Saphira Barbara Linden has been artistic director of the Om Theater, Theater Workshop Boston, for the past ten years. One of the founders of Theater Workshop Boston, Ms. Linden has directed sixteen original works for the theater and has pioneered in developing environmental participatory theater for adults and children. For the past four years the award-winning Om Theater has begun to apply meditation and esoteric disciplines toward the formation of a theater of ideals. Ms. Linden, also Sheikh and co-founder of the Sufi Order Center for the Esoteric Arts, Boston, has served as artistic director of the Cosmic Mass (in collaboration with Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan, head of the International Sufi Order), in Boston; San Francisco; Los Angeles; Chamonix, France and New York City. In the field of education, Ms. Linden has created alternative approaches to classroom learning through the application of improvisational theater techniques to standard public school curricula and to students with special needs. Her work as a leading experimental theater innovator was featured in Public Broadcasting System's series, "Artists in America."

The theater workshop Boston, as it moves into its tenth anniversary year, takes a look at the recent history of alternative theater as reflected in its own evolution. The avant-garde theater of the 1960's shocked people up. Pieces were designed to hit people over the head with everything that was wrong. People needed to be shaken out of their complacency, their indifference to the incredible number of injustices around them. Talking about what was wrong was no longer effective; and so the age of nonverbal expression was born, the world of environmental theater which forced actors and audience into a more intense intimate relationship. In TWB's first piece, RIOT (Julie Partman, director; Bryant Rollins, playwright, 1966), people had the experience of an actual riot, of being trapped, of being unable to get out. Rather than just watching a riot, they became part of one reproduced through sound, movement and light.

While adults needed to be shaken out of their complacency, children needed to become more aware of what was really happening in the world. Taking the notion of an intimate involvement one step further, in TRIBE (Saphira Barbara Linden, director and author, 1967) children in the audience were never observers. When they entered the theater, they were immediately initiated into one of three tribes of Native Americans. In this way, they experienced the beauty and joy of these cultures and then felt the injustice of being pushed off their land. In theatrical terms they were forced to leave beautiful, spacious, colorful environments to be shoved together onto a dark, gray platform representing the reservation. The adults who brought their children were seated as elders of these tribes and experienced being left behind.

In CREATION (Linden, Rosenberg, 1969), another participatory environmental piece, adults were seated in a harried city environment exemplifying polluted valleys, and the children became part of a country world of new values and natural living. A third environment consisted of a factory run by a bureaucrat who represented the voice of selfish capitalism. Children and adults, rather than simply watching a land being destroyed by the insensitivity of polluters, directly experienced their environment being taken over by a river filled with waste, an ever-expanding, ugly, plastic form forcing them to keep moving back for protection. The children were driven back to the city to take responsibility to work for change. They begged people to look at the dying world around them and listen to their pleas for action. HEADPLAY (Reichman and Linden, Reichman, 1970) reflected through bitter irony the hard reality of the drug culture. MINERVA V (Reichman, 1971) attacked the whole space program and its implications on many levels. All of these sociopolitical plays were created out of one theater but reflected an attitude prevalent among many experimental theater artists: people are blind to what's going on around them—hit them over the head, demonstrate passionately what's wrong.

But then what? Simply becoming aware of these problems left people with a sense of futility about their ability to effect change. The result was frustration and paralysis. We felt our own paralysis. In producing pieces like RIOT and CREATION, the energies involved were devasting. This kind of process became terribly demoralizing and more and more paralyzing to creative energy: it became simply self-defeating. The more we got into the problems, the more these energies were infused in our psyches, as artists, and the more we transmitted this feeling to our audiences. We became numb. The audiences became numb. Nothing people over the head may have been effective as a first step, but it wasn't enough. It became clear that, if we showed them what's wrong, we also had to show them the way out.

