Rumor Mill

How one of America's most secretive cults found its way from San Francisco theater oddity to suburban Massachusetts secret.

By Matthew Catalano

The morning of December 23, 2012 started like any other for Jane Foti. She drove her Dodge Caliber ("like driving a helmet") 20 minutes from her home to Billerica's Faulkner Mills building, a sprawling, defunct, red-brick textile factory that now served as home to a variety of tenants including a karate studio, insurance agency, and the tired (yet vigilantly staffed) Middlesex Canal Museum.

Foti walked up the creaky staircase above a yoga studio, fiddled with the ancient lock for a minute, and opened the door of her t-shirt printing business. Unlike most mornings though, this time she had received a peculiar message.

Sitting right underfoot was a piece of printer paper, packed to the margins with Times New Roman text.

Cutting through the wall of text were two lines highlighted in bold at the top of the page:

To the Tenants and Visitors of Faulkner Mill:

Be apprised that a cult is currently operating within your complex.

"I was immediately curious," said Foti.

The note continued, claiming that the cult had been operating for over 30 years, and that while this was not a Jonestown situation, the cult exercised "such control over its members they have convinced some to give up their own children to other people in the group."

Later that day, after Faulkner Mills' owner Ron Pare' arrived at the building, Foti prodded him to view the security camera footage in the hopes of learning more about who could possibly be warning the Mill's tenants about a cult. But what they saw only raised more questions.

The footage showed a figure fully bundled up—a heavy puffer jacket and baggy jeans concealed their form, and a hat, sunglasses and a scarf tightly wrapped around their face hid their identity. Going door to door, flyers in hand, the veiled individual cautiously distributed their notes.

Questions were immediately raised: Who was this person? Why did they go to such lengths to conceal themselves? How did they even get into the building? While the security footage only served to deepen the mystery, one thing was clear: this was no hoax.

On January 5, 1973, a small San Francisco theatre known as The Everyman opened its doors to the public for the opening night of its first production, “The Fantastic Arising of Padraic Clancy Muldoon.” In the playbill, Alexander Francis Horn, the production’s playwright and lead actor had written a profuse thanks to all those who had “given their time and energy night and day over many months” to make the play a possibility. Horn concluded the playbill with a note proclaiming that “we hope to be around for a long, long time.”

Little did the Everyman’s audience know the truth those statements held.

Horn, to those who knew him, was one of a kind. He had been described by ex-associate Antonio Morocco in terms such as a “very intelligent Solar type, i.e., incredibly charismatic and smart,” and “mysterious and brilliant in every way.” Dave Archer, who closely knew Horn throughout the 1970’s wrote in his blog that “merely being in the vicinity of Alex Horn was to feel a man alive in the moment, fully present yet confidently disinterested, as if focused beyond the horizon.”

But Horn carried another, more malicious trait, one which he would leverage to great effect throughout his life and career, one which he would teach his inner circle to cultivate as well: He was a master at reading one’s greatest weaknesses, and using that knowledge to attack them, to bring them to their lowest, and to bend them to his will. This knack, combined with his natural charisma and intelligence allowed Horn to evolve into a master manipulator, one who’s influence would weigh heavy in the minds of a great many people, even long after his death.

In an ironic twist to Horn’s statement, in the September of 1976, the Everyman Theatre would close due to a fire just over three years after its opening night. “Padraic Clancy Muldoon” didn’t gain much traction critically either, with one reviewer at the time declaring it “shapeless, turgid,” and “totally lacking in originality, drama, or theatricality.” But neither fire nor criticism would stop Horn and his wife Sharon Gans from continuing their efforts.

In November of 1976, Horn and Gans opened a new venue in San Francisco named “the Theatre of All Possibilities.” They continued to write and perform original plays in this larger, more ambitious space which included seating for 1,000, a ballroom, and offices. But the drama that would come to be associated with the Horn’s theatres would come to encompass much more than rehearsals and soliloquies.

Both the Everyman Theatre and the Theatre of all Possibilities would become infamous throughout the city for their aggressive marketing tactics, with “droves of ticket sellers who fanned out across San Francisco, stopping passersby and strongly urging them to buy tickets for dinners and shows,” according to a *San Francisco Chronicle* article from the time. Jack Brooks, a theater critic for the *San Francisco Progress* wrote that “rumors persisted that ticket quotas were set for the members and that failure to meet these quotas could result in drastic disciplinary measures.”

