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Published by **Boson Books**
3905 Meadow Field Lane
Raleigh, NC 27606
ISBN 1-886420-17-3

An imprint of **C&M Online Media Inc.**

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An Interview with Leon Katz

by

Donald Freed



Freed/Katz Interview

This interview by Donald Freed with Leon Katz introduces Leon Katz's *Midnight Plays*. They are four plays entitled: *Justine*, *Swellfoot's Tears*, *Dracula/Sabbat*, and *The Dybbuk*.. Leon Katz is resident Dramaturg at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles and Visiting Professor of Drama at UCLA. He is the author of several dozen original plays and adaptations produced in the US and abroad. Donald Freed is a playwright and novelist. Online editions of two of his book-length fictional works are *Executive Action* and *The Spymaster*.

**Donald Freed Interview
With Leon Katz**

Donald: These are four strange plays from four different worlds of story telling: A Victorian tale of vampires, a story of Jewish mysticism, a scatological retelling of the Oedipus myth, and a sexually graphic saga taken from the Marquis de Sade. Would you say they have, in any sense, a common denominator?

Leon: They have indeed. All of them have as their heroes cultural victims, and the focus in each play is on the theme of suffering and redemption. It emerges differently in each of the plays. In one, the victim achieves redemption, in the others not. But the theme in all of them is the victimization of cultural outcasts.

D: Let's take this common denominator of the victim's suffering. Were you making deliberate connections between that and the history of the twentieth century, with its victimizations and tortures and suffering? Or, first of all, are these plays, given their Grand Guignol environment, nineteenth or twentieth century, or does that matter?

L: They're twentieth century, all right, post-mass murder wars, post-holocaust, post-hydrogen bomb. But the plays are not directly concerned with public policy, public acts, political acts, but with the victimization of those who live counter to the ideologies and politics of their time. All four protagonists are sort of holy fools who suffer and get mangled by institutional processes and ideologies. After all, in this century, whether it's Communism, Fascism, or Democracy, the crime is the same. In each of the plays, there's a system that's operating. The systems are various and have no relation to one another except that they're systems. In the *Dybbuk*, for example, the system is Jewish orthodoxy, which is very distinctly an ideology and governs almost every aspect of behavior, of life. In *Justine*, the orthodoxy is sadistic, not merely male chauvinist, but sadism as an ideological principle, a system totally pervasive and in control. In *Swellfoot*, the system is the most savage of all—a concentration camp in which everyone is under the control of one voice, the Director's. In *Dracula*, the operative system is Christianity in its most virulent Victorian form. Although the *Dracula* figure in the play is, in anyone's normal terms, evil, in fact the Devil, nevertheless he is the outcast being victimized by what in his terms is an even more pervasive and threatening evil, Victorian-Christian values. I've reversed the values in the novel, and the four representatives of Christianity become in effect the villains, and *Dracula* becomes, though I suppose it's hard to imagine, the Christ-figure.

D: When you wrote the plays, did you have in mind to structure the four of them so uniformly?

L: Actually, no. You can call this a moment of discovery. It never crossed my mind before that they were so closely connected, but they are.

D: Our editors are waiting in the closet.

L: Each play started from a different base, and didn't begin thematically. There was always some practical reason. For example, a marvelous Israeli director, Rina Yerushalmi, wanted to do a new version of the *Dybbuk*. She wanted to get back to her "roots." I have trouble with that notion. Ansky, who wrote the original play, also wanted to get back to his roots. Well, despite the fact that the original is considered a classic, I really don't like it. It's nineteenth-century melodrama pretending not to be, extremely sentimental and very

self-serving. Ansky was a product of the Jewish Enlightenment, and was about as close to the life of the East European *shtetl* as a Protestant anthropologist studying the life of the natives in the New Hebrides. I wasn't interested in that back-to-the-roots perspective at all. What interested me was the mystical basis of the *Dybbuk* story, which involves two principal characters, Azrael, the rabidly-orthodox rabbi, and the young student Channan, who transgresses God's law to become a Dybbuk—for me, another devil-martyr. But in each play, as it turns out, there's a victim-hero with an absolute commitment, and each one lives up to it unrelentingly. Whether we think of it as good or evil, it has absolute purity of intent.

D: Do you put a name on this commitment, or is it a sheer energy?