We felt the responsibility to create a theater that would
heal rather than just denigrate. When we find that we
can't rely on the outside world, we have no choice but to
turn to inner resources to find guidance. We had to begin
by healing ourselves. We saw that we had built up walls
and defenses to protect us from being hurt by the emotional
bombardment of our work. To penetrate those walls, we
needed to discover ways to help ourselves and, as actors,
to help our audience open to new possibilities for growth.
We, as other in alternative theaters, turned to thera-
pic disciplines as a way of reaching the energy that
had been blocked.

First we had to assume that change is possible. His-
torically, every revolution outward and inward has been
based on that assumption. In order for an individual to
enter a therapeutic process, there must be the faith that,
when the walls are broken down and the insights are made,
a truer, more integrated being can emerge. In a ther-
apic setting a client must have trust that his therapist
will take care, protect and will regard as sacred his deep-
est vulnerabilities. Also, in a love relationship, to really
become one with one's mate, one must trust enough to be
totally naked, vulnerable enough to be potentially de-
stroyed. So, too, a theater wishing to help its audience
open to the possibility of change must create a safe and
warm environment where its actors place themselves on the
line, become vulnerable, take risks, invite people in to
share with them.

TOWARD THE ONE (Linden and Dym, Spring, 1973)
was a participatory piece for families that created a safe,
fun environment in which family members could make new
discoveries about each other and become quite exposed and
vulnerable through improvisational play. Using many art
forms within a theatrical setting, a people-sized board
game was created. A family therapist took the role of
Game-Guide and was assisted by actor-facilitators, FIRE-
STICKS, A JOURNEY INTO SELF-RESPECT (Linda Karima
Putnam and women's ensemble, 1974) created an intimate,
warm space where the actors shared directly their own life
stories, their personal struggles, issues and concerns as
women in this society. CLASS (Steve Wangh, Jon Lipsky,
1975) was a political piece designed to expose the hyp-
ocrisy and inhumanity of the American educational system
and its failure to prepare children to deal with real life issues.
CLASS shared with older political pieces a tendency to
explore and emphasize a harsh view of reality, to shock
people out of their complacency. At the same time the
ensemble developed characterizations reflecting their own
childhood experiences. They were putting themselves on
the line, exploring their own painful experiences and
working through them.

The therapeutic disciplines in our actor and teacher
training allowed us and our audiences to be more honest
and direct about our real feelings, find solutions to our
immediate concerns and gain insight into how our child-
hood experience has affected our adult lives. This work
helped our actors and teachers become more aware of their
bodies, to discover where fears and tensions were stored up,
to learn to become more comfortable with themselves and
confront feelings of alienation in themselves and towards
others and the larger society. But it was limited. We felt
a need to search for ways to expand our consciousness be-
yond individual self-exploration, and so we turned to
meditation.

Many of us were attracted to Sufism which has been
called the metaphysics of ecstasy. It is a body of teach-
ings passed down from ancient times often finding expres-
sion through the arts. These teachings help those who are
searching for truth to experience the inner nature of
reality—consciousness beyond our immediate selves, and
unity within the divinity of creation. The emphasis is on
practicing inner disciplines while working in the world,
to constantly improve the quality of life. The teachings
can become an energy source for opening individuals and
humanity to the potential for dynamic change. "Sufism is
based on experiences and not on precepts." The work in-
cludes meditative practices based on breath, sacred dance
and walk, light and sound vibrations (mantorom or wazis).
The teachings can become a living reality, helping one to
experience states of increased joy, strength and peace.

A lifetime is like a classroom with lessons set up for
the soul's unfoldment. The soul, pure in itself, takes on
the impressions of the outer life in the world. The per-
sonality is meant to be like a crystal through which the light
of the soul radiates. However, the personality often be-
comes dense as the light of the soul becomes clouded over
by worries and anxieties that totally preoccupy the con-
sciousness. As people identify themselves only with beh-
avior patterns and emotional states, they become trapped
in a limited perspective. The transformation of the rock
into the crystal happens through the alignment of the
chaotic structure into a harmonious arrangement of mole-
cules; so, in healing, the dedication of the person to a
larger vision of life reconnects him to his source.

