EARTHEART and MOTHERBLOOD are two transformational theater plays that grow out of our personal significant life experiences as women and the connections we have made as playwrights to the Middle East conflict. This chapter will be exploring the process by which these plays emerged, developed and continue to grow and how they have impacted performers and audiences in profound and meaningful ways.

OMEGA THEATER ORIGINS

Theater Workshop Boston, Inc, now known as Omega Theater, was incorporated in 1967 as an experimental theater. The theater’s mission was to create original plays about timely socio-political issues and to create new forms of audience/actor relationships within the environmental theater genre. As was true at the time with our colleagues in New York’s The Living Theater and The Open Theater, our goal was to break down the traditional distance that audiences experience with actors on a stage.

Initially, we did this by creating a level performing space in a church basement, in which the performers surrounded the audience and moved through them. Our first play, RIOT, actually created a riot through dissonant sound, strobe lights and moving bodies through the space. We took that experiment one step further in the first play we created...
for young audiences. In TRIBE, our eight to twelve year old audience members never sat
down, but instead, were ritually initiated into one of three Native American tribes. Led by
actors in roles of tribal leaders, they experienced, rather than simply watched, the
dichotomy on the one hand, of the beauty and wonder of their tribe’s rituals and life
styles, and then on the other hand, what it felt like to be moved off their land unjustly.
They were taken through a “trail of tears” as they landed on a gray platform symbolizing
the reservation. There, the different tribes fought with each other and finally recognized
their common plight and harmonized around common goals.

These initial theater experiments laid the foundation for Omega Theater’s
innovative orientation. Creating our own rituals in rehearsals, we attuned the actors to
each other through theater and movement improvisation, sound, and yoga breathing. Our
ritual processes allowed us to go beyond what we were trained to do in our theater
graduate studies.

The emphasis and mission of Omega Theater has been to encourage the creation of
new works that explore the varieties of life experience, their meaning and
transformational possibilities. The Theater has provided a platform for theater artists to
employ improvisational and more recently, drama therapy tools, to develop and perform
solo and ensemble pieces that have ranged from the grand pageantry of THE COSMIC
CELEBRATION which celebrates the unity of all religions and the human family with
hundreds of international performers and thousands of participating audience members,
to intimate solo pieces performed in smaller venues. (See chapter: THE COSMIC
CELEBRATION: Ritual Theater as Spiritual Awakening). Two examples are THE
CIGARETTE PAPERS, which documents one man’s struggle with nicotine addiction,
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and FINDING MY WAY: Stories and Songs from Mid-Life, which applies principals of transpersonal drama therapy to an African American woman’s stories of aging and midlife experience. Through the Theater, artists have collaborated, calling on support from affiliated playwrights, actors, choreographers, musicians, visual artists, costume, set, and lighting designers. Our plays EARTHEART and MOTHERBLOOD had their genesis in this fertile artistic ground.

For the last 44 years, Omega Theater has continued to be committed to develop new theater rituals, new forms, new plays and processes, exploring how psychological and spiritual disciplines and practices could help inform the creative potential in our actors, musicians and playwrights and also in our audiences. We have explored these questions in public settings as well. In elementary and secondary schools with special needs students, many of whom had given up on the learning process, we developed repeatable theater games and rituals within which their classroom’s academic material was experienced, which made learning non-competitive and fun. We invented theater exercises in our teacher training programs that helped teachers become more enthusiastic and creative.

For the corporate world, Omega Theater created theater/ritual processes that encouraged the use of left and right brain integration, to help executives discover their vision through music, visualization, drawing, and embodying images as the first stage of strategic planning for their companies. This integrated creative arts approach was used as well in corporate leadership training, team building, communication skills and diversity training.
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The theater launched arts festivals around Boston to bring together ethnically diverse artists, many of whom were living through active conflict and violence in their communities in hopes that by participating in artistic performance ritual, people could experience a shift from conflict to cooperation. We founded The Omega Arts Network of Artists that saw itself as a vehicle for healing and transformation, gathering artists for collaboration and support of each other in their creative work. These included poets, playwrights, writers, actors, dancers, musicians, and a wide array of visual artists. Many of Omega’s artists became drama therapists to use the developed theater exercises/rituals in the service of healing and transformation with a great variety of populations.

Omega Transpersonal Drama Therapy grew out of this intention and the resulting ritual theater form, Transformational Theater, continues to invite artists, students and clients to develop theater pieces based on their own transformational journey, using the stories/material from their own lives. The training program also helps students integrate these principles into their professional clinical and educational work.

