

A Play by a Cult Survivor

A play about a cult survivor, by a cult survivor, that identifies cult mechanisms and their growth in society today (as in authoritarian mass movements).

Hi, I'm Kevan Kenneth Bowkett, a playwright from Winnipeg. My play is a semiautobiographical story of a cult member, with interlaced sketches illustrating cult mechanisms that appear in everyday society, and how they can spread to take over large parts of societies. Antidotes to cult thinking make an appearance as well. Altogether, the play is a micro-education about cults, coercive thinking, and conditioning in society, and what we can do to protect ourselves from them.

The work, called *Seekers of Atlantis*, has gone through several drafts and through two development workshops, all funded by the Canada Council. The workshops have enabled us to develop the script and also to work out a lot of the sketches or vignettes (and songs!) that illustrate the cult mechanisms (mechanisms such as leader-worship; mentally-engineered "conversion"; suppression of dissent; demonizing of outsiders, etc.)

The narrative part of the work tells the story of Gregory, a young man leaving high school with the world at his feet, whose life falls apart, impelling him to join a cult called the Seekers of Atlantis—and shows his experiences while within it, as well as his cataclysmic exit. Interwoven with the story are the sketches presenting the major cult mechanisms—which, of course, are also seen in action in the story itself.

"I *hate* love! How couldn't I, after that?"

Some background.

There is a great deal of material available by ex-cult members who are women, but we don't as often hear the male perspective, and the male protagonist who is a cult survivor helps make this play an unusual take on the subject. More generally, there's a good deal about cults in popular media (eg. in documentaries, and on Youtube, sometimes sensationalized), but the theme has seldom been treated theatrically.

Sketches presenting cult mechanisms.

Interwoven with the drama are sketches or vignettes each illustrating one of the main cult mechanisms—like slavish dependence on the group, extreme emotional and physical stress including sleep-deprivation, conditioning through repetition, sloganeering, and abandoning one's family and previous life. Some of these "mechanisms" are personified; others are illustrated by pithy interactions between cartoon-ish characters (that appear in these

sketches but not in the main drama). Unlike the dramatic portion of the play, the feel of the “mechanisms” portion is carnivalesque and surrealistic.

The current idea is that the actors playing the Cult Mechanisms will from time to time leave items of furniture or poles standing on stage, far enough apart to allow the drama to proceed around them. These objects themselves represent the different coercive/cult mechanisms present in everyday society—but in normal everyday society, they are present in only some times and places. However, as today with populist authoritarian movements in many parts of the world, these mechanisms can mushroom and spread over vast areas of society. We’ll illustrate this by the actors rushing out at one point and moving the objects on stage to form a pen or cage, in which some of the actors will be imprisoned.

Actors also personify some of the Antidotes to Cult Thinking, such as Empathy, Critical Thinking, and a Sense of Humour. At certain points there’s conflict between the Cult Mechanisms and the Antidotes.

Songs.

So far we have written three songs expressing different aspects of cults and the cult experience. I intend there to be at least five songs—more, depending on what direction the next phase of the project takes.

“Don’t ask me what my cult was called
That’s just the name by which it hides.
Who cares how the kool-aid tastes
When you’re drinking cyanide?”

More of the story.

The story also portrays the love between Gregory and his friend Svetlana, the cult’s impact on their relationship—and her impact on the cult: as well as her life decisions independently of Gregory.

“I so, I so wanted you to give more to the world than this. To *be* more than this.”

Which producers and audiences want this play?

This project is suitable for companies or theatres that want to make incisive, high-impact commentary on social and political issues, as well as tell a good story about characters we can empathize with.

If you're concerned with the rise of cult-like authoritarian movements in the world and our intensely polarized political arenas in which dissent from favoured views is not tolerated, you will be keenly interested in this play. So will your audiences.

Audiences want to know what they can do toward stemming the tide of authoritarianism and coercive mechanisms that we see in the world today. This play helps with thinking, and acting, in relation to these issues.

At the same time the play is ultimately a comedy—it has a positive ending—and the numerous sketches illustrating cult processes are often funny—and this makes the play easier to take in for audiences who have been stressed for more than two years by the covid pandemic and are seeking something upbeat.

“We're *all* the seekers of Atlantis. And maybe—and sooner rather than later—the finders?”

The playwright.

I'm a 54-year-old Winnipegger, Caucasian, middle-class, with a decent education. I'm also a cult survivor—I was in a cult in the earlier part of my adult life, and still in a sense have not made up for the time and opportunities I lost then. Since my time in the cult, for the last quarter-century, I've also lived with debilitating depression and anxiety, as well as Crohn's Disease.

In addition to cult matters, my interests include ecology and new technologies. I approach new technologies particularly from the angle of looking at their effects, both positive and negative, before they're commercialized and spread widely. Contrary to popular belief, technologies are not value-neutral, good or bad according to the intentions of the user, but have inherent and identifiable social, ecological, and political effects. I've worked with an international NGO that addresses these concerns, and drafted an International Convention on the Evaluation of New Technologies which attracted interest from governments, global NGOs, and the UN.

I've written a play and some sketches which present this technology theme, and plan to write another in the near future.

There is commonly a political dimension in my work, as in both *Seekers of Atlantis* and the technology play.

My main dramatic influence continues to be Shakespeare and other Elizabethans. Also some Tom Stoppard, and the ancient Greeks. One of my Shakespeare-esque plays, *Time's Fancy*, was a semi-finalist in the American Shakespeare Center's competition in 2020/21.

“I may hate love, but what Svetlana and I have--it's deeper than love.”

The ask:

What's required next for *Seekers of Atlantis* is a workshop process in which Sixth Planet Productions (me) collaborates with an established theatre or theatrical company to bring the work to final producible form, followed by a staged presentation of the workshopped play.

Five actors are required in the present version, which may be cut down to four. I envision the set as minimal, the main set pieces being items of furniture or posts that the Cult Mechanism "characters" progressively bring on the stage and leave cluttered around. Budgets would need to be proportional.