

Deep Comedy



Activist, author, Buddhist monk and solo performer Alan Clements offers some insight on how humor can quite possibly save the world.

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“I think we have to come out of the coma of thinking that god is the salvation to human existence.”

—Alan Clements

Don't feel bad if you've never heard of Alan Clements. Despite being called “one of the most compelling voices of our times” by no less than Amnesty International, the former Buddhist monk, author, war correspondent, and human rights activist, won't ever have the profile of, say, David Suzuki. Why? Because he's just too darned outspoken.

Consider his new solo “deep comedy” show he's bringing to the MacPherson Playhouse Theatre this Friday night. Originally billed as “Spiritually Incorrect II—An Existential Anti-war Comedy”, Clements felt compelled to change the name to “How to Save the World: God? Drugs? Revolution?” “I had to evolve the title in order to enter the greater issue,” Clements explains, noting that he feels addressing spiritual materialism and the madness of war just isn't enough. “Although much of the problems we face today are rooted in the dementia of religion, we've got an amphetamine-cranked-American war machine bent on global imperialism to contend with. This beast alone begs the question, ‘How do we save the world right now?’”

He pauses and takes a breath. “To me, a more appropriate title would actually be, ‘How do we save the world from America?’ In a way, it's like combining the religious, jihadist Bush orthodoxy with the core theme of the show, which is how can we decode violence from the species—beyond the Bush government, beyond war, beyond who's right and wrong. After my years a journalist in war zones and as a Buddhist monk, the one question left with me is, ‘What in the hell is going on in the human heart to compel one to justify murder for any reason at all?’”

See? Suzuki would never say anything like that.

LAUGHTER INSTEAD OF TEARS

It's unflinching sentiments such as these that have earned Alan Clements comparisons to the likes of Lenny Bruce, Noam Chomsky and Terrence McKenna. But, after all, if you're the first American monk in Burma, have been a journalistic witness to a pair of genocides and can count imprisoned Nobel Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi amongst your peers, perhaps you've earned the right to be as outspoken as you wanna be. And it's not like people aren't listening. The last time he hit town a few years back (with the original “Spiritually

Incorrect”, Clements sold out the Belfry; since then he’s performed his trademark brand of “liberating comedy, revolutionary satire and activist entertainment” more than 120 times across the world to great acclaim. Now, Victoria is set to become comedic ground zero for the Canadian premiere of his all-new production, “How to Save the World—God? Drugs? Revolution?”

“You know,” he admits, “I got into theater as a lark, I was just so bored as a spiritual teacher with how shallow, commercial, and plitudinously-driven the scene had become. And yet, for some reason, when I added comedy and satire into some otherwise tragic and miserable concepts—like human rights and democracy—everyone dropped their yoga mats and meditation cushions and started to listen: liberals, conservatives, republicans, democrats, socialists, anarchists, and greens. And this was pre-9-11.”

Often compared to such intellectual funnymen as Eric Bogosian and the late Spalding Gray, Clements describes his unique brand of humor as “deep comedy.” (Like the concept of deep ecology, Clements’ satire tends to eschew the surface and examine things on a more fundamental level.) “My show is physical, spontaneous, and multi-layered, with a psychoanalytic-existential-political edge,” he says. “There’s also a lot of light-hearted humor in it—as well as some full-frontal irreverence—but I do tackle some tough topics. Ultimately, what I do on stage is to have fun, let people hear the multiplicity of my inner voices: the contradictions of the soul, the competing appetites . . . it’s much like eastern European theater, which deals in conversations with the subconscious. I think if people can see how you deal with the dilemma of being human, how you go about the business of struggling to be real, they’re less threatened by our foibles and frailties. That’s why the stage, by and large, is much more interesting to me than the lecture hall; I’m not teaching anything out there.”

Heady stuff, true, but Clements thinks he’s got what it takes—for the right audience. (What he calls “smart people: the CBC crowd, the theatrical jazz crowd, anyone who wants to be stimulated at a core psyche level.”)

“The operating architecture of my show is that it is not wrong to be radically committed to non-aggression as a way of living,” he continues. “It is not wrong to commit yourself to anarchistic behaviors, to not belong to the cult of liberals, democrats, conservatives, whatever—it’s okay to be yourself and to interrupt the apparatus of this machinery and all other structures of conformity.”

THE PRICE OF COMEDY

When asked about his background, the Boston-born Clements freely admits that U.S. values like militarism, oil and being in war zones are “in his blood.” Both of his parents are military veterans of World War II, for example, his brother has spent 33 years climbing the corporate ladder at Exxon Mobile and Clements himself spent his teen years working at his father’s gas station. “I grew up smelling Saudi gasoline, so I understand the intoxication for Bush,” he quips. And while he’s nearly constantly on the road, performing in exotic places in the US, Australia and Europe, Clements also lived in some of the less beautiful corners of the world, including Bosnia, Croatia and Sarajevo. But it was his time in Burma that really defined his current path.