EARTHEART

EARTHEART, our original transformational play, evolved in two ways out of this tremendously active theater energy. The first inspiration came with the realization that in our Omega Theater’s Transformational Theater Trainings, we were asking students to create transformational theater pieces about their personal journeys toward wellness and wholeness. We felt that in order to facilitate others’ processes, we needed to engage as well in the same personal explorative and creative processes that we were facilitating for our students and clients to understand from the inside what it was like.
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The second impulse was inspired by a group of women, who had written books about or had been deeply involved in other ways in Feminine Spirituality, and who came from many different religious and ethnic backgrounds and perspectives. We convened in person and by phone every Winter Solstice, to meditate together on the Earth and attune ourselves to thoughts, feelings and ideas arising from our meditations. Collectively we conferred about how to translate these into artistic expressions relevant for our time. This Solstice process continues twenty-one years later. Some of the images and ideas illuminated in these meditations became threads woven into EARTHEART.

EARTHEART, which was developed using improvisation, drama therapy exercises, and transformational theater rituals, is a two-woman, hour and fifteen minute long play focusing on growing up female and Jewish. The play was performed first to a standing ovation at The Cape Cod Synagogue in Hyannis, Massachusetts; in a co-sponsorship by a church, a synagogue and a multi-cultural council, at Duke University's Department of Women's Studies in Durham, North Carolina; through Independent Players at Blizzard Theater in Elgin Community College's Visual and Performing Arts Center, Elgin, Illinois; at The Annual National Association for Drama Therapy Conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico; at Temple Beth Abraham in Nashua, New Hampshire; at Richard Cambridge’s Poet Theater at Club Passim, a performance venue in Cambridge, Massachusetts; and at The Boston Actors Theater Summer Festival.

EARTHEART begins with a ritual poetic piece about the creation of the world that sets a tone of entering a mystery. With a backdrop of a drumbeat/heartbeat and intoning the resonant sound “ah,” the following is chanted as we move through the audience:

"In the beginning,
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There was nothing but a heart in darkness.

All was silent, except for a heartbeat.

The heart breathed out love,

Breathed out life,

In the form of stars, planets, earth, clouds, rain, plants and animals

And human beings,

All dancing as one,

Knowing where they came from.

Then a deep sleep fell upon the world.

Human beings forgot who they were. (Repeat)

Human beings forgot who they were."

After this ritual introduction, we as actors, changing into many different characters, move through a series of short vignettes about personal and political conflict, oppression, the abuse of power and the estrangement of human beings from the natural world and each other. Then follow scenes on issues including childhood and its relationship to nature and spirituality, the significance of initiation in the developmental process for children and adults, feminism and vocational calling, and deep and transformative spiritual experience leading to a profound sense of unification and pluralism. The scenes are entitled:

Prelude

The Little Lights: The Wonder of Childhood Spiritual Experience

To Be Or Not To Be … A Cantor: Facing Gender Restrictions in Religion

The Real Bar Mitzvah: An Initiation for Mother and Son
**Pilgrimage to Jerusalem: A Young Woman’s Awakening**

**Finale**

The play often ends with a participatory ritual dance where the audience is led in a spiraling choreography with a song, which repeats the phrase and invitation to, “return to the home of your soul.” This is followed by, an open discussion about the play and how people related to the entire performance.

As we developed EARTHEART, we were taken through and had to process many things that people in close relationships experience, in order to productively keep working. Not only did we have to learn how to meet each challenge we experienced both personally and as theater artists and accept our differences, but we also had to learn how to capitalize on both our unique and collective talents for the artistic work. In essence, the processes and rituals we developed to work through all of our difficulties to become good creative partners, writing a harmonious, artistic, and meaningful play, were a microcosm of what different races and cultures in our global village need in order to create peaceful relationships with each other and facilitate balance in the world. Deep listening, open and compassionate sharing, flexibility, patience and compromise are at the heart of this.

**MOTHERBLOOD**

In a vignette from the play there is a brief exchange of only two lines between an Israeli woman and a Palestinian woman about a suicide bombing involving both their children.

Israeli Woman: Your daughter was the suicide bomber who killed my son on the bus, on the bus.
Palestinian Woman: My house was bulldozed by your husband.

This is where the kernel for MOTHERBLOOD began. We felt drawn to developing this scene as something that could stand on its own as a short play or be integrated into EARTHEART as another scene. We were interested in the actual political and religious conflict as Jews and humanists and felt a stake in the characters as women and mothers. We were also interested in the idea that if women or men who were open to their feminine sensibilities – the ability to be receptive and deeply listen – were at the peace negotiation table, there could be a different outcome.

