

I want to tell a story today about fire. Death in flames and resurrection in ash and clay alike. The experimental and internationally celebrated Bread and Puppet is central actor in this play.

On screen, an early playbill shows off the group's imaginative creaturely poetics and folkloric tradition of masking.

“[Puppetry] is an anarchic art, subversive and untamable by nature,” says the sculptor and dancer, baker and Pacifist creator of the theatre, Peter Schumann (Figure 2). As for bread, consider only in passing our daily rite of eating. Some would say *sacrament*. Bread, *the* peasant food of vitality and uprising (Figure 3). A Lifeforce.

Regardless of terms, sourdough is sustenance; and breaking bread both a shared symbolic act and collective breadth in resistance. “Art is food. You can't eat it, but it feeds you,” again the kind aphoristic pithy thinking Schumann advocates. More to come on this.

The year is 1963 (and as quick preface or trigger warning)—*there will be a few harrowing images I show; most explicitly, a Buddhist monk's self-immolation in South Vietnam*. It is summer and across the US a climate of protest is brewing. Our dissident stage is set (Figure 4). And it is puppetry, writes Schumann in a self-published zine titled *The Radicality of Puppet Theater* that, in fact, most “allows us to physically inhabit a reality **That Is** a reality of the imagination.” (Figure 5) Spring has arrived, and the troupe has just completed its first staged production, ‘Crucifixion.’

Over the next 18-minutes, I want to meditate on the dialectics of fire and its vernacular role in Bread and Puppet. I make the case that the theatre summons an aesthetics of fire in order to enact its unique revolutionary vision of solidarity (Figure 6); alliance with the poor and working class; the displaced and the dispossessed; de-colonial freedom-fighters and comrades; war-torn villages across Vietnam and their resilient mournful mothers. In order to accomplish this, I directly situate B&P methodologies, praxis and performance history within a molten cauldron of kin 1960s events: at least four acute fiery sites configure this ephemeral map. Bracketing the decade, each make a passing appearance in my talk.

More too, and as we will learn, the very act of B&P's breaking bread and baking dough are part and parcel with this cosmos of flame: the alchemic process of kneading (*with a K*), to then Bake, combining a mixture of milled rye berries and sprouted grains; lullabied time, measured tablespoons and sensuous handling that in turn create the group's lauded sourdough rye loafs—‘*Silesian* peasant bread,’ as it is locally called, acts as shield and saber, elixir and foil for the ruling class, military power, institutionalized corporate supremacy, and state violence.

Who is B & P, the Schuman trickster duo more specifically? How and why puppets? And what about the bread?

To commence again then, (Figure 7) let me recursively introduce a most archetypal image here as a way to, in haste, communicate further the rich visual lexicon of symbols and principles that

orient B& P. In this slide, note the color and dress, the mournful sculptural forms and their colossal-sized scale. Donning white robes—with oversized Paper-mâché hands and hand-crafted moon-like faces—this group of larger-than life puppets wander the street. On the surface, the setting appears to be as much a public site of protest or solemn processional—as it is any blithely staged ‘dramaturgical production.’ (Figure 8). And indeed, this is in fact the case. Disruptive marching, limited dialogue, and an accompanying program of meditative action define some of the philosophical parameters of Bread & Puppet. Unconventional props with unorthodox staging likewise too pillars of their ontology. (Figure 9).

Formed in 1962 by the mystically-minded Peter Schumann—and nurtured in tandem with the guidance of his artistic life-partner and future wife, Elka Scott—B&P gestated in New York City’s Lower East; then a mere raggedy and tattered, traveling puppet show that would sojourn only as far as Coney Island on summer weekends. Since the early 1970s, however, the same shabby circus-like cast of austere drifters has been based in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont. (Figure 10) An airy domain of freedom reigns wild in the blue firmament and haloed (white, windy and whimsical) figurines that tiptoe along the sky’s edge.

A bit more germane bio here: The theatre’s sage founder, now an elderly statesman, was born 1934 in Silesia (a contested territory wedged in the hinterlands between Poland and Germany; and hence the title of the group’s sourdough). Raised amid this type of WWII chaos, from early-on struggle and displacement inscribed the artist’s blood. Schumann remembers fragments and feelings; a refugee camp and the familial camaraderie of survival; his sensibilities trained to vibrate in tune with life’s daily vitality and the barebones of sustenance: Bread.

