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Directing Theories

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Theatre for a Country in Denial

I grew up watching people I love protect their comfort instead of facing the truth. Most of my white relatives shut down every conversation about racism, misogyny, transphobia, or state violence the moment it threatened their comfort. My poorer white relatives rejected discomfort for a different reason: Trumpism fed them lies that promised dignity while stripping away their rights in broad daylight. They repeated slogans like "build the wall" or "protect freedom" while Trump tried to kill the Affordable Care Act with no replacement, leaving millions of working-class families one illness away from financial ruin. He handed massive tax cuts to billionaires while freezing wages. He rolled back environmental protections, letting corporations dump toxins into the same rural water systems my neighbors and family relies on. He dismantled workplace safety regulations, making jobs more dangerous for the exact people cheering his name. He ignored COVID science and let the virus tear through poor communities, treating their deaths like political collateral instead of human loss.

Trumpism didn't stop at domestic harm; it aligned wholeheartedly with U.S. military violence abroad. My relatives watched bombs fall on Gaza in real time, entire neighborhoods leveled, thousands of civilians killed, and they told me "not to bring politics to the table." They defended leaders who sent weapons to a government driving an entire population into starvation and rubble. Children losing limbs and eating sand to stay alive, but still they repeated headlines that dehumanized Palestinians, headlines written to protect American foreign policy rather than Palestinian lives. They treated the mass killing of families as an uncomfortable topic instead of a moral emergency. They celebrated authoritarianism abroad because authoritarianism teaches citizens to stay obedient at home. They weaponized Islamophobia and anti-Palestinian racism to legitimize U.S. violence and redirect white fear toward anyone who looked, prayed, or grieved outside their worldview.

Trump and his movement thrive on that dynamic. They exploit white grievance and starve public education. They replace textbooks with book bans, civics with conspiracy, dialogue with paranoia. They push policies that make people easier to manipulate: gutted schools, defunded libraries, censored history. They treat critical thinking like a threat and ignorance as a weapon. Wealthy white people choose denial because responsibility threatens their comfort; working-class white people cling to denial because propaganda convinces them they have no other choice. Both groups uphold the same violence. Both groups keep the same system alive. And the cultural

elite, the same wealthy white demographic that dominates American theatre, protect their comfort inside the art they consume. They fund and attend rich white theatre: familiar stories, polite storytelling, morally safe narratives designed to reassure the privileged that they are good people living in a stable world. That kind of theatre comforts the very audience most invested in denial. It flatters them. It lets them applaud without changing. It functions as a luxury good, not an artistic intervention. It is the type of theatre Peter Brook would call deadly.

But we don't live in a moment that can afford luxury. We live in a moment where truth costs people their lives. Art becomes one of the few remaining places where someone can still tell the truth without government approval, one of the last unpoliced spaces left as books disappear from libraries, teachers lose their jobs for teaching history, and politicians criminalize honesty. Even that freedom shrinks by the day. Censorship moves from the classroom to the stage; donors threaten budgets; institutions silence artists to avoid "controversy." The space for truth narrows, yet art remains the only place where we can practice seeing one another clearly. Art drags us back to our own humanity when the world pushes us toward division, fear, and obedience.

So the question becomes: if art still gives us that fragile space for clarity, what do we do with it? We use it. We weaponize it against the numbness that protects injustice. We turn the stage into the place where truth refuses to die. Theatre cannot comfort the comfortable anymore. Theatre must confront the reflex that tells people to look away from harm. Theatre must disrupt the denial that keeps the country asleep. And horror does that better than any other form. Horror grabs the body before the mind invents excuses. Horror breaks the spell of comfort. Horror pulls the truth into the room and forces the audience to feel it. In a country built on cultivated ignorance and rewarded blindness, horror becomes the only honest theatrical language we have, and the only one that still carries the possibility of awakening.

Why Horror?

