

# Free Speech **Z**one

By

*John Sullivan*

**WHY I LIKE IT:** *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes... John Sullivan hits the dystopian nail on the head with such accuracy in his play, Free Speech Zone, we may wonder if he's coming back from the future to warn us about it. What's especially disturbing is that this future may not be so far off. Structured as a performance piece rather than a traditional theatrical narrative, the play has a cinematic vibe, and yet it's still a play in that there is a climactic arc for the characters involved as well as for the audience that bears witness – and even interacts with the event. In the Free Speech Zone, the members of a particularly rigid fascistic society come to a designated – heavily guarded – zone where they deposit their secrets into the earth. They are baclava-clad and robotic “volunteers,” who through intimidation, force, and conditioning are required to participate in this highly structured ritualist purge just as they are required to act as their own jailors. Although Sullivan doesn't state that the stage description might accompany the action as narration, the prose is compelling and in places comes off the page as such:*

*(...Above the entrance gate hangs a sign: **Say Your Truth Here.** The work whistle blows three times in short blasts. Soon it will be time for citizens to quit, go back to their cells, get their standardized grub, eat, lockdown and collapse. But first the day's volunteers must freely say their truth.)*

*As the Free Speech Zone unfolds, the nameless citizens find they may not be able to subjugate themselves to a life of imprisonment – or bury their truths any longer. What if one person were to step out of line and challenge the system? Would it mean imminent destruction or perhaps the hope of a new world order? Regardless of the final outcome (and to avoid spoilers – not that spoilers are possible in the spirit of experimental theatre), there are some of the truths that cannot be contained, not by oppression nor by time...*

## Free Speech Zone

**Place:** A city where all respectable adults are trusted to be their own jailors. Each morning they let themselves out of their cells; each evening they self-lockdown with no apparent problem or misgivings. The free speech zone is a special sector in a sketchy post-industrial district of the city.

The site is rectangular, circumscribed by an 8 ft. tall cyclone fence rimmed with concertina wire with one way in and out – through a heavy gate, also 8 ft. tall. Inside there are guards at each corner. Two others coordinate volunteers in process. Citizens who forget to volunteer or deliberately forgo the zone have recurring reminders piped into their cells. The frequency and volume of these reminders depends on how long it's been since they last voluntarily used the zone.

**Note:** No children live in this city; they are removed at birth and raised in a separate World of and for The Kiddos. They're conditioned to work, lock their cells, and generally honor the process. Reinforcements for good behavior are doled out on an intermittent schedule. Those who fail to respond to this conditioning never return never return to the city.

**Time:** This is blurry, but it seems to be some time like right now shading into some time in the near-enough future. The zone is used each afternoon just before the swing shift end-to-workday whistle blows.

**Characters:**

**12 nameless citizen / “volunteers”** who come to the zone to say their truth.

**4 interior guards** with tasers, one at each corner of the zone to maintain compliance.

**1 gate** and **1 spade-keeper** to smoothly move the process inside the compound.

**(At Rise:)**

(The Free Speech compound in late afternoon. Inside the enclosure, the interior guards are at their posts in each of the four corners. One gate-keeper is poised at the gate, the other, designated the spade-keeper, near a central pit holds a short-handled spade. That central pit is a very shallow landfill designed to receive, absorb and muffle each volunteer's free speech act. Above the entrance gate hangs a sign: *Say Your Truth Here*. The work whistle blows three times in short blasts. Soon it will be time for citizens to quit, go back to their cells, get their standardized grub, eat, lockdown and collapse. But first the day's volunteers must freely say their truth.)

(In response to the signal, volunteers begin to move toward the free speech compound. They come from backstage; they come through the side exits; they rise from the audience and come. Twelve altogether, they converge slowly, deliberately, more or less robotically on the compound's entrance. As they arrive, the gate-keeper hands each a balaclava which they slip over their heads. As soon as the balaclava is on and adjusted, the gate-keeper gives each a push and they shuffle around the pit. The first ones move toward the spade-keeper, going full circle around the pit. When all twelve are in place, they turn together and face the inside of the pit. The spade-keeper tosses the short-handled spade to the first one in line and commands: *“dig your truth-hole, now.”* The truth-sayer kneels down and digs with the spade. When the truth-sayer's tiny hole is dug, the spade-keeper commands: *“say your truth, now.”* The truth-sayer presses her / his lips into the dirt and *whispers* their secret truths, the questions that gnaw at their very core into the pit. These truths often take the form of an unanswerable question? If this truth is too loud, the spade-keeper pushes the truth-sayer's butt with his foot and commands: *“say your truth, now, say it better.”* When truth is said at the proper (subdued) volume, the spade-keeper commands the truth-sayer to: *“bury your truth, now.”* And so each truth-sayer buries their truth in the shallow pit,

rises up and tosses the spade to the next truth-sayer, then takes their place at the back of the circular line. This process proceeds robotically in lock-step.)