Key—and metaphysically at the heart of B&P too—is an early memory of trauma from the artist’s childhood: Fire already on the mind. (Figure 11) How was this the case? As if ventriloquizing her husband’s misplaced past lives, Elka describes a panoramic tableau of horror and fright. The “entire horizon was ablaze behind him,” she recalls. “The town was on fire; the black smoke and explosions from the inferno of Breslau as it burned,” ash scouring the heavens, and all the while “frantic refugees clinging to the roofs and windows of the last train.” Something like 80,000 civilians were killed during the months-long German defense and Soviet Red Army siege of the city.

More than mere psychoanalytic jargon, *Fire* indeed left an indelible imprint on the sentient Schumann; a branding that would only deepen his soulful mood and the sensitive disposition of the boyish adolescent. Subsequently, as a young man, he would begin to study both dance and sculpture, eventually more seriously taking up classical instruction in the ruins of postwar Europe.

Amidst this environmental gravitas and wake of terror, Peter’s own artistic aspirations began to blossom. He decided to travel to to the U.S. in 1961 and quickly became an active participant in the *Living Theatre* ensemble—itself a matrix of radical drama, vanguard jazz, and potent activism. A rift, however, in ideology ensued and the fiery Schuman set off on his own course of creation. Fire walk with me.

So, let us return forward to the wider worldscape of the 1960s. On screen, (Figure 12), Rowland Scherman's photograph shows the B&P at a March Against the Vietnam War on November 27, 1965. In ambulatory flow near the Washington Monument, their ghoulish death masks sculpt the foreground; the macabre band of puppets blurring the ring of American flags in the distance. Morality and faith on display (Figure 13).

Vehemently antiwar in Vietnam, each puppet, action and performance would manifest an expression of the company's lowbrow, anti-capitalist ideology (Figure 14). The Schumann's (Elka and Peter a committed couple at this point) at this juncture are fully immersed in the inebriating haze of creation. And *Pow*, a **flash**. Then *Fire*. Released in 1965, the laconically titled play, *Fire*, became the company's first critically-acclaimed production (Figure 15). A psychically charged event, the picture here shows original masks and set-design from the show; the photograph itself from a re-presentation of the play most recently shown at Reed College in 2015.

Performed originally as a silent vigil—and created for a smaller, more intimate space of performance—*Fire* was dedicated to those who protested the war in Vietnam by self-immolating—Americans and Vietnamese alike.

Plaster white masks cloaked in black shawls configure two rows of women; in the play, the life-size puppets tell a story of an ordinary week in wartime Vietnam. A bell announce the days of the week. Various everyday gestures and ordinary conversation make proclamations about life that goes on even amidst the chaos and terror of war. The performance is quiet. (Figure 16) Until there is, according to stage directions, “shrieking, a metallic whine and roar like the noise of a siren and the splintering of bone. A light on stage swings wildly in all directions... the figures slowly swath the others in dark red bands.”

The haunting production would, like B&P itself, transform over time. Its antiwar message, nevertheless, never wavered, and *Fire* would in 1968 go tour Europe, making momentous stops in Amsterdam, Berlin, London and France.

There is precedent for this monastic homage and fiery processional (Figure 17). June 11, 1963, Saigon, as noted. The elder Buddhist practitioner and Bodhisatva Thich Quang Duc is preparing his own life-offering in flames. The first of many self-immolations; an original ember and plea for peace. American AP reporter Malcolm Browne, tipped off by a local news source was the only western cameraman present (Figure 18). On the morning of June 11, fellow Buddhist monks created a wall of peace as they cordoned off the makeshift stage in the urban center of the southern capital (Figure 19). A match was lit. And for more than six minutes, Thich Quang Duc sat still in a sheet of flames.

Dorothy Day—cofounder of the Catholic Workers Movement—later remarked that Alice Herz, Herb Morrison, and Roger LaPorte (each self-immolators, like Aaron Bushnell most recently in 2024) were all seeking to “endure the sufferings” that the US government was inflicting upon the rest of the world.

Puppeteer Bob Ernstthal remembers the response to *Fire* always being the same; his words feel uncannily resonant to the grief-riddled pavement and Duc's self-sacrifice from Saigon. (Figure 20) It was "always the same way... we closed the curtain at the end and there would be this silence, as if there was no one was. I me there. I mean they could have been standing packed in the back, packed in the entranceway, you know. People stuffed in the theater. And there was this silence. Dead silence. And maybe after a few minutes you'd hear somebody clap... It was so powerful... There was something there that was really stirring."