If my goal as an artist is to make theatre that destroys denial rather than protects it, then horror becomes the clearest tool I have. Horror speaks directly to the parts of the audience that cannot hide behind intellect, politeness, or rationalization. Horror begins in the nervous system, not in ideas, so the audience reacts before they have time to think. That shared physical reaction creates instant community. When a room flinches, gasps, or freezes at the same moment, it binds strangers together in a way no other genre consistently can. And because the body reacts first, the mind is forced to make sense of what it felt. That is built-in introspection. Horror is the one form of theatre that guarantees physical engagement, collective experience, and unavoidable reflection.

And unlike other affect-driven genres, horror's physicality is inseparable from its meaning. Fear is not random or arbitrary; it is always about something. Horror is the only genre where meaning becomes physically unavoidable. You cannot ignore something that forces you to confront life and death. The body refuses to stay neutral. Many theorists I mention later in the essay, point toward this same truth: horror destabilizes the categories we rely on to feel safe. And this matters

now more than ever. In America today, both the privileged and the vulnerable are walking through a country that is actively harming people while insisting everything is fine. Those with power are encouraged, even rewarded, for looking away and upholding this harm. Denial is convenient. Comfort is convenient. Pretending not to see the violence of racism, transphobia, misogyny, police brutality, the collapse of bodily autonomy, is convenient. But horror removes that convenience. It takes away the safety blanket of detachment. It forces audiences to feel in their own bodies what they refuse to acknowledge in the world around them. Horror doesn't let you turn your back. It doesn't give you distance. It collapses the space between spectator and reality, making avoidance impossible. And right now, in a country built on comforting lies, that is not just powerful, it is undeniably essential

Effective and Ineffective theatre

I do not divide theatre into "good" or "bad," because those categories confuse taste with purpose. I divide theatre into effective and ineffective. Theatre enters this landscape as one of the last places where truth can move freely, so effective theatre must rise to meet the world that produced it. After watching denial operate as a political tool and a cultural habit, I refuse to make theatre that reinforces it. Effective theatre cuts through the fog that protects injustice. It wakes people up by showing them something they cannot ignore.

Effective theatre begins with purpose. A production must carry a reason to exist beyond entertainment, beyond praise, beyond the comfort of the audience members most invested in looking away. When a play invites people to confront what their world asks them to deny, it becomes part of the civic imagination. Once the purpose is clear, process becomes the structure that allows it to take form.

Effective theatre grows out of a collaborative room, one where artists shape the story together rather than perform tasks assigned to them. Collaboration keeps the work alive because no single perspective can hold the full truth of our moment. If we want the audience to realize the truth of the world, and face their discomfort, we must do it ourselves. To achieve this, we must have a diverse team of people both on and off stage, to avoid any blind spots. A production team should include multiple people of color and people of different genders whenever possible. This is not a symbolic act of representation. It is a structural necessity. A rehearsal room without diverse perspectives risks reproducing the same narrow worldviews that theatre should challenge. Building a team with varied experiences and identities ensures that the work is informed by a broader emotional and cultural vocabulary. Diversity strengthens creativity, and it also builds accountability. It becomes harder to make lazy or harmful artistic choices when surrounded by people whose lives and perspectives demand truth.

Pass Over, written by Suzan-Lori Parks and directed by Danya Taymor, demonstrates this. Its predominantly Black creative team built a production that confronted racism and police violence with urgency. Jesse Green of *The New York Times* observed how the show "exposes the psychic

stakes of racist violence with a clarity that lands in the gut" (Green). That clarity emerged because the people telling the story understood the stakes from the inside.

The reverse appears when white creative teams control narratives they have no lived relationship to. *Miss Saigon* remains one of the clearest examples. Its portrayal of Asian women and its history of casting white actors in yellowface reveal what happens when a rehearsal room lacks the perspectives needed to steward a story responsibly. Ma-Yi Theater Company described the musical as "a damaging fantasy rooted in Orientalism" and documented how it reinforced racist stereotypes for generations (Ma-Yi Theater Company). When a team lacks the people necessary to challenge harmful assumptions, the production reflects that absence.