(But at some point, there's a serious glitch. One of the truth-sayers – maybe one that's already buried their truth and moved on, or maybe one that hasn't yet, but has been to the Zone before and remembers this process, rips off their balaclava, breaks ranks, jumps down into the shallow pit and begins to root around and dig with their fingers. Then another follows suit. Now the guards light up their tasers and move to force the truth-sayers back into compliance with the process. But the other truth-sayers grab them and the odds are bad for the guards: the corner-guards are overwhelmed, subdued - "fully neutralized" in guard-speak. The truth-sayers bend and smash each corner-guard's taser and throw the broken weapons over the fence. The gate-keeper and the spade-keeper flee the compound – no truth-sayer attempts to stop or hold them. Truth-sayers escort the four corner-guards to the gate and give each a push-out. The corner-guards also flee.)

(The others join the two digging truth-sayers, now. They've all ripped off their balaclavas and they're frantically digging, digging, digging with their hands. Now we hear snatches of prayer, plea, observation, imprecation, denunciation, incantations, ancient-recent-future truths rising up from the pit, first as whispers, then repeated – over and over - with more and more volume and resonance. Some pieces of this buried truth-questioning might sound like this, though not necessarily in any order like this:)

*Where are my children? What, where is this place? Where is my husband-wife-partner-lover? I hurt? I hurt, I'm so tired! Why do I hurt, so much, why do I? Do I, did I ever have children My brain hurts, why does my brain hurt so much? Am I dead, yet? I'm lonely, it's so lonely in here! My body's stiff, sore, rigid, so brittle!! If this goes on ... If this goes on I'll ... I'll ... I'll break and shatter! Please, someone talk to me! Me and you / you and me / where are we, now? Who did this to me / who did this to you? Who are you? Were we ever a WE? Where are my children? I'm scared, all the time! A ghost told me to keep my promise, or it would be bad. What does that mean? I can't feel anything, anymore, anywhere My heart ... my heart is so a brittle Who replaced my memory with this life? Where are my hands, my feet, is this really MY face? I can't feel my hands, my feet, my body! Did I love you, once, did I ever know how to do that? My breath is caught in my chest! Who was I, who am I now? Why, why, why, why, why? Who put me here, who, who are you? Where are my children? Did I ever have any children? Where are my children?*

(There are many other truths in that pit. Most of these truths leak out of their holes as questions. And maybe audience members add their own truth to the sound-scape. Maybe audience members rise up, too, and walk toward the Free Speech Zone. saying their truth as they (not so robotically) walk. The waves of spoken truth grow and swell, as does the number of truth-sayers.)

(The last work whistle has yet to blow. Waves of buried truth & uncomfortable / unanswerable questions radiate from the Zone and spawn chimeras, anomalies, inflection points, new event horizons, new holes in hereditary over-stories. Everywhere throughout the city, citizens leave their work stations before the work whistle blows and wind their way toward the Free Speech Zone, saying their own truth as they come. Something once locked is broken, now: all that truth, all that need to know, once buried, spirals through the air and finds its voice, its key, its rhythm ... holds aloft its signature wound like a torch.

## DONE

**THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:** The inspiration for *Free Speech Zone* came from direct in-the-street encounters with some of these dubious structures of the same name created by national political parties in concert with municipal police, the FBI and Homeland Security to sequester, isolate and dampen inconvenient progressive voices that interfere with mainstream messaging – sometimes referred to as “soft propaganda” – at political events like national nominating conventions, self-congratulatory rallies, and red carpet donor meetings. This description of the scene by a visitor to a (2004) version of such a zone at the Boston Democratic Convention is lifted from John Whitehead’s article in the Colorado Independent, *A Free Speech Graveyard at the Democratic National Convention*.

*“[Free speech zones] are not only a blatant offense to free speech, but also highly dangerous and unsafe. I would suggest protesting anywhere in Boston but inside of it. No amount of hyperbole can accurately describe how disastrous the interior actually is. It’s like a scene from some post-apocalyptic movie — a futuristic, industrial detention area from a Mad Max film. You are surrounded on all sides by concrete blocks and steel fencing, with razor wire lining the perimeter. Then, there is a giant black net over the entire space.”*

Now that’s a full capture of one grotesquely deranged image; I wish I’d written it myself. Sounds like an inviting space to speak freely, no? And this quote doesn’t even mention the partially concealed cameras that drew a bead on each protester’s face for easy identification and possible further surveillance. Whitehead’s complete article on speech zones and their implications for democracy may still be accessed at:

<https://www.coloradoindependent.com/2008/07/22/a-free-speech-graveyard-at-the-democratic-national-convention/>.