(Figure 21). Peter Simon's photograph of the melancholic Buddhist-like nuns walking the streets of Montpelier, VT, are, in fact, an altered iteration of characters from *Fire*. Roaming—or better yet, boundedly adrift—along an emptied-out civil stage, the rope-bound puppets rebuke the Masters of War. Their collective quietude a reproach to nationalist fervor and the supremacist zeal of imperial empire.

The world is indeed bleak. Still, ART goes on. And the breadline-like, chain-gang angels marching against the invasion of Lao on February 10, 1971, are a miracle, a blessing. Longtime collaborator with B&P, Simon's oeuvre continues to be the most resonant pictorial testament to the theatre's mission.

Small and non-commercial, self-managed and anti-hierarchical, B&P is, in other words complicated. The playhouse acts as a place for emancipatory dreaming; a fabled dwelling wherein a cohort of interchangeable thespians remain loyally dedicated to the hopeful and speculative landscape of the 'Not-Yet.' A riff off the German Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch's tome *The Principle of Hope*, the theatre exists in some parallel, fluid state of transcendental becoming; a realm that operates on the 'front edge of a forward leaning world,' Mark Estrin's poetic turn of phrase. I like this idea. A leaning into the future of redemption. The tongue of a breezy flame in motion.

"Not puppetry, dance or theatre alone, but an entirely new form of Art incorporating elements of each," so writes the esteemed puppeteer Jim Henson (creator of *Fraggle Rock* and *The Muppets*) in a 1965 letter to Schumann. In effect, B & P is rhizomatic: vegetative and quasi-auto-generative it is at once **a site** of communal resistance; **a safe space** for united grieving; **a radical platform** for theatrical creation.

Originally derived from a variety of ancient folkloric traditions, and what Schuman describes as a medley of "medieval morality plays, Punch and Judy, Sicilian and Balinese puppetry, and Japanese Bunraku," B & P is—at its core—a visually rich street-theater of performance art; a tapestry of marionettes paper-mâché, actors, chamber music, and stilted cardboard dancing. Eugenio Barba aphoristic gloss from *The Paper Canoe*: 'Performance in search of a genre,' makes good sense here, and B&P similarly wants us too to understand that "theater is not yet an established form, not the place of commerce you think it is." In fact, the stage is "more like bread it is a necessity."

Theatre then—in a most infinitely open-ended sense—models a way of living; and B&P bears witness while participants tread onward like visionary Miyazaki spirits. With an ethos of active participation and sympathetic dreaming, being a part of the B&P milieu becomes, in short, a **cleansing experience for the soul; mind, and heart**. A collectively creative and **psychically charged** symbolic event, the playhouse offers a form of VORSCHAU—that German concept of ‘some pale illumination from the future that shed light on the present.’

All of these prolix rejoinders aside, *puppetry* remains the vital essence of the theater: action over dialogue, gesture outweighs plot. And these puppets portray life in simple, ritualistic terms; one could even call it a kind of generous, didactic exchange. In this way, B&P *shows* rather than tells: and instead of trying to explain or teach, the work is committed to the Act. Schumann believes that “puppetry—and all of the arts—are for the Gods, are wild, are raw material, are bread and sourdough; are for life and death, births, weddings, exaltation and sorrow.” The group continues to create and perform new work today, and remains the longest-running, self-sustaining and non-profit-making theatre ensemble in the U.S.

And as performances conclude, bread roams free (Figure 21) “You sit there chewing, salivating, feeling your commonality with others, with the puppeteers, even with the puppets... People with full mouths tend not to chat, at least until after they swallow, and it is in the munching silence, large messages sink in and soak.”

Recall the maxim: “Art is food. You can’t eat it, but it feeds you.” Almost a platitude or cliché. But the sentiment feels more and more **so** true. Embodied; carnal and full. **And** nourishing. **Art is** food, a truism about creative practice perhaps even more apropos in this post-surveillance-Capital, techno-feudalist landscape of AI *fake-news* and glib **fuck-youS**. Disingenuous gaslighting and the oft-disenchanted everyday world that purports to give virtuous values—honest faith and joyous naivety, spiritual liberation and compassionate mercy—a bad name. **Good** karma remains and resilience returns.

