

# White Rabbit, Red Rabbit: The Bunniality of Evil



Morality is personal, not political; this is, to a large extent, the theme of *White Rabbit, Red Rabbit*, a theatrical experiment written by Nassim Soleimanpour. Because the playwright is an Iranian who is not allowed to travel outside of his country, he is unable to participate in performances and therefore has written his play to require no direction and no rehearsal. Each performance is unique, a cold read by a new actor, and no actor is allowed to perform the play more than once.

Epic Theatre presented *White Rabbit, Red Rabbit* as a one-off performance at the Artist's Exchange in Cranston, RI, on Saturday, May 17. This is a small space, usually seating 35, but was expanded with additional chairs to hold 43 - literally a standing-room-only crowd but for those additional chairs. Performer Joanne Fayan was handed a sealed envelope by Kevin Broccoli, artistic director at Epic, which she then opened to see the script for the first time.

The play is by no means a dry lecture on either morality or history, and instead was entertaining, fast-paced in its single act, and in places quite humorous. Broccoli in an interview jokingly described the play and its unique circumstances as "critic proof" because, no matter how well or badly the actor does, they can never do it again, but Fayan did a great job of animating a cold-read very effectively. Broccoli said that he has long had an interest in "event theater" where something can only be seen once. This is a concept that arises in many cultures and contexts, such as the Japanese tea ceremony and its motto of "ichi-go, ichi-e" ("one time, one meeting"), embodying the core Buddhist idea of transience. Epic and Fayan are to be congratulated for their courage in putting on an experimental play that came out of a sealed envelope in front of a live audience, and the audience deserves congratulations as well for being a part of the experiment.

There is a "gentlemen's agreement" that reviewers not discuss that content of the play in such a way as to spoil it for new audiences, and I will try to respect that. Nevertheless, it is a fascinating and disturbing play, and that became especially apparent in an impromptu talk-back session that the audience began among themselves in the lobby while exiting the theater. At several critical points, audience members are directed by the performer speaking for the playwright to do or say things, and the audience chooses whether or not to comply. Of course, this decision is made in the context of the conventions of theater, with all of the expectations of artifice and peer pressure that entails. As Charles Nonon, the final director of the legendary Grand Guignol horror theater, explained at its closing in a 1962 interview with *Time* magazine, "We could never equal Buchenwald. Before the war, everyone felt that what was happening onstage was impossible. Now we know that these things, and worse, are possible in reality."

But personal morality is the underpinning of political morality, which is the basis for the now-famous Milgram experiment in psychology: three persons, consisting of an “experimenter,” a “teacher,” and a “learner,” were given the supposed task of the learner trying to remember arbitrary word pairs recited by the teacher, with the experimenter directing the teacher to administer electric shocks of increasingly painful severity to the learner for each error. In truth, the so-called learner was a confederate of the experimenter and was play-acting the experience of being electrically shocked, and the real purpose of the experiment was to see how far the teacher would go in following orders. Milgram conceived of the experiment in 1961 in response to the trial of Adolf Eichmann, who had served as the day-to-day operations manager of the Nazi Holocaust; because Eichmann was a desk-jockey bureaucrat and relatively low-ranking officer, a lieutenant-colonel, his defense was that he was just following orders. The schism between “intentionalist” and “functionalist” historical views of the Nazi Holocaust has pitted leading scholars diametrically against each other, notably Christopher Browning in *Ordinary Men* and Daniel Goldhagen in *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, arguing from the same evidence.

In the lobby talk-back session, I briefly interviewed the only audience member who admitted not complying with one of the more important instructions, who gave her name as Courtney Burnside. She said that it just didn’t “seem right” to her, so she decided to disobey. I can’t explain the actual instruction without introducing a spoiler, but I can say that it was seemingly so minor that no one else noticed that she disobeyed, and that she was not asked to do anything that would have required leaving her seat or bringing attention to herself. I asked if she had ever experienced real-life situations where she had to break a rule or take a risk to do “the right thing,” and after thinking about it she cited a few examples, the most memorable of which to me was that she was working in a convenience store and overheard a customer making calls to his family before his own imminent suicide, so she locked him into the store against his will and called police.

I was reminded of my elementary school music teacher who fought with the anti-Nazi resistance in the war; after immigrating to the United States, she taught us as children the anthem of the resistance, based on an old German/Swiss folk song: “Die Gedanken sind frei” (“My thoughts are free”).

*Epic Theatre web page for White Rabbit, Red Rabbit:*  
<http://artists-exchange.org/whiterabbitredrabbit.html>

*Wikipedia articles on the “ichi-go ichi-e” phrase, the Milgram experiment, Adolf Eichmann, Christopher Browning, Daniel Goldhagen, and the “Die Gedanken sind frei” song:*

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ichi-go\\_ichi-e](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ichi-go_ichi-e)  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Milgram\\_experiment](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Milgram_experiment)  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adolf\\_Eichmann](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adolf_Eichmann)  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christopher\\_Browning#Ordinary\\_Men](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christopher_Browning#Ordinary_Men)  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daniel\\_Goldhagen#Hitler.27s\\_Willing\\_Executioners](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daniel_Goldhagen#Hitler.27s_Willing_Executioners)  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Die\\_Gedanken\\_sind\\_frei](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Die_Gedanken_sind_frei)