L: Well, it varies from victim to victim.

D: Is their substance relevant?

L: Extremely relevant. In each of them, the commitment is the opposite of the pervasive ideology. Swellfoot, or Oedipus, is totally committed to his belief in the oracle of Apollo, the promise of a life of holy suffering which will end in glorious redemption. He is in the plague pit, a.k.a. concentration camp. The Director, who is in fact Oedipus now old, is commanding a performance showing the time long ago when he wallowed in his suffering. The plague-victim portraying the young Oedipus, having adopted his persona, holds to the ideal of Apollo's promise in the face of the Director, who in his loathing of his former delusions of salvation, and out of his embittered nihilism, has made torture and mindless inhumanity the formal rule of the camp. In each of the plays, absolute confronts its opposite. Swellfoot is the only one in his world of nihilism who retains faith; none of the others, neither plague-victims, Guards, nor Director, has any whatsoever.

D: Is rebellion a function of these scapegoats?

L: It's automatic. Since they're totally victimized, and totally committed to the reason for their victimization, they're implicitly rebels, to my mind the most authentic kind. It's the only posture I can imagine that has any heroic dimension in the twentieth century, the only one. The scapegoat is in automatic rebellion, not with the intention of rebelling, but only with the intention of being uncompromisingly himself.

D: Let's make a point here. The reason I ask whether it's relevant—are you saying evil and good are irrelevant in the moral sense, or only aesthetically? You could certainly argue over your characters whether their intention is moral, but is that relevant to what you're getting at?

L: It's relevant to audiences, but I have to admit, not to me. They're of a moral kind people don't normally think of as victims, but as criminals or fools. Readers or viewers have reason to be outraged by these "victims."

D: And since the plays are about these victims, they would have reason to be outraged or repelled by the plays.

L: Yes, they're horrifying and sort of repellent. That's why they're midnight plays, after most good people are asleep. They function best after midnight. What I have in mind I guess has to do with the nature of the heroism of these victims. No matter what their intent, no matter how wrong they may be in a practical or moral or social sense, the force with which they commit themselves to their life-ideal is what redeems them as heroes. There's something absurd, ludicrous, about each one. That Justine, for example, does not have the

sense to join the pack is ridiculous. In every instance, she's victimized because of the fact that she will not give up her belief in the absolute justice of God. She is in de Sade's world in which the commitment to God is a joke. For de Sade, Nature is the ruling principle, and that principle is utterly indifferent to the fate of each man, to morality, and it operates simply on the basis of its own willfulness, completely hedonistic, governed by nothing but gross satisfaction.

If Justine were to join that willfulness, as she has the opportunity to do over and over again, she would do just fine. Her virtue outrages the men who victimize her, and eventually she is destroyed by Nature, which is enraged in principle at her devotion to Christian virtue. Even Justine knows after she is rescued from torment that rescue is not the end of her story, and rather than being in raptures over her escape, she falls into despair awaiting the inevitable. De Sade says at the end of the play to the Countess who is Justine's rescuer and the only woman de Sade himself ever respected for her virtue: Regard the monstrosity of Justine's virtue; understand well how monstrous such virtue is. It flies in the face of everything that is true of and operative in the world. He makes a joke of Justine's principles—and significantly, audiences join in the joke whenever the performance reaches the moment in which Justine determines, after many lessons which should have taught her more common sense, to rescue the tormentor who has sworn, if rescued by her, to torment her to her death. Audiences consistently laugh at the impractical godliness of Justine, because fundamentally their convictions about the practical world are the same as de Sade's.

D: They cannot follow her.

L: Nor can they follow along the path of any of the others. Even within the plays themselves, the strongest supporters of the victim-heroes turn from them at the critical moment. Even Channan's rabbi-mentor, who has taught him the very strategy with which Channan is to embark on his sacrilegious journey, longs to abandon him. He is terrified at the thought that carrying through the cabalistic strategy Channan has in mind will destroy the entire universe. But Channan in effect says: And if it does? Swellfoot also holds to his belief unrelentingly, which is simply to stay alive, to pass through all this and stay alive, simply survive, holding out for the promised redemption. *Swellfoot's Tears* is the play closest to the twentieth century.

D: Oedipus at Auschwitz.

L: Oedipus at Auschwitz, precisely.