It took us two years to craft a ten-minute play that was authentic, covered the major political issues of the Middle East conflict and dramatized the range of emotion these two women might feel. We each played both characters at first and then settled on roles – Susan as the Palestinian and Saphira as the Israeli, researching the history of the conflict and keeping up with the current thinking on both sides. We developed the script having these two characters meet in a medical waiting room in Jerusalem, which is where they might meet in reality. They are forced to sit next to one another because the waiting room is full. Although they try to avoid contact, they eventually engage in some conversation which leads them to discover that both of them have lost young adult children to the violence, and that possibly the Palestinian’s daughter may have been a suicide bomber responsible for the explosion in which she herself died and which killed the Israeli woman’s son.

What follows this discovery is a verbal fight full of passion and vitriol in which each yells out her grievances, disappointments, and feelings toward the other personally.
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and politically nearly coming to physical blows, until exhausted and spent they both
dissolve into grief. It is in the shared moment of high release and then deep sadness,
when compassion spontaneously arises. As each character begins to hear the other’s story
a moment of contact occurs. As the script evolved, we sent out each iteration to
connections who were Jewish, Muslim, Israeli, and Palestinian, as well as to academics
and religious leaders in order to get feedback. Among these was Rabbi Michael Lerner,
whose thorough research and balanced views in the book, HEALING
ISRAEL/PALESTINE: A Path to Peace and Reconciliation. (2003) was inspirational.

The response to our script was rarely neutral. MOTHERBLOOD roused strong
feelings that ran the gamut from admiration to revulsion, and with each survey we
continued to fine tune the script and attune ourselves as characters to the deeper subtleties
suggested by the feedback. And constantly, we were searching for the authentic ways
these characters might connect. We found that when they were able to simply relate to
each other as women, as mothers, as humans sick of war and loss, that it made a
difference. Through their gradual willingness and ability to compassionately and deeply
listen to each other’s experiences, a small but significant connection could begin. The
play ends with a question as to whether or not these two women will choose to meet
again and with these words by the Sufi poet Jelaluddin Rumi: “Out beyond the field of
wrongdoing and rightdoing/ there is a field. I’ll meet you there./” (Coleman Barks,
ESSENTIAL RUMI, 1995 p.36)
THE POWER OF THEATER AS RITUAL

As long time actors and playwrights we have been keenly aware of the power of the ritual of theater to impact audience members even only as witnesses to the action onstage. Also, we have been cognizant of the transformative power of the ritual of entering into a character as an actor, moving through the portal of one’s own self into the realm of another. But we were not prepared for the transformative power of both these aspects of theater as ritual when we agreed to stage read MOTHERBLOOD in a significant performance in the play’s and our own artistic development.

This came when we were invited to present as part of Lesley University’s conference, “IMAGINE: Arts in the Service of Humanity” in Tel Aviv, Israel. A conference put on in collaboration with the International Group Psychotherapy Association, the focus was to find ways the arts could help in the peacemaking process around the world, especially between Israelis and Palestinians who had just elected Hamas to the leadership. Lesley University had worked for a year to ensure that health care professionals from Gaza and the West Bank could safely and legally attend the conference and that dialogue between parties could happen in the microcosm of the conference. Approximately fifty people of many nationalities including Palestinians and Israelis attended our workshop, which included a staged reading presentation of the play, a discussion, and an exercise in which we invited participants to imagine the scene following the end of the play.

The discussion after the performance was multi-tiered. First, there were the immediate emotional responses mainly from the Israelis and Palestinians, which mimicked the larger political/social/religious conflict itself. There was a good deal of
finger pointing from both sides, anger and frustration and heavy criticism about the play being lopsided in favor of Israel (from the Palestinians) and lopsided in favor of the Palestinians (from the Israelis). This is how we knew the play was fairly balanced.

Then there were comments about the play’s characters – the Israeli woman needed to present more of the dangers of her situation. She needed to be more angry and less understanding. The Palestinian woman shouldn’t eat an apple so sloppily because it made her look slovenly and dirty. She needed to be stronger in her political stances. The third layer of conversation went deeper into how people were experiencing life during the conflict, their own pain of loss, weariness with the war, the trauma that each side’s children were experiencing, the guilt and shame about each side’s actions, the deep suffering, the real desire for peace. In many ways, the ritual of the play and its stages of unfoldment were replicated in real time in the discussion.

And finally, the scenes that were presented, when the audience created them in small groups, were all continuation of the play’s message of possibility for contact. Some examples included: the Israeli woman visits the Palestinian at her home; the Palestinian woman brings food to the Israeli woman’s home; they meet surreptitiously for more conversation somewhere else; they start an intercultural group.