(Brooks had previously reviewed Horn’s final play, “The Magician,” stating that it “wasn’t very good theatre.”)

But beyond persistent sales techniques and unfounded rumors, for years no one had any reason to suspect that the Horn-Gans theaters were anything besides eccentric, until December 14th, 1978, when a man called into KGO Radio and posed a question to the host, Jim Eason: "What do you really know about the Theater of All Possibilities?"

The caller answered his own question by alleging a myriad of misgivings and malpractice committed by the Theatre, calling out Horn and Gans as tyrannical abusers with a penchant for cruelty.

By December 23, the floodgates had opened. *The San Francisco Chronicle* ran a front-page story compiling numerous accounts from former theatre members corroborating everything the radio whistleblower had accused, and far more.

Ex-associates of Horn and Gans claimed that they paid hundreds of dollars in cash each month to be taught esoteric self-improvement techniques based on the writings of Russian philosophers George Gurdjieff and Peter Ouspensky.

Gurdjieff and Ouspensky's teachings were esoteric, positing that humans are born "asleep" and can only be "awakened" via strenuous physical labor, and mastery over one's mental habits and struggles. These practices involved "intentional suffering," such as abstaining from food, sex, and other pleasures, "Gurdjieff movements," a type of sacred dance that supposedly represented cosmic truths, and more.

The Chronicle conservatively estimated that $20,000 (over $90,000 in 2023) dollars a month was being paid to Horn and Gans by students, on top of the revenue being produced by the theater's normal operations.

Suddenly, Gans and Horn's $300,000-plus (over 1.3 million dollars in 2023) Pacific Heights home and theatrical staying power (despite being critically reviled) made much more sense.

Verbal beratement, physical beatings, arranged marriages, forced divorces, constant monetary fines for infractions such as "noise backstage, 'whimpering', and falling asleep," and child neglect were all alleged in the *Chronicle*'s exposé.

Seemingly overnight after the *Chronicle* published its account, the Theatre of All Possibilities shuttered its doors and Horn and Gans fled San Francisco.

Esther Friedman was not exactly what one might call "thriving" when she was recruited. The year was 2006, and Friedman, after moving to Boston in 1989 to attend graduate school and seek opportunities outside of her native Ohio, had still not found quite what she was looking for. A recent career change had resulted in a monotony that stifled her musical creativity, and her relationship of [x years] was on the brink of collapse. At 41, Friedman felt that she was simply "not adulting very well, you know?"

On a rainy spring night, Friedman made a plan with her soon-to-be ex-boyfriend: to have one final conversation that would spell the death knell for their relationship. He was to meet her at her apartment, and the relationship would officially end over various snacks.

While waiting in line at Whole Foods, breakup snacks in hand, Friedman recounted that she was "brooding, feeling very sorry for myself," only vaguely aware of the family of four standing behind her in line. Suddenly, snapping Friedman back into reality, the mother asked: "What do you think of that magazine cover?" Friedman glanced down to see a Zen garden, picturesque and serene, looking back at her. "It looks awesome," responded Friedman.

The woman introduced herself as Lisa, alongside her husband and two children. Like Friedman, they were artistic souls dampened by the soulless corporate world. Friendly conversation ensued, and by the time Friedman reached the parking lot, she and Lisa had exchanged phone numbers. On that night, while one relationship for Friedman had crashed and burned, another had just begun to take form.

"We developed a 'friendship' for lack of a better word, you know," recounted Friedman. "Let's put 'friendship' in quotes. Mostly it was just because she consistently called me."

Over a four-month period, Friedman and Lisa became closer. "Part of me was like, what does this person want? And the other part of me was interested," said Friedman. They grabbed coffee together, took walks, went to museums. "But I liked her. And we laughed a lot."

Friedman began to trust her new friend. "I was naïve, and I was not happy with my life, so I'm just pouring my soul out to this person." Unbeknownst to Friedman was the fact that every detail of her life that she shared with Lisa, no matter how private or minute, was being reported back to higher-ups operating a certain shadowy "school" that had shed its theatrical roots and found its way to Massachusetts.