Collaboration also demands flexibility. Effective theatre recognizes that people's capacity changes from day to day. A rehearsal process built on capitalist ideas of constant output suffocates creativity. Instead of measuring productivity in hours or exhaustion, the room should value honesty and presence. Some days an actor may bring their full energy, and other days less. The process should allow for that fluctuation. The expectation is not perfection but contribution: that each person brings what they can, truthfully, that day. Building this rhythm into rehearsal might mean leaving space for silence, discussion, and rest. This approach does not slow the work. It deepens it.

Annie Baker's *The Flick* exemplifies this. Baker explained in interviews that she builds rehearsal processes that "protect space for awkwardness, stillness, and discovery," trusting the room to find its way without forcing momentum (Healy). That patience translated into a production that invited audiences to sit with the tempo of ordinary life, revealing the loneliness and labor beneath it. Flexibility gave the play its pulse.

Embodiment is the next step to success in theatre. Theatre communicates, at its most base level, through sensation, which means the body becomes a primary instrument of meaning. Neuroscience research shows that audiences mirror the emotional and physical states they witness; mirror neurons activate during live performance, pulling spectators into a shared physiological experience. This is what sets horror theatre apart from other genres. Harvard Medical School notes that fear "activates the entire nervous system, not just the brain," explaining why affect-driven work reaches the audience's body before their intellect (Harvard Health). Effective theatre builds on this by treating the body as a source of knowledge. Breath, impulse, and physical exploration help actors locate emotional truths the text alone cannot access.

In my own training, I learned that breath alone can access an emotional release. A teacher once showed me how a single pattern of breath can pull the body toward tears without forcing a feeling or manufacturing sentiment. That moment taught me that emotion lives in the body first, and text only follows.

Effective theatre interrogates structure instead of inheriting it. It asks why a story requires a particular space, order, or convention. When artists experiment with form intentionally, the structure becomes part of the meaning. Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More* demonstrates this. By dispersing audiences through a multi-floor maze without spoken text, the production forces spectators to assemble narrative through movement and sensation. Ben Brantley wrote that the piece "activates the senses in ways narrative theatre rarely attempts" (Brantley). The form produces the experience.

Ineffective theatre often appears when a production tries to control the audience's imagination too tightly. The 2017 West End revival of *The Woman in White* relied heavily on digital projections intended to create suspense. Critics noted that the projections "short-circuit the imagination and leave nothing for the audience to build themselves" (Trueman). When a production over directs the viewer's emotional response, the stage loses its potency.

Cohesion becomes one of the clearest markers of whether a room succeeded. When an ensemble trusts one another, the audience senses it. Critics described *Pass Over* as having an "electric sense of communion," a charge that radiated from the unity of the artists creating it (Green). That cohesion came from a room where ownership was shared. Ineffective theatre reveals the opposite: fractures, confusion, or emotional detachment.

I saw the show *Little Women* at DePaul University. During the process the actress playing Jo refused to deviate from her own interpretation of the character. She had come into the process already having done a large amount of work on the role, and when the director wanted a romance between Jo and Laurey, she refused. This created dissonance in the rehearsal room, and the directing team lost trust in her. When tech week came around, she still wasn't off book, and this created a divide between her and the rest of the cast. This was visible in the performance. Everyone's character had an arc except for hers. Jo did not change from the beginning to the end, and her headspace was clearly separated from the rest of the cast. This made the show feel disjointed and hollow.

Ineffective theatre isolates. It divides artists in the room, divides audiences from the story, and divides the story from the world. A production made under fear, ego, rigidity, or indifference dissolves the moment the house lights rise.

Effective theatre does the opposite. It creates a temporary community formed through shared risk, shared sensation, and shared clarity. It refuses denial. It demands engagement. It asks audiences to carry that clarity back into a world built on looking away. And while I believe horror accomplishes this with unmatched precision, the foundation of effective theatre remains universal: a rehearsal room committed to equity, a process grounded in truth, and an art form driven by purpose.

How Horror Works

When an actor trembles, the audience doesn't just "see" trembling. Because of mirror neurons and embodied simulation, the viewer's brain partially imitates the observed movement and emotion. We literally feel a trace of what we see. In this way, horror is not just a genre; it is a neurological delivery system.