While I steered my *Free Speech Zone* in a more existential inward direction, the core of the piece is contained in this image, as well as my own remembrance of the set and production concept of Alan Browne’s 1987 AID’s play, *Beirut*, and photos of The Living Theater’s 1963 production of Kenneth H. Brown’s drama set in a military jail, *The Brig*. Other dystopian works (both plays, novels, films) such as Roberto Bolaño’s, *2666*, Fernando Arrabel’s, *Guernica*, and a profoundly disturbing South African film, *District 9*, haunt this piece as well.

About the various themes in this short play: I’m attempting to engage and unpack the visceral feel of social issues like isolation (especially coming off successive COVID lockdowns), alienation (both from others and our own sense of self), and the way extreme individualism (in this case enforced) causes us, as plural / feeling beings, to disconnect, contract and spiral ever further inward. I thought physical actions “said” all of that better than dialogue so no one speaks directly – human to human - in this piece. Guards bark orders and engineer behavior but that’s

the full extent until the very end of the play. The whole idea of corralling speech behind steel and barbed wire and calling it “free” fits very cleanly into Herbert Marcuse’s political / philosophic conception of repressive tolerance: a neo-liberal ruse that defangs, co-opts and often monetizes every civic “right” – free speech or due process, for example – before allowing any exercise of those rights, and then only under regulated circumstances. The ending reflects my belief – borne out by history – that the cultural and individual tensions in this play cannot stand indefinitely.

About my own influences: I’ve done theatre long enough to have been influenced by some major groundbreakers like *The Bread & Puppet Theater*, *The Living Theater*, *The Open Theater / Winter Project* and Edward Bond. Moving closer to something more contemporary, Sam Shepard’s entire oeuvre (particularly his collaborative piece with Joe Chaikin, *The War in Heaven*), Megan Terry, Anne Bogart’s “Viewpoints” method of working with text, and Eugenio Barba’s anthropological approach to performance are important factors. And even closer to our present: Naomi Wallace (particularly *In the Heart of America* and *Slaughter City*), Cherie Moraga (*La Güera* and *Heroes & Saints*), Guillermo Gómez-Peña (*The Border Brujo*), Juan Felipe Herrera (*Noche Verde Nuclear: Coreo-Poema en Dos Laminas* and *Jaguar Hotel / Hotel Balam*), and Caryl Churchill (*Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*, *A Number*, and *Love & Information*) still speak to me. My sort-of-current, most favorite, personally influential play, right now, is *Sweat* by Lynn Nottage.

But my most important, most informative influence is (hands-down) Augusto Boal and his Theatre of the Oppressed. His methods and dramaturgy and his (at times, direct) mentorship taught me how to put my ego and private agendas aside and make truly authorless theatre with (and within) communities that stirs up what the late U.S. Congressman from Georgia, John Lewis, called “good trouble.” To directly grapple with and propose solutions to social issues and injustices that oppress us, as plural / feeling beings, and keep a tight lid on our collective liberation.

**AUTHOR BIO:** John Sullivan was an ACTF Playwriting finalist, received the 'Jack Kerouac Literary Prize,' the 'Writers Voice: New Voices of the West' Award, AZ Arts Fellowships (Poetry & Playwriting), an Artists Studio Center Fellowship, WESTAF Fellowship; he was also a featured playwright at Denver's Changing Scene Summer Playfest, an Eco-Arts Fellow with Earth Matters On Stage, Artistic Director of Theater Degree Zero, and directed the Augusto Boal / Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) wing at Seattle Public Theater. He and Sheli Rae (Producing Director: Theater Degree Zero) facilitated a series of acting/playwriting workshops inside the Pima County Jail in conjunction with the Pima County Library and the Tucson Writers Project. He uses TO with communities to promote dialogue on environmental and climate justice with environmental health scientists. His work has been published in a variety of print and online venues. Weasel Press (Manvel TX) published his first book, *Bye-Bye No Fly Zone*, in December 2019. *When Story Stops, the Leak Begins* came out from Unsolicited Press (Portland OR) in April 2020. A collection of performance pieces, *Dire Moon Cartoons*, was released by Weasel Press (now of Lansing MI) in October 2021.

