to rescue her, and he has failed, with no chance of retrying. It is, unquestionably, a tragic ending. But out of that gloom comes two shining stars of hope. The first is very literal, as Hermes stands up and sings a song reminiscent of the opening track, this time knowing how the story will end. "It's a sad tale, it's a tragedy... but we sing it anyway. 'Cause here's the thing; to know how it ends and still to begin to sing it again, as if it might turn out this time." There's a chance. He's hopeful that maybe, just maybe, it can work out next time. He doesn't give up. He doesn't give in to the despair.

The other star of hope in the night sky of Orpheus' failure is Hades himself. Initially, he's a hard man, laser focused on material wealth to the point that he's largely forgotten how to really love his wife. He doesn't have time for kindness. But by the end of the musical, he's turned. He's improved.

He's made up with Persephone. While they must be parted for the summer months, they make a mutual promise to do better. Hope. For the characters to become better than they have been, to put aside their squabbles and do what's right.

It's this hope in redemption, in doing the right thing that I want to capture in my art. I want to inspire people to help build God's kingdom here on Earth through that. Maybe through the very direct example of the Christmas truce. Maybe through the story of *Chariots of Fire*, where Eric Little fights for what he cares about most, despite the cost. Maybe through a character choosing to make a better life down the road, even if you can't understand that right away. Whatever the case, stories I tell will always have hope. Most of all, hope to inspire faith in the good of humanity. Sometimes just hope that things can improve. Maybe just a lighter mood, lifting the audience's spirits to go on for another day. But no matter what, if someone leaves the theatre having watched a play I've written, nobody will be feeling despair for humanity. Perhaps a somber reflection on themselves, and a drive to improve, but never without a little seedling of hope for them to take home and plant. To grow. To shelter them from the scorching sun of our world's struggles. And one day, to take their own seed from, and share with someone else.