Do we dare to be who we really are? For us, one of
the main purposes of new age theater is healing. The
healing process involves helping ourselves and others to
awaken to the eternal qualities of the soul rather than to
identify with the limitations of the personality. From this
perspective, "personality is the flower that blossoms out of
the roots of God"; and "the development of personality is
the real purpose of human life." We wish to create in
theater an experience of the total human condition in
which emotional, social, political and spiritual goals
unite in a new vision of what is possible.

But how do you start to find out what that is? When
you enter a totally new process, you have to leave your
preconceptions behind. To learn how to approach theater
through meditation disciplines, how to discover or uncover
the healing power of the soul, we had to sacrifice the
art we had known in order to take new risks. We had to
give up the security of what we knew with only a few in-
tuitive flashes about how to proceed. Ya Fatah! mean-
ing Oh Opener of the Way! was a workshop-laboratory
for exploring the nature of inspiration working with many different meditation practices introduced to us through Sufi teachings. Ya Fatah is the basic concentration we use to experience ourselves as vehicles through which inspiration is channeled. By concentrating on surrendering to the deepest guidance within rather than on achieving a certain result, letting go of attachments and judgments, creative energy seems to flow much more easily. What comes through inspiration is often a kernel, a seed which can then grow into a poem, movement sequence, sound fabric, characterization, etc.

"Art is the medium of God through which God Himself completes His Creation," (Hazrat Inayat Khan).

The goal of Sufism in the West is not to learn how to sit on a mountaintop away from the world, but to learn how to use these teachings in everyday life to solve concerns and problems personally and to deal with the sufferings of humanity. We soon became concerned with problems in the Middle East. We learned that Jerusalem is really the heart center of the world but has, in fact, been the seat of ages of bloodshed, dissension and strife between all of the monotheistic religions. Our next work was to create a counter-vibration to that history. PRAISE: THREE RINGS FROM JERUSALEM (OM Company, 1972) celebrated the ideal of recognizing the One spirit underlying each of the three monotheistic religions. The same actor became the voice of God manifesting successively through three great prophets, Abraham, Jesus and Mohammed, teaching us that the message of love, harmony and beauty or of the oneness of all humanity has come to us many times in history through different beings. This work was developed further in TOWARD THE ONE, A JOURNEY TO THE CITY OF PEACE (OM Company, Fall, 1973) in which the outward pilgrimage to Jerusalem was really the inner journey to our own center of peace. We depicted through a participatory form the struggles of the journey and experiences of higher states of consciousness. These two pieces really served as background work in our own process toward the development of the COSMIC MASS.

The COSMIC MASS (Pr: Vilayat Inayat Khan (head of the Sufi Order), Linden, Mathieu, and OM Company, 1973-77), is a large-scale pageant that moves far in the direction of embodying a cosmic perspective—recollection by the collective memory of the cosmic drama which sets the pace of earthly events. The influence of higher spheres is woven into the drama of history as depicted in the parallel events and rituals of the five major religions of the world. It is a celebration of the unity of all religious paths. Members from the whole spiritual community are drawn together, some to participate in a play, others in a religious service, others in a happening; all feel a sense of something larger than any single person, beyond a project, reaching beyond the ordinary world of events. Most participants are not acting; the rehearsal process becomes for all us sadhana, a spiritual practice, a surrendering to a larger purpose manifesting through us. All participants, even those working on publicity, set and costume design, technical support, fund raising and other aspects of production, are given inner concentrations or sacred phrases to maintain through the work. Through these practices comes the inspiration for manifesting the original concept in form and movement. The inner concentrations are also meant to transmit to a general audience the vibrations of the corresponding inner states creating an atmosphere supported by a fabric of dramatic musical and visual imagery.

