

Art and Executions: from Texas to Melbourne

I've never been a metaphor before, but that's what I felt like for two weeks when I left my native Texas to visit Melbourne. I came to Australia for a woman, of course—the only really appropriate reason to travel across the world—but I also took in some theatre while I was in town. I was very intrigued by the Malthouse Theatre, with its thematic, chaptered programming. I visited during Chapter 3: Ritual // Extinction, and I got to see two of the performances: Declan Greene's new play *I Am a Miracle*, and *The Last Supper*, by UK performing arts troupe Reckless Sleepers. They were both excellent productions, but to my surprise, the “extinctions” in both plays turned out to be executions—in Texas.

In *The Last Supper*, dinner guest (the audience) are read a litany of famous (and sometimes fictional) last words, punctuated by the very real and yet very anonymous last meals of thirteen Texas death row inmates, identified only by number and date of execution. The title, inspiration, and finale of *I Am a Miracle* comes from the last words of Texas death-row inmate Marvin Lee Wilson, who was executed in 2012 for murder, despite his IQ being below the minimum threshold for capital punishment.

We Texans famously think a lot about ourselves, but we (perhaps infamously) don't think much about what others think about us. This was for me a rare opportunity to get a sort of “insider's take” on being an outsider. And I must say I didn't like it.

As the only Texan in the audience at both plays (I assume), I felt like I was seeing something I wasn't supposed to, like when you walk up behind someone just as they're saying something bad about you that they'd never say to your face. I talked to both playwrights after the performances, and I told them I was from Texas—they were both startled. Did they think I was going to be angry? Were they embarrassed? More likely they were just surprised because it didn't fit the stereotype: a Texan at a play!

We kill a lot of people in Texas, and it's a problem. On average, about half of the executions in America are in Texas, despite us having less than 10% of the country's population. As a Texan who is adamantly, morally, and religiously opposed to the death penalty, I was very glad, if somewhat embarrassed on behalf of my state, to see that the rest of the world at least thinks our out-of-control executions are a problem. I go to a lot of plays in Texas, and I don't think I've ever seen a single one that had anything to do with the death penalty. It's not that it's not an issue here, it's just not a safe issue to talk about—you could lose whatever conservative funding you might have.

But then, I guess that's the case in Australia, too. Some things are hard to talk about, so we use metaphors. While I was in Australia, I learned about Her enduring legacy of racism and the systematic tragedy of Indigenous deaths in custody, and I learned about the humanitarian catastrophe of asylum seekers being shipped around on boats, and people being incarcerated indefinitely off shore in the name of “Border Security.” This sounded all too unfortunately like home. We too have our “illegals,” as immigrants from our poverty-stricken and war-torn neighbors to the South are often derisively called (as though a person could be illegal!); we too turn a blind eye to the grossly disproportionate number of dark-skinned people in our prisons (34.6% of our inmates are African American compared to only 12.4% of the population); in sum, we too dehumanize. Thinking about this, I realized: these plays weren't about Texas at all; they were about y'all (as we say). We Texans were just the metaphor.

And probably we've earned it, but still, it was hard seeing my home as a metaphor for someone else's humanitarian failures—even if the hardest part was how well the metaphor fit. But if our problems can help shed light on yours, then I'm happy for that. And I'm happy too if your art can help shed light on our own problems. But at the end of the day, let's realize that they're the same problems.

I'm not going to hold Texas up as a model for respecting human dignity—we're not—but I will hold it up, as these plays did, as a mirror and a metaphor for Australia's own problems. And who knows?—Maybe one of my playwright friends in Texas will write a play about Australia's Indigenous deaths in custody, or Her refugees being denied safe harbor, and this will shed new light on our moral failures at home. It's hard being the metaphor.

Christopher T. Haley lives in Dallas, Texas, where he writes and speaks regularly on topics in art, philosophy, religion, and culture, and serves as Director of Publications and Marketing for the Hildebrand Project.