

Discussion

Reply to Karen Michalson

Rand as Guru: Will It Never End?

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It was a pleasure to read Karen Michalson's intelligent response to my play *The Emotionalists*. Since I am an out gay man and a mouthy drag queen, my work is rarely taken seriously. But I disagree with Michalson's analysis. I find it surprising that she focuses on the subplot of my play—which deals with a young, closeted gay florist (Marcel Pin) who idolizes Ayn Rand. Of the main plot, which centers around Rand herself, she says “Rand's story is tawdry, bathetic, and somewhat embarrassing” (Michalson 2004, 472). I find this response fascinating, as it is precisely opposite to the ones expressed in Toronto newspapers during the play's first (and only) production in the year 2000. Though reviews for the play were enthusiastic, two out of three felt the subplot marred an otherwise gripping story. *The Globe and Mail* stated: “The rest of the story is much weaker. Drawing heavily on his own destructive encounter with Rand's exaltation of the supposedly rational man, Gilbert constructs a flimsy subplot about a young florist who is unable to accept his homosexuality and goes to Rand for advice” (Taylor 2000). *The Toronto Star* suggested: “As things unfold, Pin's story becomes a melodramatic but less interesting subplot to the larger narrative” (Wagner 2000).

I must admit that I had an ulterior motive in writing a play with twin plots. In most of my work, ‘the gay lifestyle’ is explored in exhausting detail. When I write about straight subject matter, it amuses me to offer the audience a gay subplot. Invariably, the critics and the audience choose the straight plot over the gay one. Reviewers often assure me that I have achieved some sort of apotheosis with my straight plot. At last, they say, I have written a somewhat serious and

important play.

Why did Michalson uncharacteristically prefer the (gay) subplot over the (straight) main plot of my play? Well I am certainly not going to argue with the evidence that she brings in defense of it, as I think the reviewers who criticized it were clearly homophobic. But I think that the plots are excellent and balance each other well. It is Michalson's dismissal of the Ayn Rand narrative that concerns me.

I *meant* to portray Rand as "tawdry, bathetic, and somewhat embarrassing." I will say, in the defense of the main narrative, that audiences and critics alike found Rand to be a bewitching, entertaining, and realistic theatrical villain. I think that because she is portrayed as such an enormous hypocrite, people enjoyed hating her. At the same time, their hearts went out to her in the admittedly "bathetic" moments. I chose Rand as the central figure for my play because I couldn't imagine a more hypocritical figure, and hypocrisy is always funny, and enormously cathartic, on stage (see *Tartuffe*).

We are all hypocritical—we often say one thing and do another, preach abstinence and practice lechery—it is one of the side effects of living in a Judeo-Christian culture. Michalson disparagingly mentions the melodramatic words that I placed in Rand's mouth during a love scene with Nathaniel Branden: "Use me, I am here for your use. . . . Treat me in any manner you wish. I am at your feet, I am nothing" (Gilbert 2000, 42). I don't think it's wildly imaginative of me to have portrayed Rand as a masochist. Since most of the sex scenes in her books involve consensual rapes in which the woman is a willing victim, it didn't seem like a huge leap to suggest that a self-effacing submissiveness was a part of Rand's personal sexual repertoire. (Most prostitutes and gay men will tell you that those who are dominant in the public sphere enjoy being submissive when the bedroom door is shut.)

But of course my goal was not merely psycho-sexual analysis masquerading as historical accuracy. I had an agenda. That agenda was, most emphatically, *not* to destroy Ayn Rand. I simply wanted to knock her off her pedestal and chip away at her guru status. I have an enormous amount of affection for Rand and her novels. But since she and her disciples have labored for so long to make her an icon (and

they are still at it), nothing can aid us more in a realistic evaluation of her work than coming to terms with the fact that she was a flawed human being.

What is a Guru? I happened to re-read Joshua Logan's introduction to Sonia Moore's book about Stanislavsky yesterday. After seeing a racy, farcical production directed by the master of naturalism and emotion memory, he is disillusioned: "We were stunned. Was this the Stanislavsky of the famous method? It was our first shock at the realization that Stanislavsky was a human being—not a distant god—that he was first and foremost the interpreter of the author's play" (Moore 1984, xiv).

The guru is always right, consistent, and has no relationship with the real world. The realization that a person is not a guru entails realizing the opposite: that they are inconsistent and connected to the real world. As a teenager, I received copies of *The Objectivist* in the mail. I eagerly awaited the arrival of every issue, and was bitterly disappointed when there was not an article by Ayn Rand. I would have gobbled any ideological crumb from the master's lips. I used to wonder if she addressed the magazine to me herself, if her holy hand had actually touched the precious pages. In my only surviving copy of *The Objectivist*, there is a message from Rand in a small typewritten note near the back: "Beginning with this you will receive *The Objectivist* regularly at or about the middle of the month, post office irregularities permitting." The words of Ayn Rand, mundane perhaps, but still—her words! And how typical of her to take issue with the state-run and inept postal service! How consistent and how reassuring her mystical assurance was to a gawky, self-conscious and socially inept teen!

Rand claimed not to like being a guru. But she also had the misfortune of never being wrong. How could she maintain the contradictory position of always being right but still being human? Rand used an ideal circular argument to defend herself from charges of idolatry. She was merely being rational. She was an intelligent person—not a guru. If others disagreed with her, she would argue, and, as all Objectivists know, reason would prove her opponents wrong. Since Objectivists know that reason is objective, they also

know that right thinking people will come to the same conclusions as Ayn Rand. There is only one problem with this defense: reason is the most subjective thing in the world. Everyone reasons differently. Right thinking people can come to opposite conclusions, and sometimes never agree.

Why are we so attached to guru figures? Because we all wanted Mommy and Daddy's approval, and many of us find it difficult to relinquish the need. As we mature and separate from our parents, we search for parental approval in other places. It is the dynamic so articulately expressed in Erich Fromm's *Escape from Freedom*: We would rather not be responsible for our own lives. This is something Rand railed against in her writing, and yet something that her guru status did everything to encourage.

But take my word for it, there is nothing quite as liberating as telling Mommy and Daddy to fuck off. Though I love my parents (and still have a warm relationship with them), critics have accused me of being a grown up adolescent who never stops rebelling. I keep harping on the idolatry of Rand because so many people are afraid to question the authority figures in their lives.

As much as I know it is a scholarly mistake to speculate on the motives of another academic, I am convinced that Karen Michalson relates to Ayn Rand as a guru. First, there is her obvious reluctance to deal with the Ayn Rand plot in my play, a story that others found entertaining and fascinating. Second, I've become a master at detecting Randisms in people's writing. Rand had a marvelously infectious writing style and a seductively authoritative voice. I detected two 'Randisms' in Michalson's piece, passages that utilize typical Randian terminology, and could only be written by someone who was once a devoted fan. On page 471, she says "How can you rationalize your way into becoming something else to survive, something you do not necessarily excel at but which will earn you a living, something that tests nothing more than your willingness to wear the dull thorns of mediocrity like a badge of merit?" Rand was obsessed with bashing mediocrity. The melodramatic phrase "the dull thorns of mediocrity" is a pure Randism. And finally, Michalson says "Marcel's self-destruction is as morally bankrupt as Marcel's murder of Bruce" (478).

“Morally bankrupt” is a common Randism; it certainly has the hard puritanical, ring of Rand’s scorn. In fact, it was one of her favorite dismissive phrases.

I enjoyed Michalson’s review. But I think that, like many who were interested in Rand, she still idolizes that fascinating, hypocritical, bewitching, and infuriating woman.

And that can be a very bad thing.

References

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