To conclude quickly, and if I had to choose but one figure that most captures the pathos of B&P, it may be this one (Figure 22). The totemic closeup of a crimson priestess is a resplendent ruin in repose. With hollow, quasar eyes her statuesque head tilts just gently. The funerary effigy beams a transcendental light, her radiant downcast gaze a post-apocalyptic glow from beyond the grave.

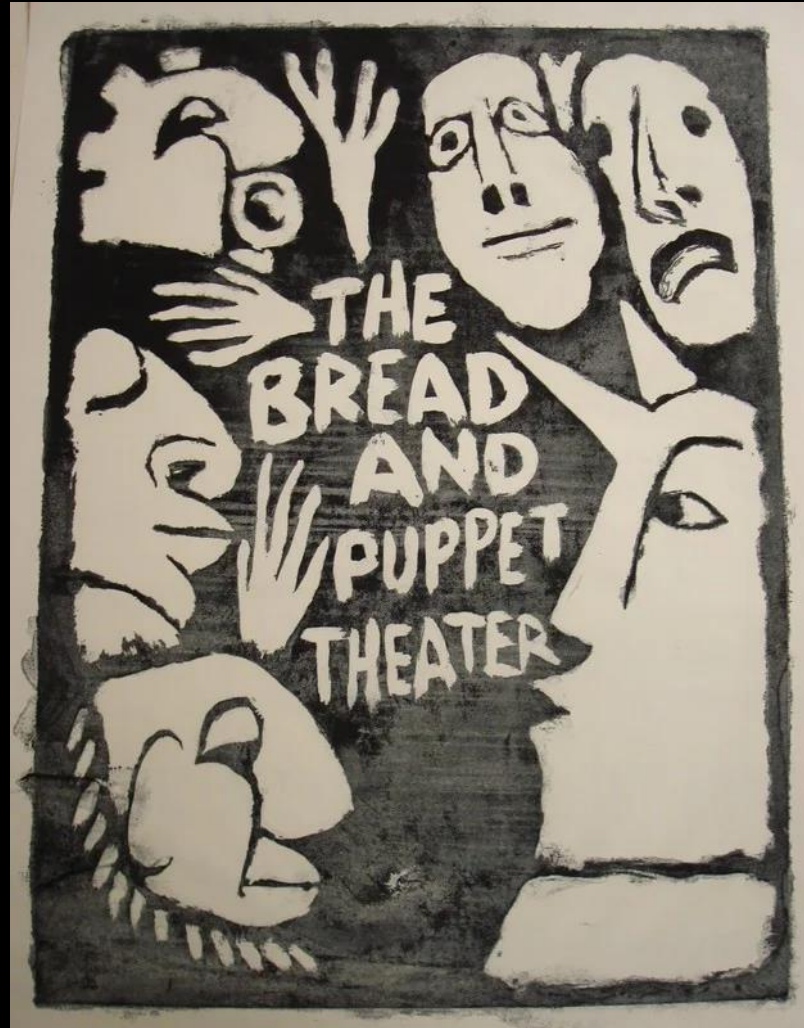
The gambit of B&P is total: a new state of dawn; and *that Ernst Blochian* molding into the ‘*Not Yet*’ is precisely this red, fiery mask cast in darkness. Forged within an empty casket of doubt, the Consciousness of B&P knows itself to be **righteously anticipatory**: Enigmatically directed Attention that is neither retrospective/nor solipsistic in bad faith. This blissed out void of **Hopefully becoming** is thus an inverted subjunctive plea—not the ‘as if’ or ‘could have’ of utopic presentiment, but rather a willful suspension of disbelief; the humility of a blind leap into some Heraclitean cauldron of unknown movement.

I finish with this: (Figure 23): That the fiery séance of the Catonsville 9—their draft-card bonfire and napalm buckets from May 17, 1968; and the interconnected masked-stilting subterfuge event ‘America is Hard to Find’ held at Cornell University on April 19, 1970, will both have to wait for another emblazoned panel of fire (Figure 24). A future table in the round and sacramental site for

sharing the camouflaged hidden life of Father Berrigan (Figure 25). Wherein an after-echo from the underground (Figure 26) holographically resuscitates; to then only speak blank halleluiahs inside holy choruses with prostrated puppet arms—as all the while a gentleman smiles nonchalant and signals two-fingers for peace; freedom beyond the ruse of his shackled hands (Figure 27).