Fear is pre-verbal. Before I can name what I'm afraid of, my body has already decided to be afraid. The amygdala, a small cluster of nuclei in the brain, is responsible for detecting threat and triggering the fight–flight–freeze response. It reacts faster than the parts of the brain responsible for language and reasoning. My heart rate spikes, my palms sweat, my stomach flips, before my internal narrator shows up to explain it.

This sequence is what makes horror such an effective theatrical form. It exploits the order in which we experience reality: sensation → emotion → interpretation. Most genres try to work the other way around, give you ideas and then hope they trickle down to feeling. Horror starts at the bottom of the nervous system and climbs upward.

Antonin Artaud tried to articulate this when he described theatre as a plague: not just contagious, but physical. The plague does not ask politely to enter; it overruns the tissues. A truly effective performance, for him, bypassed polite psychology and attacked the senses so violently that the audience was forced into a kind of involuntary honesty. They couldn't maintain their nice little lies about society or themselves because their bodies were already reacting.

If fear is pre-verbal, then directing horror means speaking directly to the parts of the audience that don't have language. That demands technique. It demands intention. You can't rely on tropes or aesthetics alone; you need a framework that respects how the body receives threat.
This is where my Rules of Horror come from, a practical vocabulary for communicating with the nervous system.

Rules of Horror:

Rule 1: If the lights aren't off, you need a reason

Our visual system evolved to keep us alive. Simply, blocking out as much light possible will do half the work for you. In low light, our brain becomes less precise and more paranoid. The brain "fills in" missing information, often erring on the side of detecting movement or faces where none exist. This is apophenia and pareidolia at work: the tendency to see patterns, especially threatening ones, in random noise.

Skinamarink is almost a pure demonstration of Rule 1. When it came out in 2023, it was regarded as one of the scariest films of the year. After watching it myself I saw why. *Skinamarink* is a masterclass in suspense. The entire movie is essentially just shots of long dark hallways in a home. There is almost nothing "happening" in the traditional plot sense. But the brain refuses to

accept that nothing is there. It starts hallucinating danger. The fear does not come from what is shown; it comes from the gap between what is shown and what might be lurking just off frame.

So when I say, “If the lights aren’t off, you need a reason,” I’m saying: if you are not using the body’s evolved fear of the dark, you must have a stronger tool.

Rule 2: Anything visible must have purpose

If the eye can land on it, the nervous system will process it. There is no such thing as a neutral object in horror.

If I clutter the stage with meaningless stuff, I’m essentially lying to their nervous system: offering threats that never materialize, exits that never matter, symbols that never pay off. That weakens their trust in stage language. Effective horror turns every visible detail into a promise or a warning.

This is why, in my own directing, I try to adopt the ethic: if it doesn’t serve fear, empathy, or meaning, it goes**.** Not because minimalism is always better, but because attention is finite. If I ask the audience’s body to do the work of scanning the environment, I’m responsible for making that work worth it.

Rule 3: Do not show the threat until the audience has built it

Fear thrives on uncertainty, and there is absolutely nothing scarier than the unknown. The moment a threat becomes fully knowable, meaning we see its shape, measure its speed, clock its weaknesses, fear starts to fall away, and a sense of control replaces it.

Horror is most potent in the gap before the plan. Until I reveal the threat, each person in the room projects their own worst thing into that void. It becomes massively personal and therefore massively effective.

Once you do show the threat, you have to show it in a way that doesn’t let the audience fully understand it. That usually means keeping some element of it unstable: light that never quite allows a clear view, movement that doesn’t map to a known gait, behavior that stays slightly unpredictable. If the threat can’t stay unpredictable, you shouldn’t reveal it at all.

Rule 4: Pattern is the predator

The nervous system is a pattern-detecting machine. We learn what is normal so we can detect what is wrong. Horror hijacks this.

The trick is to build a pattern and then violate it. That violation is where the real terror lives, because it briefly collapses the audience’s prediction system. Their body is thrown back into the uncomfortable space of not knowing what comes next. This is why jump scares work only when the audience can feel them coming and are still surprised by how they land.