“My performance style is pretty much informed by the spirit of the Burmese comedians,” he explains. “They’re spoken word renegades, who combine storytelling and acting, with political and spiritual satire, comedy and a straight-up preacher/teacher/activist-confront your-inner-and-outer-Big-Brother style of subversive theater.” Didn’t know Burma had a long tradition of stand-up comedians? While Burmese satire has clearly influenced the work of former resident George Orwell, let’s consider the case of U Par Lay, whom Clements describes as “the Robin Williams of Burma but with a political activist subversive Buddhist mind.”

Clements recalls being among the 400 activists and democratic leaders invited by Aung San Suu Kyi to

celebrate Burma's Independence Day at her prison compound in 2000, where U Par Lay was the special guest. "What was ironic about this was that everyone knew he'd been locked up in prison for the past six years under hard labor for his last comedy routine back in 1989, where he had only mildly satirized the dictatorship," he explains.

"Now, this was U Par Lay's first act upon his release just two days before. He took the microphone and explained how he had been pounding rocks 12 hours a day in prison, all the while waiting for this moment. And what really got me was that he knew that what he was about to say and perform that day would land him back in prison—"but freedom is more important than fear," he said. Then, for two hours, he did his show only obliquely satirizing the regime. And upon the show's conclusion, the goons of the gulag came to his home and carted him off to prison again. Six more years of hard labor, in leg irons, pounding rocks."

Clements pauses for a moment. "I was there that day, and it brought me to tears that someone—as well as the entire crowd—would take that kind of moral risk for the sake of human rights, freedom and human dignity. As a result of that, I asked myself, 'What risks am I taking in my life? Where's my inner-Gandhi? My Rosa Parkes? My Harriet Tubman?' Four and a half years later—September 2000—I did my first show at the Vancouver East Cultural Centre and it was born from U Par Lay."

Not that Clements himself is expecting imprisonment from "How to Save the World."

"I'm a harmless, non-violent spiritual terrorist using satire, humor and guilt to change the world," he says. "The only real prison we should fear is the one of our own doing. Bush will come and go. But our inner dictator may get re-elected. So, my show is about breaking free of this self-imprisonment. That's the only dictatorship we need to fear in the West. The dictatorship of fear. Or, if you happen to be suffering from 'rich man's madness,' then you have to free yourself from the tyranny of comfort.

"I do try to bring some playfulness to the insanity of global politics, as well as some intelligent critical analysis," he insists. "We're so indoctrinated in this stuff that it's almost impossible to turn on the television or read the news anymore and actually care. I've found that it's only humor and satire that can get through the wall and reach a lot of good people who are sitting on the fence today. In America, for example, everyone remembers that Vietnamese monk who burned himself in protest, so the operative image of my show is, 'Are you willing to set your heart on fire, and what will you do with your conscience?' It's ninety-minutes of activist-entertainment with a fundamental conclusion: 'Impeach God too, not just Bush.'"

YOU GOTTA HAVE HOPE

So what is going to save the world: god, drugs or revolution? "I think we have to come out of the coma of thinking that God is the salvation to human existence," Clements says. "I think that's a big part of the problem—by and large, we don't recognize that we're myth-making mammals; we live within these illusions we cast on the cave walls of our own heads and think they're ultimate reality—but they're just bio-chemical-driven illusions. The only hope for our survival that I see is to come out of the hypnosis of our pet hallucinations, crack the coma of our cinema, reclaim the projections and have a pure psycho-analytic awakening on a global level. I joke in my show that it isn't just a performance but it is a metaphysical monologue. Or maybe I should simply call it anti-psychosis theater."

Okay, so that's god . . . and possibly drugs. What about revolution? "Huh," he snorts. "I'm not sure Americans would take to the streets unless their hot water was cut off—or if the current regime would even care. I mean, we're dealing with a neanderthal state of consciousness, even among many liberal-minded people."

"Do I see hope?" he concludes with a rhetorical flourish. "I find hope simply in the fact that life exists. The self-evident phenomenon of life is, to me, evidence enough of the miraculous. Somehow, just as Bush has

connected the dots of evil in the world—North Korea, Syria, Iraq, Iran—we are compelled to connect the dots of hope. It's just that simple. And whether it be the dots of hope in our own heart or in the broader community, we can't be defeated by ourselves. Not to sound cliched, but that would be the worst defeat of all, to succumb to cynicism—and I'm not going to do that at this stage in my life."

Clements pauses one last time and looks for a way to sum it all up. "A lot of my show is a kind of Rorschach, if you will, that's indirectly trying to awaken people to pull back from the culture of blame and take a deeper responsibility with their own hearts. If we can sensitize enough people to come out of our addiction to aggression, I think the earth could restore itself to the sacred garden in a very short period of time."

Now that's a message of hope anyone can accept.