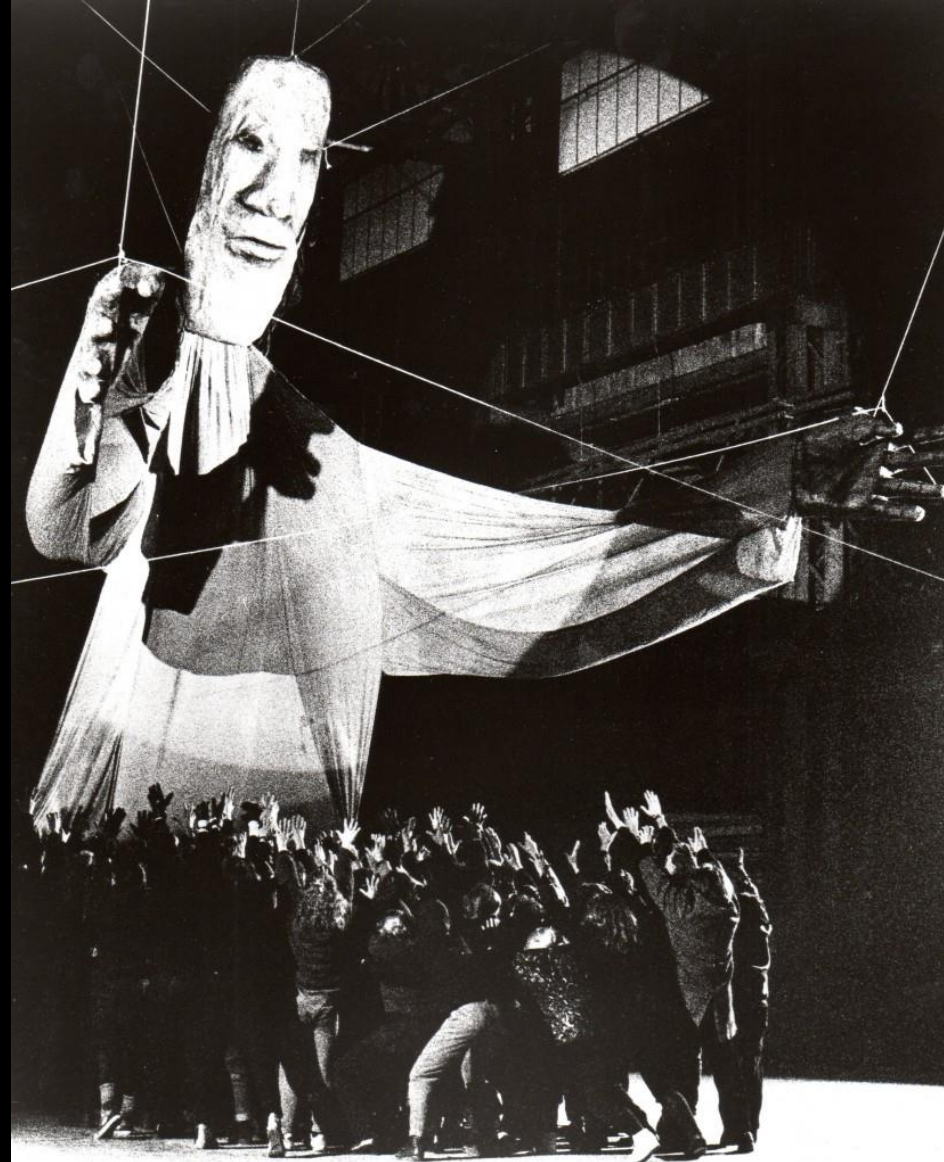
It is indeed no accident that Prometheus—original Titan trickster of fools—stole a spark of embers from the Gods and in turn molded mankind out of earthen clay. The world made from flames. Thank you all for sharing in the bread of my presentation.

A World on Fire: The Bread and Puppet Theatre
Redefining the Stage, Feeding the Community



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An early poster for Bread and Puppet Theater, 1963,
Bread and Puppet Theater Collection, University of Vermont Libraries Special Collections).



Anonymous, Rehearsal for Domestic Resurrection, c. 1965

the WHY CHEAP ART? manifesto

PEOPLE have been THINKING too long that
ART is a PRIVILEGE of the MUSEUMS & the
RICH . ART IS NOT BUSINESS !