Lisa eventually extended an offer for Friedman to join her and others in "school." She was told that the offer was exclusive and private, "just for her," and that it was imperative that she not tell anyone else about it. Friedman later wrote that "the invitation was both creepy and strangely seductive." In August, Friedman would attend her very first "class."

What began next was the five-year period that Friedman appropriately refers to now as her "cultic misadventure."

In 1986, eight years after fleeing San Francisco, Alex Horn and Sharon Gans moved to New York City. There, along with the help of a few particularly devoted disciples, they began to establish new schools and teach new students the ways of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky.

This time though, Gurdjieff, Ouspensky, and anyone else associated with the "Fourth Way" teachings were to have their names redacted from reading materials and never be mentioned

aloud. Horn and Gans had learned their lesson in San Francisco– and figured that absolute secrecy and control would be the new norm in order to avoid detection.

One such devotee, a follower of Horn and Gans since the Everyman, was a rotund, bearded, and jolly-looking man by the name of Robert Klein. Klein was dispatched by Gans and Horn to Boston in order to establish a sort of satellite school, and in turn expand the already lucrative moneymaking network. This sister school would prove successful, worming itself deep into the fabric of suburban Massachusetts and becoming even more secretive and invisible than the New York headquarters.

This new branch would find its own home base on the third floor of Billerica's historic Faulkner Mills building. Billerica, a suburb lying a mere 30 minutes from Boston was the perfect place for Horn, Gans, and Klein to set up shop. It was close to the heart of the state's population without being too visible, in a town transforming from blue to white collar, with rent still reasonable but nearby potential recruits becoming increasingly affluent.

Like Horn, Robert Klein was a charismatic leader, articulate and skilled at dispelling any thoughts among his peers that he may not be anything more than a preacher. "He could be funny, he could put himself down every once in a while, you know?" recalled Friedman.

But also like Horn, Klein shared the ability to pick apart a person to their bare essence and to crush their spirit. Klein was "very skillful at humiliating people," said Friedman. Commonplace were "feeding frenzies," as Friedman called them, wherein Klein or another teacher would begin the verbal abuse of a rule-breaking or otherwise disorderly student, culminating with the entire rest of the room joining in to hurl vitriol at the offender. Previous classes wherein students would openly share details about their struggles and most vulnerable details would be used against them in order to shame and humiliate them as effectively as possible.

But it would be two years before Friedman would witness such an event. She wouldn't even graduate from the "beginner" class held at the Belmont Lion's Club until over a year, at which point she was allowed into the inner sanctum at Faulkner Mills.

By that point, Friedman's "trial period" was long over and she had been paying $350 per month to be a member of school. She also had begun devoting more and more time to the group. Class was two days a week, and largely consisted of tai chi or other "body movements," followed by a teacher pontificating on the (hijacked) teachings of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky. Students could ask for help, but only in the context of "the work," or the esoteric path outlined by their teachers. Sometimes there would be required confessions or goal setting from students, or even pseudo-therapy sessions where students would ask for guidance from their teachers with regards to their life outside of school.

Friedman also had been assigned a "sustainer," who, similarly to a sponsor in AA would make sure that she was keeping in line with her work, and most importantly, keeping the school's secrets safe. "The work" was relayed to students as hidden, ancient knowledge that had been passed down orally through the ages and taught to those worthy "enough." Students were told

that their outside friends and family were not to know about these teachings, and that they would be simply too “asleep,” too stupid to comprehend them.

Ever since the note had been left under her door, Jane Foti began to take stock of those coming in and out Faulkner Mills. Every Tuesday and Thursday night, cars would begin parking in the building’s rarely used rear lot, and people would begin to trickle into the back of the mill, avoiding the more “retail” sides of Faulkner Mills, and walking up a small staircase to the third floor. And so, Jane too began to park in the rear lot on Tuesdays and Thursdays and use the mill’s back entrance.

“They were all different shapes and sizes,” said Foti of the mill’s mystery tenants. “A lot of Birkenstock-wearing hippies, kind of older than me. You know, the grey hair, and the glasses, and not—not friends of fashion, let’s put it that way.”

Foti continued her amateur investigation, asking gentle questions to members when crossing paths in the parking lot, or offering to help carry bags of snacks and food for them. Yet there would be no piercing the veil of secrecy for Foti.