The COSMIC MASS is an extraordinary gift given to us that seems to really transcend any personal ownership of the work. After the first COSMIC MASS we experienced profoundly the effects of channeling inspiration beyond our limited selves. However, we felt the need to bring "Cosmic Mass consciousness" or awareness of higher states of consciousness into everyday life. We needed to make sure of our own clarity in understanding what had been given to us. By creating a piece for children, we forced ourselves to be very simple, concrete and clear about what can be highly abstract, esoteric concepts and images. SUNSONG, A PEOPLE PUPPET PAGEANT FOR CHILDREN OF ALL AGES (OM Company, 1975) is a participation piece for children that combines both psychological and spiritual disciplines in a healing experience, but it has none of the outer religious vocabulary. By identifying with the qualities of one of the four elements (earth, water, fire and air) and the healing power of those energies operating inside them, children begin to discover new potential to heal others and in the process themselves. The concept of a systems theory of family dynamics is the basis for the psychological changes taking place in the troubled puppet family, and it helps children to realize that change is possible and that change in one family member can help growth happen in the whole family. The relationships of the puppet family are conceived as a microcosm of everyday situations and also of the interplay of cosmic forces. Initially, the family of people puppets is a humorous presentation of classic family dynamics demonstrating how our higher selves become distorted or unbalanced in the acting out of our personalities in daily life. The children participants in the role of these elements of nature become the healers of the people puppet family. The puppet children receive gifts prepared by the children participants which reflect the healing qualities of their elements in the form of songs, dances, improvisation. Without trying to magically "cure all" the puppet family sings—"though all our problems aren't worked out, that's what life is all about and we can laugh to help us make it through."

The next phase of our work we call AWAKENING (awakening of the consciousness of humanity to the divinity in humankind). It may take the form of one work or several. We wish now to use all the tools of our theater experience to create real characterizations based on our eternal beings, which we learn to recognize through concentrations on divine attributes (archetypes that represent our cosmic dimension). We want to depict how our life's experience, our problems, hopes, sorrows and joys are a continual unfolding of the soul's essence working toward the fulfillment of its purpose. As we each continue on our own path to unfoldment, individually and to deeper realization.

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collectively as a theater company, our goal is to become more effective instruments of the spirit.

We feel a need to enter schools (Theater Workshop Boston has been developing and implementing many programs in the Boston Public Schools and elsewhere, especially focusing on children with special needs—as well as creating a language arts TV series entitled "How Can I Tell You"), old-age homes, hospitals, prisons, churches, synagogues, etc., with theater pieces and workshops designed to heal. In Spring, 1976, we were in residence in the Berkshires. We designed and implemented workshops including performance segments for elementary schools, high schools, a vocational school and an old-age home in three towns. We trained teachers in theater techniques (as they related to their curricula) and designed theater workshops to deal with concerns of women's groups, men's groups and families. We want to help people tune in to the possibilities for transforming suffering into joy, viewing their pain as energy that can be channeled into hope and faith that people can work together toward a revolution of consciousness in humanity.

We pray that other alternative theater artists will join us in working toward this new awakening of higher consciousness and the healing of a deeply wounded society.
In the years that have passed since the writing of our tenth anniversary article, we have been working toward the establishment of the Omega Arts Center, a center for the study and integration of all the performing arts. We wish to provide a place for artists who feel that their art has become an expression of their spiritual path. Symbolically, we have adopted the name Omega for our acting company (formerly OM) to represent our wish to find meaning and purpose in our lives and our work. We've developed a way of working together called Omega Process. The Omega Process can be described in three parts.

1. who we are - the essential Self as a starting point.

Through meditation and insight practices, each of us explores archetypal images, the source of our uniqueness, our essence. Always referring back to this source, we develop characters for original theater pieces from the material of our lives. Example: Harry the street clown in AWAKENING was developed from a concentration on The Wise Fool from the Tarot cards as well as the source qualities of Pure Intelligence and The Light of Intelligence.

2. what are we doing - the group as creator.