It does not belong to banks & fancy investors
ART IS FOOD . You cant EAT it BUT it FEEDS
you . ART has to be CHEAP & available to
EVERYBODY . It needs to be EVERYWHERE
because it is the INSIDE of the
WORLD .

ART SOOTHES PAIN !

Art wakes up sleepers !

ART FIGHTS AGAINST WAR & STUPIDITY !

ART SINGS HALLELUJA !

ART IS FOR KITCHENS !

ART IS LIKE GOOD BREAD !

Art is like green trees !

Art is like white clouds in blue sky !

ART IS CHEAP !

HURRAH

Bread & Puppet Glover, Vermont, 1984



Peter Simon, *Cloaked and Masked Protestor* (Bread and Puppet Theatre), February 10, 1971



Peter Schumann and John Casson, *Christ, or Madonna on a Donkey* (Early poste c. 1965 for Bread and Puppet)



The Great Warrior from Bread and Puppet Theater's revival of its 1962 anti-war show "King Story" at Boston College. (Greg Cook)



An early poster for Bread and Puppet Theater, 1963,
(Bread and Puppet Theater Collection, University of Vermont Libraries Special Collections).

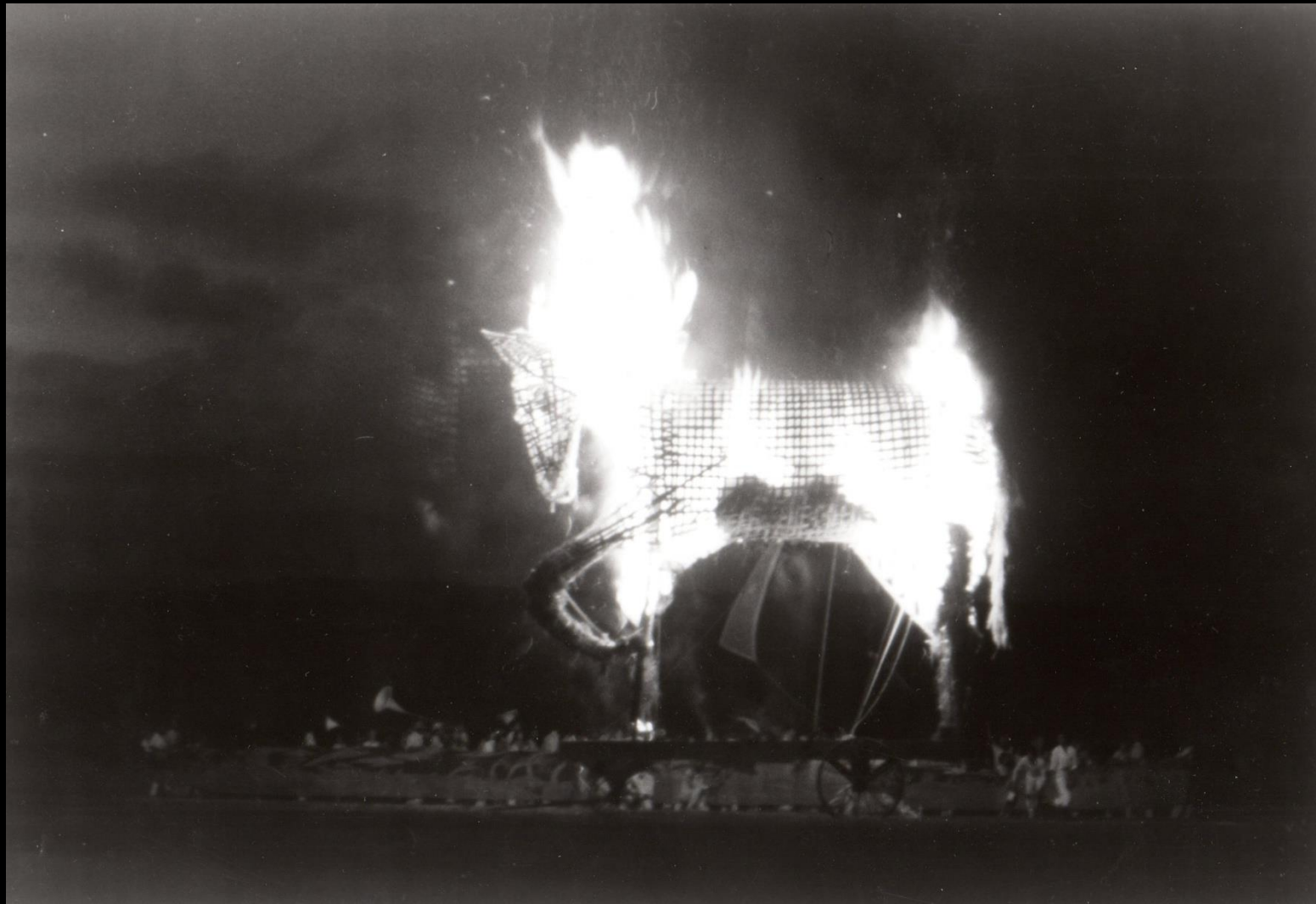


Fred McDarrah, *Bread and Puppet Theater Protest*, 1966, Getty Images



Anonymous, *Child Walking Past Members of the Bread and Puppet Theatre*, July 1, 1969





Paul Petroff, Bread and Puppet Theatre Performance of *Pageant*, Vermont, 1989



Rowlad Scheman, *Bread and Puppet Theater*
Performing near the Washington Monument, November 27, 1965

**March on Washington
to end the war in Vietnam**

April 17, 1965



students for a democratic society

SDS March on Washington to end the war in Vietnam, April 17, 1965. Social Change Collection (MS 457). UMass Amherst Libraries



Bread and Puppet Theater, "We are the women of Vietnam,"
Women Strike for Peace Rally, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, April 1, 1972.



Fire, Bread and Puppet Theater, Performed (2015 Reed College)



Fire, Bread and Puppet Theater, Performed (2015 Reed College)



Malcolm Browne, AP photo, Duc Self-Immolation Event, June 11, 1963



Malcolm Browne, AP photo, Duc Self-Immolation Event, June 11, 1963



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Peter Simon, *Cloaked and Masked Protestor* (Bread and Puppet Theatre), February 10, 1971

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**ROYAL COURT THEATRE
BREAD & PUPPET THEATER**