D: This extremity of passion you're describing in these victims, does that make you suppose that Nietzsche's statement is merely ironic, that anything absolute tends toward the pathological? One always thought of that as cautionary but perhaps it shouldn't be thought of in that way. Or perhaps Nietzsche is not exempting anything, including his own passion.

L: I would say the same thing, that anything absolute is pathological. And commendable.

D: Then in your mind, doesn't it follow that the only alternative is banality, a life of following orders?

L: No, one is good, the other is great.

D: Adjustment, reason, the middle way is good, but still, so much for Aristotle.

L: So much for him. The lunatics are the great ones, the moral lunatics.

D: You used a phrase before: these characters are unarguably themselves. So was Charles Manson. How does it make you feel when you realize you can't follow in the footsteps of your own protagonists and that you're forced to join the rest of the banal who in revenge, in resentment, some I suppose in sadness, simply watch the protagonists disappear into the horizon? Many people feel bitter resentment and fury, don't they? And would like to kill those protagonists? What are the feelings that are the alternatives, do you think? When you watch a Swellfoot or a Justine or a Dracula go beyond the point where you can follow, do you have to make a choice at that point whether to hate them or love them? What personal feelings do you have?

L: I go with them all the way. The very thing that I'm celebrating is that quality that is either awesome or reprehensible.

D: Beyond good and evil, in effect.

L: Beyond good and evil, yes. In Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*, Timon is a character who goes right through. He reaches the point of utter hatred of mankind. He hates even his own humanity. I follow that with a tremendous sense of awe—not with moral admiration but with human admiration. That's the one play of Shakespeare's that people find it hardest to stomach. Timon has the same effect as Justine. He becomes ludicrous to viewers. How much simpler it would be for him to take the option of Alcibiades, joining up at the end of the play, satisfied, and satisfying all the senators of Athens. Timon holds out even against the cynic Apimantus who does a devastating critique on the origins of Timon's nihilism. He points out that he who never really suffered in his life, at the first endurance of suffering takes on the posture, says Apimantus, the costume of the total cynic. I have earned it, you have not, he tells him. The critique makes no difference to Timon. Even so shrewd and accurate an analysis of Timon's slender claims to misanthrope doesn't pull him back from it.

D: He pushes through.

L: That's right. Though it's been pointed out to Timon that what he's doing is psychologically absurd, he feels no impulse to relent. He still goes all the way.

D: You can learn the truth through suffering, or you can learn it in a lightning flash, I take it.

L: Whether it's the truth they've learned is a question, and whether they've learned it in the long or the short run is their business, not mine. Either way, they're uncontradictable, absolute; they're lunatics and saints. That's the quality I want to define. I believe that it's the one possible way of portraying the heroic in the twentieth century, because I really believe that all the others are as false as they can possibly be.

D: You mean that given the pervasive technocratic control of the state in the twentieth century, the only option open to—

L: You see, in the past, in most cultures, heroes embodied the prime social, cultural

and political values of their moment. Even the negative and positively morbid heroes of Jacobean tragedy had always to be called villains, and made to suffer providential punishment to signify that what they manifestly were intended to be all through the play was really only aberration. Even now scholars take satisfaction in demonstrating at those plays' ends that "order is restored" and we can all breathe a sigh of relief. What is true now is that anyone who embodies our predominant values is about as horrible a human being as you can possibly find. Underneath the commitments to loyalty, to patriotism, to honor, lies a deadly evil, and functions as that evil. We have a perfect example of the heroic figure who portrays every one of those values, mouths them, is them: Colonel North. Sitting underneath the icon of Colonel North is just about all the evil of our political times. Yet what is coming out of his mouth would make him a prime candidate for heroism in the French seventeenth century. Corneille would celebrate his boy-scout rhetoric. He spouts all the right values and does all the right things to exemplify them, and flying in the face of a couple of secondary values makes little difference because his ultimate objective is noble. It's that *noble* that's so dangerous in our time. Its devotion is to abstractions—to the intangible, the imperceptible, the non-existent: Flag and Country, Democracy, Race, that sort of thing, and is revered largely for its distance from tangible earthly delights. Devotion to such abstractions is the highest of nobilities and the most insidious of evils.

D: The Nazis claimed they were rebels and revolutionaries.