The creation of our works involves a process of improvisation and meditation. Inspiration flows through each member of the company. We practice breath and sound attunements to harmonize our intuitions. We start from a ground of shared ideals and as we work our common vision grows.

3. who are we as a theater - Theater of Awakening.

We believe that now is the time for a quantum leap in human evolution. It is the time of the awakening of the consciousness of humanity to the divine source within us (the divinity of humankind). We are dedicated to doing what we can to serve this great event of our time. Our ideal is to create theater pieces that heal a world wounded by doubt and negativity. We want our work to reflect the latent resources in people for strength, light, love and peace.

We have sought to apply the Omega Process in the different fields which have been opened in us in management training, education, the community and of course, the world of artists.

Over several years, Theater Workshop Boston has worked with a leading innovative management training firm helping to design and guide workshops with executives. Production of a highly successful video training tape that dramatizes how a stressful and distorted corporate environment can be created unconsciously by a powerful executive has led to new possibilities for communicating to people of great influence and great capability the importance of basic human values.

*as in "alpha and omega" connoting our metaphysical relationship to Cause and Purpose and as used by Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan in his description of Omega Consciousness as awareness of the Divine Plan.
American Roots is a program for high school students that attempts to translate parts of the Omega Process within an educational setting. While busy exploring their ethnic roots, students brought together from a suburban and an inner city school are also discovering something about who they are— their feelings, their creative ideas, their talents. They work together as a group on an original dramatic demonstration of the 10-week process, learning about cooperation, responsibility and basic group attunement. They also share experiences that build feelings of unity, of rising above differences and distinctions which they have also been seeing in an affirming, appreciative light.

We also were given an opportunity to work in a school hard hit by urban blight, Roxbury High School. Through a pairing with Harvard University, we work as consultants in two year-long Theater Arts classes as part of the regular academic curriculum. Students create an original theater piece reflecting the realities of street life, e.g., drugs and violence. By probing underneath their attitudes toward these themes they discover positive feelings about themselves which are expressed in the development of the play. They also work with the adaptation of a popular play like the Wiz.

Also in our community, we have worked to develop ethnic unity through the arts. As part of Boston’s 350th birthday celebration, we developed a neighborhood festival, Jubilee Jamaica Plain, A multi-ethnic concert including performance groups representing Black, Hispanic, Irish, Latvian and Greek traditions helps a general audience to appreciate the richness of neighborhood cultural resources and draws together residents of varied backgrounds. A participational play based on the history of immigration into the neighborhood and famous local figures who spoke up for tolerance and unity is designed to get residents to interact and experience a unifying neighborhood identity.

Our role in the World Symposium on Humanity (1979) as coordinator of three simultaneous Arts Festivals in London, Toronto and Los Angeles gave us access to an international network of artists working consciously toward the expression of spiritual ideals in their art. We hope to serve as a clearinghouse linking up this growing network for future collaboration and mutual support.

Two original one-person productions grew out of AWAKENING, the process of exploring archetypal sources and relating them to the experiences of our lives. SWAN SOLILOQUY (1980) is a behind the scenes look at an actress caught in the act of preparing to play the role of her life. She shares her inner process of transformation with the audience as she explores the art of personality in giving and receiving life from the various characters she portrays. HUNSOELD (1980) uses classic tales of the world’s religious traditions as teaching tools to transform the consciousness of Huey, a modern Everyman. A cosmic minstrel storyteller, Hunsold who represents the archetypes of Wisdom, Ecstasy and Light initiates audience (children and adults) as players in the Theater of Light. Audience members participate in acting out stories to help Huey see that if he only allows it, the Divine seed planted in his heart will grow to fruition.
As we move through the 80's the unfolding planetary drama urges us on to manifesting our spiritual ideals as a reality in our lives. It becomes increasingly important for those with shared ideals to support each other and together to reach out to a world crying for relief. As artists we are given the opportunity to transform doubt, fear and confusion into hope by sharing our vision of the perfection of love, harmony and beauty in humanity.