“I would think for days, like, okay, it's Friday, and Tuesday's coming up. And I'm gonna find a question that they can't get out of, like they have to answer it, yes or no, or whatever. And every single time, they just skirted around it.”

The bag carrying trick didn’t quite work either. “They would accept my help,” said Foti, “But they would stop a few feet away from the door to go upstairs and say, ‘Thank you very much’ or ‘You can leave everything here,’ and they would make me put everything on the ground. And then they would have one of their people come and take the bags and bring them up the stairs.”

Pare’ didn’t seem too concerned. Foti, mimicking the mill’s owner, recalled him saying that “they pay their rent on time, the place is neat, I never have any trouble from them, so I don’t give a shit.”

The pressures of school were taking their toll on Friedman. “I was falling apart. I was probably about 20 pounds lighter than I am now, I looked emaciated. It was not like, attractive skinny.” said Friedman. “I couldn’t even wipe my own ass without asking someone how to do it.”

Activities like school’s lavish annual holiday party went from being a fun distraction and an outlet for creativity to an all-consuming task wherein teachers and sustainers asked students to meet ever-increasing demands– a fully stocked bar, elaborate stage plays, handmade gifts, multi-course meals, and choreographed dances were just some of the necessary undertakings expected of students.

“Everything in my life got shoved aside,” recounted Friedman. “Of course, your outside family and friends are going ‘What? Where are you?’ And then that sets up the group to say, ‘Well they’re terrible people who don’t understand that you’re evolving.’”

Early into Friedman’s tenure at school she had begun dating the man who would later become her husband. Although being kept in the dark for years about Friedman’s biweekly “thing,” he suspected it may have something to do with his wife’s deteriorating mental and physical state.

Finally, on a Tuesday before class in the fall 2011, Friedman’s husband confronted her with evidence he had found online that seemed to corroborate with what little information she had told him about her biweekly group. What he had found online suggested that this was not simply a harmless self-improvement group, but a manipulative cult with roots dating back decades and a history of abuse.
At first, Friedman balked at the idea that she had been manipulated. But her attitude quickly changed. “The shelf broke. I started connecting dots, there’s some back and forth between me and this teacher who starts to freak out because I’m not just folding.”

By the year’s end, Friedman had completely removed herself from “school.”

Friedman, now 58, can look back on her “cultic misadventure” with a laugh. Yet she still acknowledges that speaking on one’s experiences with a cult is still “really painful for most people.” But Friedman believes that the only way to help others recognize their mistreatment and escape cults is to dispel the mystery.

“That’s how I recovered my dreams,” said Friedman, “by going, ‘I’m not keeping your fucking secrets.’ And then the more I talked about it, the more I started connecting all these dots and seeing a complete con job, and then realizing like, oh, there are people in the world who really will pop you over for their own benefit, which is a tough lesson.”

Since 2012, Friedman has kept a meticulous blog detailing her own cultic experiences, which has since evolved into a fully-fledged book, *The Gentle Souls Revolution,* released in February of 2023. Her creative side has also returned in full force, and you can catch her performing gigs with her cover band around the Boston area.

Most importantly, Friedman is now working as a therapist specializing in cult recovery. Friedman says that those in need of cult-related counseling are “far more common than you would think,” estimating that at least two-thirds of her clients are those impacted by cults.

Data corroborates Friedman’s experiences, too. A 2008 survey of 695 psychologists found that 33% had treated people who were or had been cult members. In 2018, Steve Eichel, president of the International Cultic Studies Association told CBS news that “up to 10,000” cults still exist in America today.

At least one of those cults is still operating out of the third floor of the Faulkner Mills building to this day. Despite Alex Horn having died in 2007, Sharon Gans in 2021, and Robert Klein supposedly being ousted from the group (according to an anonymous blog) Foti still sees

members park their cars in the mill's back lot and make their way up the stairs. Foti is also still devising plans to figure out how to get a glimpse of that mysterious third floor. Her latest scheme involves tiny cameras.

"You know, they have those surveillance stores or whatever. If I could get something that's like, you know, that big," Foti makes a pincer with her index finger and thumb a half-inch apart. "And put it up in there…. I'm still obsessed." It seems as though Horn's wish made 40 years ago to "be around for a long, long time" had come eerily true.