Host, a found-footage ghost film, is a perfect example. The ghost stays invisible for most of the film, creating the expectation that we'll only ever feel its presence, never see it. I let my guard down. Then, near the end, the film breaks its own rule with one devastating reveal. That single image still haunts me.

Ghost Quartet, A Theatrical song cycle by Dave Malloy, builds a clear pattern. A performer tells the story in complete darkness, the ensemble sits completely still, and the audience settles into that quiet rhythm. Then the show breaks that pattern when a singer suddenly appears out of the dark and delivers a line inches from an audience member's face. That rupture hits the body before thought can catch up because the show teaches the room to expect stillness and then tears that expectation apart.

Rule 5: Shock without aftercare is manipulation

This is the rule where everything else converges. Fear is easy. Meaning is not.
A loud sound can make someone jump; a strobe can overwhelm the senses. But reaction is not the same as transformation.

This is the core of horror theory.
Robin Wood, a foundational film and cultural critic, calls horror the return of what we repress.
Noël Carroll, one of the most influential philosophers of art, says monsters horrify because they violate categories.
Carol J. Clover, a groundbreaking gender and film theorist, shows how the body becomes the battleground for cultural contradiction.
Eugene Thacker, a philosopher of horror and metaphysics, suggests horror is what emerges when philosophy becomes too big for language and has no choice but to crawl into the flesh.

That's why a hair on your head is nothing, but a hair in your food is disgusting.
It's why a nail attached to your hand is normal, but a nail on the floor is abject.
Horror lives in that shift, the familiar turning foreign, the inside becoming outside.

So fear must do more than jolt. It must expose the fault line between self and other, safe and unsafe, known and unknowable. That exposure is what gives horror meaning. Without that meaning, fear is empty.

So now you're likely wondering how you go about doing this. The horror subgenres are where I like to start. This is why horror is naturally suited for social commentary, its subgenres are literally built around cultural anxiety.

In the appendix that follows, I break down the major horror subgenres and the kinds of meaning each is structurally designed to carry.

Subgenre	Primary Fear	What Disrupts	Meaning	Examples
Body Horror	Flesh turning against itself	Self ↔ Body	Disability, Decay Violation	*Raw, The Substance*
Erotic Horror	Desire becoming Dangerous	Desire ↔ Violence	Power, Objectification	*Jennifer's Body*
Slasher	Body under attack	Safe Body ↔ Target Body	Gender violence, Punishment myths	*Scream, Friday the 13th*
Psychological Horror	Losing control of perception	Self ↔ Perception	Trauma, alienation	*Get Out, Black Swan*
Religious Horror	Moral Judgement	Human ↔ Divine	Purity, Guilt	*The Exorcist*
Ghost Horror	Haunting	Living ↔ Dead	Grief, Memory	*The Others*
Haunted House	Home is unsafe	Familiar ↔ Unfamiliar	Familial trauma, Domestic abuse	*Bly Manor, The Innocents*
Folk Horror	Community turning Hostile	Civilization ↔ Ritual	Tradition, groupthink	*The Witch, Midsommar*
Monster Horror	Nonhuman Entities, The other	Human ↔ Nonhuman	Otherness, evolution	*Alien, The Thing*
Cosmic Horror	Human Insignificance	Self ↔ Universe	Existential dread, Nihilism	*The Color Out of Space*

Examples: What Effective Horror Looks Like

Jordan Peele's films offer some of the clearest examples of how horror can speak directly to social truth. In *Get Out* (2017), Peele tells the story of a young Black man, Chris, who visits the wealthy white family of his girlfriend for the first time. What begins as awkward politeness slowly turns into a nightmare built on racial violence. The film's most famous sequence, the "Sunken Place," shows Chris paralyzed in a chair while his consciousness falls backward into a dark, endless void. He remains aware but powerless, trapped behind his own eyes. Peele created this image to capture the feeling of racial terror as something that overwhelms the body before the mind can process it. White audiences watching the film cannot escape the discomfort of that moment; the politeness of the family, the tension at the dinner table, and the emotional vacancy of his girlfriend's household force viewers to confront the violence hidden inside quiet racism.