L: And they had a very lofty ideal, and the rhetoric of that ideal, that ideology, was of exactly the same false kind as the rhetoric of Christianity, of Democracy, of Marxism, of Jewish orthodoxy, they're all the same in the twentieth century. The most evil thing that is happening in Judaism, for example, emanates from the man who is the most committed Zionist on earth, the Lubovitcher Rabbi, and he trumpets every one of the prime values of orthodox Judaic tradition.

D: Then everything absolutely owing to pathology is written in capital letters when we're talking about these enormous ideologies against which these individual commitments which we may call fanatic, ludicrous, mad, oppose themselves. Pathological commitments are reserved then, for individuals, is that it?

L: Necessarily. Notice that if you universalize the values of Nietzsche's Superman, he becomes monstrous. Dracula writ large in the context of a whole culture is worse than the Marquis de Sade. But it's the individual who goes against the stream, not his ideology, that is heroic.

D: If it succeeds, then the idea is doomed to be co-opted.

L: For which reason both Ibsen and Nietzsche said: Save me from my disciples. The moment any of these principles is generalized beyond the individual himself, you get the evils of a broad social/political ideology.

D: But if the principle remains the same, why is it evil in the one and not in the other?

L: Because when it's generally subscribed to, the only function left to it is hunting out and killing its enemies, or inventing them.

D: This common denominator—it seems to me you do have a leap here—if you go back to Lucifer's fall and as far back as we can go in story-telling, there seems to have been a general recognition that the possibility (in your case you make it the necessity) of antithesis, of negation, has always been there.

L: Well, yes, always, the alpha creates the omega. When you reach a point of general social and cultural agreement, then automatically the opposite rears its head. One of the functions of drama, as a matter of fact, is, I think, to compensate for a culture's prime values by countering them. It does so almost automatically, since, to get very pretentious about it, drama has the capacity to reveal the truth. It poses alternate truths to the ostensible truth. When you add one to the other, you have the truth.

D: Now, isn't it also true that the very nature of everyday life is adjustment, compromise, from the most practical to the ideological. All human beings short of being a Ghandi or a Martin Luther King, or a person in real life who behaves like your fictional characters—isn't it also true that your midnight plays are suggesting to them some increment of courage or energy to make a decision more consciously than they otherwise would have? It would approach a miracle, wouldn't it? If for a member of the audience there was opened up so much as a tiny window or a question mark about what otherwise would seem to be no choice at all?

L: If the plays had such a consequence, I would deplore it. I'm not advising, I'm sneering. What I'm doing is telling audiences what they are not. They are not these protagonists. The only thing that one can do with figures like these is contemplate them. I'm not advising anyone to follow the path of scapegoats and become one. If anything, out of charity, I would urge them to resist the temptation.

D: So there's an element of cruelty in even introducing these figures to the body politic.

L: The cruelty, if there is any, is only to moral sensibility. As a matter of fact, when I was writing the plays, what I had in mind more than anything else was Artaud, and his notion of getting to the audience through the skin. To prove your case on those grounds is of course more difficult than by corroborating moral sensibility. But there's always a lie involved in that. I wanted to step away from that completely. For drama to float on top of that stream, saying the normal things that are normally said, and appealing to normal responses, means that we're not even touching on the reality. That's what I respect so much about Artaud. He was a lunatic himself, and we recognize in him that it's from the posture of lunacy that one can see the horror and the reality behind. I think one way to get at that reality is to portray these absolute tensions between the lunatic saint on the one hand and controlling ideologies on the other.

D: It appears to the viewer that for these lunatics, their portion of the violence, unequal as the struggle is, is a kind of suicide. About all they can do is throw themselves on the wheel. And so it's a sort of slow-motion suicide for them, which may be extremely poetic and evocative, but gets little accomplished. Now it's true that death or suicide is always a possibility for any act of rebellion, however modest, if it should lead to other small acts. But so extreme is the control of the state, so jealous of its power, that it doesn't take more than a few 'no's' till you reach confrontation. So that everyone knows instinctively that they don't have much margin. And that's why perhaps people are sensible. We complain that they won't even lift a finger, but they know that to lift a finger is the beginning of a critical gesture.