**MOTHERBLOOD IN REAL LIFE**

After our presentation both of us continued to connect with Israelis and Palestinians throughout the conference. We shared several meals with the Palestinians and sat with and talked with the Palestinian women on a conference-organized bus ride from Tel Aviv to a Philharmonic concert in Jerusalem and back. We met Israelis who connected us with
several underground peace groups of women never covered in the media, including Mothers For Peace (Israeli and Palestinian Mothers) and The Abrahamic Council for Peace, bringing together Jews, Muslims and Christians who were clergy and laypeople.

Through these organizations, we met an American born woman, who settled in Israel and raised her family there with her husband. Her story reflected an important storyline in MOTHERBLOOD. Her college age son, who was severely injured by a bombing attack in Jerusalem, catalyzed her to work for peace. She spearheaded, organized and participated in many inter-religious peace groups.

We also met several Israeli women with whom we drove back to Jerusalem after the conference and who were involved in a group that visited the checkpoints in the West Bank everyday. We asked if we could join them and they allowed us to go. This was a very transformative experience for both of us and the outgrowth of theater ritual at its best. Originally the purpose of this Israeli women’s group was to be a presence at the checkpoints and to report any human rights violations occurring on either side. At first these women were not welcomed by either Israeli soldiers or by Palestinians crossing into Israel or living in the territory. But as these women became more familiar with both sides they began to be trusted and were often used to help mediate potentially volatile, abusive and dangerous situations. We were privileged to be with this peace group and we believe were invited to do so because of our play, its stance of mediation and its invitation through discussion and theater ritual to participate in the political conversation. And in addition, we ourselves had become transformed by the ritual of entering the characters, engaging in the personal, religious and political struggles of the characters and were drawn to be in the heart of the struggle, not just participate from a safe distance.
Through accompanying this group, we were able to witness first hand some of the paradoxes – the Wall constructed throughout the West Bank had significantly lessened the numbers of suicide bombers entering and the resulting bombings in Israel. Israelis were being successful in establishing more security and a safer environment for their people. But at the same time, Palestinian families living in enclaves were often cut off from each other by the Wall and had to travel many miles and through one and sometimes two checkpoints to visit family members who were once just next door or across the street. The Wall and its blocking or rerouting of traffic affected Palestinian businesses, and attending weddings, funerals and every day events like work and school were sometimes complicated by needing to pass through regular checkpoints and floating checkpoints. These could appear without notice and were time consuming for the traveler, and could end with Palestinians being refused passage. Emotions on both sides often were high and this women’s group served regularly to help moderate the extremes. As actors and drama therapists we were able to witness this powerful peace work.

At the conference we had also met a Palestinian woman in her late twenties, engaged to be married and still living with her family in the Arab Quarter in Jerusalem. She had been at our presentation and was among the women with whom we had connected. After leaving the conference in Tel Aviv, we arranged to meet her during our stay in Jerusalem, where she invited us to her home for dinner. This was to be the first time her family had ever had Jewish people in their home and our first time ever being in a Palestinian home. She met us accompanied by some young nieces and nephews at King David’s Gate in the Old City and led us through the ancient labyrinthine streets to her house. We felt overwhelmed by our welcome. Her entire family was there – sisters,
brothers, in-laws, children of all ages, her elderly parents and other older people. All the women had removed their headscarves and were perfectly at ease with us.

A large table was set up in the living room and we ate, drank, laughed and spoke to one another. Some spoke English and translated. At other times we talked to each other in gesture and seemed to understand a language between us that transcended words. Music was played. We danced together and there was a short little play with costumes that seemed like a family ritual that we couldn’t really grasp. Later, we smoked a hookah with a dried fruit mixture with the elders. The afternoon was a wonderful, joyful and freeing experience for us and created a bond between everyone there. None of this would have been possible without MOTHERBLOOD and the extended power of our performance and theater rituals.

We saw this same Palestinian woman one more time for coffee before we left Israel. We shared a deep sense of appreciation for one another and hope to remain in contact. She spoke with us more about her fiancé and excitement about her forthcoming marriage and always we talked about our hopes for peace. We remained in contact with her and another Palestinian conferee from Gaza after our return to the USA. When Israel launched its offensive against Gaza, we received graphic pictures of the violence and a plea for help. We were not able to contact our friend from Gaza after the offensive.

Since our trip to Israel both of us have remained very concerned about the Middle East situation and have stayed committed to continuing to bring audiences together through MOTHERBLOOD to explore the issues. We’ve presented at conferences and worked with a wide variety of audiences in different performance venues and in collaboration with other performers. We were invited to be the keynote event at the
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EmpowerPeace Conference sponsored by Lesley University and Harvard University for young Muslim women who were receiving leadership training.