Peele continues this social lens in *Us* (2019), a film about a middle-class Black family who encounter their own doubles: people who look exactly like them but have lived brutal lives underground. These doubles, called the Tethered, rise to the surface to reclaim what they were denied. At first, they seem like traditional horror-film intruders. But as the story unfolds, Peele reveals that the Tethered symbolize the people the nation tries to forget: those whose suffering makes everyone else's comfort possible. When Red, the double of the mother, declares, "We are Americans," the movie shifts from a monster story to a statement about national responsibility. The horror comes from recognizing that the violence inflicted on the Tethered mirrors the violence in real systems of class inequality. It forces the audience to confront the parts of society and the parts of themselves they would rather ignore. Peele uses this device on film to connect

personal identity with national guilt. He makes us ask, who are the real monsters in this world? Could it be us?

Paranormal Activity is a live adaptation of the well-known haunted-house story that uses an ordinary home as the setting for a haunting that unfolds in real time. A reviewer from *TheaterMania* wrote that the play "will keep you up all night" and praised the actors for portraying "two people too frayed to sleep or even breathe" (Sullivan). That immediacy defines its power. The sounds, shadows, and disruptions happen in the same room as the audience, so the fear becomes physical rather than distant. The production shows how theatre can turn a familiar domestic space into a site of dread by attacking the audience's sense of safety.

The long-running British ghost play, The Woman in Black, follows a lawyer who reenacts a haunting from his past with the help of a young actor. Instead of relying on elaborate effects, the production uses shadows, fog, and precise timing to frighten the audience. A reviewer for *Box Office Radio* called it "chilling, gripping, and surprisingly moving," emphasizing that the ghost's power comes from "what you don't see" rather than what is shown (Clarke). The play proves how minimal staging, an empty doorway, a whisper from offstage, a figure half-visible in the dark, can create overwhelming fear when the audience must fill the gaps themselves.

Objections to Horror

People often dismiss horror as gratuitous, manipulative, or "traumatizing," but this criticism usually reveals more about the viewer than the genre. Real trauma responses exist and deserve respect, but most objections to horror aren't trauma, they're discomfort. And discomfort is exactly the point. Many people use the language of triggering as a shield, a socially acceptable way to avoid confronting the things they would rather not face: violence, inequality, decay, guilt, complicity. Horror refuses that avoidance. The genre forces audiences to sit with what they spend their daily lives looking away from.

We must ask ourselves whether the boundaries we claim to need are truly about protection or about maintaining denial. Horror strips away the distance that allows privileged people to ignore harm while others live inside it. It collapses the safety buffer that comfort creates. This is not exploitation; it is clarity. When fear is used with intention, it becomes a tool for truth, not manipulation. It doesn't traumatize the audience; it interrupts their ability to hide. That interruption is exactly why horror is one of the most responsible, socially necessary forms of theatre we have.

My Vision For Theatre

My vision for theatre is to stage the truths people work the hardest to avoid. I want to make work that begins in the body, breath, pulse, dread, recognition, and then expands into meaning. The stories I create will sit at the intersection of the ordinary and the uncanny: a family dinner where a casual comment reveals deep violence, a bedroom where the silence feels watched, a public space that slowly stops behaving like one. I want my theatre to blur the line between realism and

the surreal, using darkness, stillness, rupture, and sound as structural tools rather than decoration. Actors may appear out of unexpected corners; light may vanish to force the audience to listen; a pattern may build for twenty minutes before breaking open in a way that jolts the entire room awake. The material will change from project to project, but the intention remains constant: to expose the pressure points of American life: racism, state cruelty, manufactured ignorance, the violence we normalize, and to let those truths surface through sensation before anyone can rationalize them away. My theatre will not offer safety or distance. It will offer confrontation, recognition, and the possibility of change that comes from being unable to un-feel what happened in the room. I want audiences to walk out sensing that something inside them shifted, even if they can't name it yet. That is the theatre I want to make: work that breaks through denial, work that tells the truth loudly through the body, and work that refuses to let the world stay comfortable.

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