L: If that impulse to lift a finger exists at all. You remember what Ibsen said about the compact majority: they've all joined. It's hardly just the state that is the enemy. The enemy is the mind-set of the whole culture.

D: Then your scapegoat-heroes and the plays they're in invite pretty broad negative reaction.

L: They invite and hope for censorship. *Justine*, in fact, was once banned in Pittsburgh. It was a modest ban, but a pleasure nonetheless. Finally, I thought, maybe somebody got it.

D: Could you tell us a little bit about the atmospherics? Because in America, they're always funny instead of tragic.

L: Yes, tragically, it was only funny. Theater Express, which produced the play, was touring it around Pittsburgh and environs for evening performances, and one of the venues was a high school. The principal got wind of the substance of the play, and he forbade it to be done in his school even though it was being done when no classes were in session. But of course the newspapers picked it up, and it did wonders for the box office. What he was worried about was the sexual explicitness of the performance. Since censorship in this country almost automatically means censorship of sexual explicitness, you can't possibly get people to run to a theater more quickly than when they expect to see censorable sexuality on stage. It's not as though you're being censored for the right reasons, though. You can't get yourself censored for the right reasons; it's very hard. It's very hard to get arrested, because everything floats on this foam rubber pad and it simply doesn't make noise. You're automatically co-opted by the big silence.

D: But the reason for that silence is finally political, because political realities are the final revetment to stop a challenging idea. So I'd like to bring you back to where we started. I suppose it's no accident that the organized violence of the twentieth century is in inverse ratio to the reduced power of the symbolic arts. Never has the ratio been so unequal. As one of the people who give full weight to what you're up against, does this provoke a combination of depression and rebellion, or how does it fall out for you?

L: When I'm writing plays like these, I allow myself the illusion of supposing that there can be no opposition to them. Everybody is and will be in perfect accord with what I'm doing and showing and saying, which makes it possible to—

D: Overcome self-censorship in the first place.

L: Exactly the point. That's where the silence is really operative. It's the self-censorship that really subverts the writing. I think the only way to break through it is to pretend with perfect comfort and ease that nobody could possibly object to this kind of discourse. You pretend perfect freedom and solidarity of opinion with all possible readers.

D: What you're calling pretense is a sort of cunning. On the one hand, you're completely innocent and naive, and at absolute solidarity with what the world's opinions will be in the next five minutes. On the other hand, you do have a passport, and haven't actually sent your resignation to the institution where you might be teaching. It's a willed naivete, and possibly, just possibly, in good faith. The cunning stems from the knowledge of the fear. In overcoming your own you've made the assumption that you'll overcome all the others. But at the same time you know that the fear is so great and so diffused that the time lag could be enormous and that while you've written it for everybody, the truth is that it's only an anybody who might see it.

L: Yes, you play this game at considerable risk, because one thing is certain. These plays can never be popular. If they became so, I'd have to rewrite them or ban them.

D: You've been occupied for a long time working on Gertrude Stein. Has there been any strength, any reinforcement gathered for your own writing from her?

L: And how. In her own peculiar way, reactionary Republican though she was, she was doing in language what I would long to do in theater in dealing with moral and aesthetic questions. Imagine someone who breaks through the barrier of conventional communicative language and continues on that course despite the fact that she could not get published for years except for spasmodic and limited publication. Imagine a lifetime of that kind of pursuit before redemption came. What's interesting is that when she finally did become successful with the publication of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, it caused her about five or six years of disorientation, because as she said, now that I'm a public rather than a private voice, and I hear that voice coming at me from outside, from that other Gertrude Stein persona, which one is writing? And then her work devolved on the question of identity. When she was in Hollywood, and one of the stars asked her how she became so famous a personality when so few people had ever read her books, she said, the secret of that is not to become successful until very late in life. She had the courage of remaining herself—not just the general idea of "being yourself," but step by step opening doors that nobody had even supposed were there, step by step breaking through one barrier of language after another, until she was doing something in which she was absolutely alone. And that is the kind of lunacy and sanctity that I most respect. She was both, a lunatic and a saint—hardly personally, but aesthetically. It doesn't have to be directly on the social or moral or political issue. It has to do with fundamental courage and unremitting commitment.

D: Then even the aesthetic becomes a moral question, and therefore a political—

L: Agreed. We'll leave it at that.

END OF INTERVIEW

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