JUNE 24th - JULY 11th
EVENINGS 8:00
SAT. 5:30 & 8:30
BOX OFFICE 730 1741

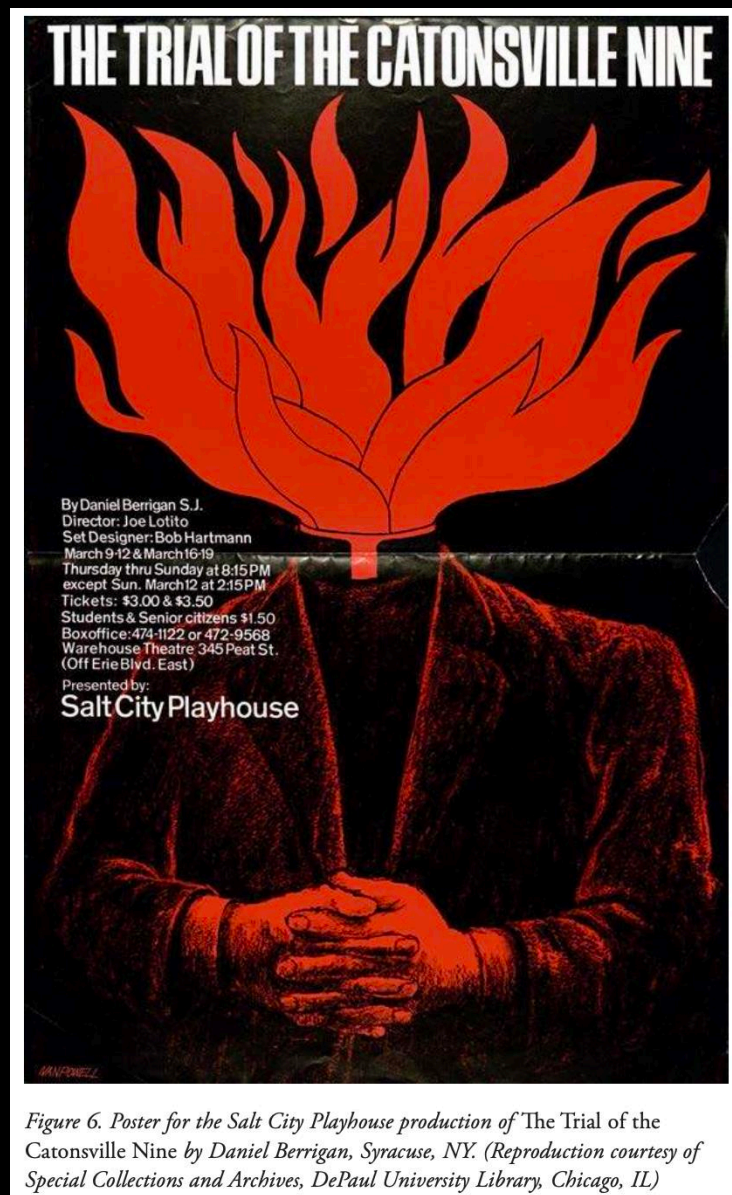


Figure 6. Poster for the Salt City Playhouse production of *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine* by Daniel Berrigan, Syracuse, NY. (Reproduction courtesy of Special Collections and Archives, DePaul University Library, Chicago, IL)



“America is Hard to Find,” Event at Cornell University, April 17-19, 1970



Bread & Puppet Theatre Disguising Daniel Berrigan at
“America is Hard to Find,” Event, Cornell University, April 17-19, 1970

“This Is Father Berrigan Speaking from the Underground”

Daniel Berrigan SJ and the Conception of a Radical Theatre

Benjamin Halligan