We performed MOTHERBLOOD and engaged the audience in discussion, inviting them to talk about possible next scenes toward peace. Some of the women performed these short scenes extemporaneously. Several of the women expressed a desire to have us create other plays about their ethnic and cultural conflicts and we encouraged them to write and perform their own. In other venues we continued to create performance rituals for the audience to experience after watching the play. We had discussions with the whole audience and/or broke the audience into small groups and facilitated discussion that led to envisioning scenes toward some next steps to reconciliation. We performed at the Union for Reform Judaism in New York and facilitated a discussion with the staff there.

At a well known Cambridge, Massachusetts performance venue we included along with MOTHERBLOOD, Arabic and Israeli musicians playing their ethnic music and a poet who read his own work about the conflict as well as poems by well known contemporary Palestinian and Israeli artists. In another venue, we partnered with a Boston based Playback Theater which elicited from the audience their own stories catalyzed by the MOTHERBLOOD performance. These stories ranged from personal family conflicts to stories about inner conflict about one’s own religious feelings.

In Washington, we performed to a standing ovation as part of a finale at a conference for The Network for Spiritual Progressives, where clergy from many traditions came together to create new visions for cooperation and peace in the US and throughout the world and to begin to create viable political initiatives toward those ends.
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All of these opportunities to perform, create rituals and have personal and artistic encounters were catalyzed by the substance and content of MOTHERBLOOD. We were gratified that one short play could make a difference in the real world. As a Sufi teaching of Hazrat Inayat Khan tells us, in order to create peace in the world, we have to create peace in ourselves.

We have realized that our challenge as theater artists is to stay connected and present to our individual and collective inner guidance and motivation and to allow the ripples from each performance to help lead us into the play’s next steps. We hope to continue to be engaged in the mystery of theater as we create performances and rituals that illuminate universal personal and sociopolitical issues that touch and motivate our audiences to listen deeply and then take meaningful action in their lives and in the world.

And even though there continues to be so many obstacles in Middle East, we hold the vision of hope that peace may be possible in Israel/Palestine through the growing number of grass roots peace initiatives, often organized by Israeli and Palestinian women. We hope to continue to support these movements with performances of EARTHEART and MOTHERBLOOD.

COMMENTS ABOUT EARTHEART AND MOTHERBLOOD

“The performance of EARTHEART was inspiring, graceful and touching and helped to promote a sense of community amongst diverse communities.”

Dr. Zareen Karani Araoz, President, “Managing Across Cultures,” formerly Founder/Director, Masters Program in Intercultural Relations, Lesley College.
MOTHERBLOOD:

"This amazing dramatic performance breaks through all the rhetoric on both sides of the Israel/Palestine struggle and leads us directly to the humanity and fundamental decency of most people on both sides. It’s a perfect opening to a serious conversation about what we can do to build a lasting peace with justice and security for both sides."


STUDY GUIDE FOR STUDENTS FOLLOWING A PERFORMANCE OF MOTHERBLOOD: Middle School through to adults

1. How did the play speak to you? What are your feelings and thoughts after watching the play?
2. Divide into small groups. Discuss some possibilities of what might happen in a next scene.
3. Select one “next scene” and work together to create and present it to the whole group.
4. Discuss the scenes.
5. What step could each participant take to help create the reality of peace?
   - Write regularly to pen pals in the Middle East.
   - Sponsor visits of Palestinians and Israelis
   - Create fundraisers for organizations that support the peace process.
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- Create dialogue events.
- Present issues in your House of Worship and schools.
- Write letters to your congress people.
- Join the Network of Spiritual Progressives and/or other interfaith organizations whose missions support the peace process both locally and nationally.
- Educate yourself about the past and current socio-political situation in the middle. (Recommended book: HEALING ISRAEL/HEALING PALESTINE by Rabbi Michael Lerner.
- Create your own artistic expression of the vision for peace through art, music, poetry, dance, film/video and theater.

The Production was offered in these formats to communities, schools churches etc:

1. Performance of MOTHERBLOOD. 12 minutes
2. Performance of MOTHERBLOOD with an introduction to EARTHEART (enacting global social/spiritual crisis). 20 minutes
3. Performance EARTHEART with MOTHERBLOOD 70 minutes

At the end of the performance, the following were offered:

An audience discussion as a whole or in small groups,
A workshop and/or a simple circle dance with the audience,
An envisioning process with the audience about the next scene toward peace, which may also be improvised.
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For more information about Omega Theater, its productions and training programs in Transpersonal Drama Therapy and Psychodrama:

www.omegatheater.org

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