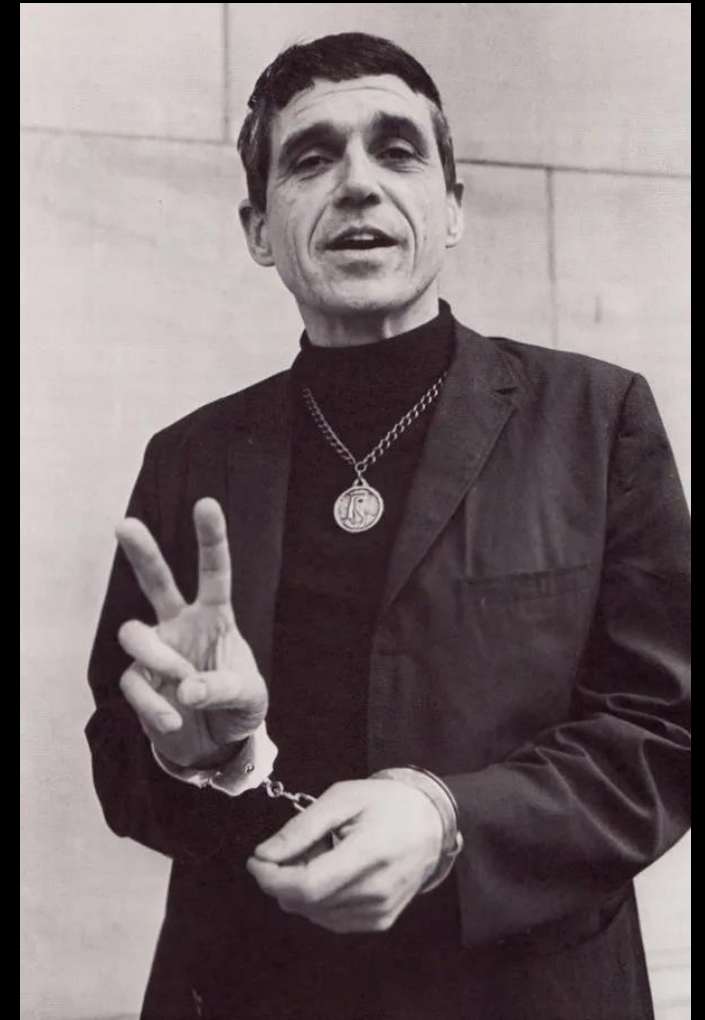
Figure 1. Daniel Berrigan with the cast of 'The Trial of the Catonsville Nine. Salt City Playhouse, Syncause, NY, 1972. Daniel Berrigan papers, box: 1a, folder 1. Special Collections and Archives, DePaul University Library. (Photo by Merton J. Gordon; reproduction courtesy of Special Collections and Archives, DePaul University Library, Chicago, IL)



Bread & Puppet Theatre Disguising Daniel Berrigan at
“America is Hard to Find,” Event, Cornell University, April 17-19, 1970



Bread & Puppet Theatre at "America is Hard to Find," Event, Cornell University, April 17-19, 1970



Daniel Berrigan in handcuffs

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