

100 Cats On Fire

“You sit down with these Senators, and you sit down with their staff, and you tell exactly what happened on December 14th . . . and you tell them all in excruciating detail so they have that picture in their mind when they’re casting their vote. And for them just to look at you . . . like . . . nothing . . . They have no emotion. They’re not, ‘Oh, I’m sorry.’ It’s nothing.”

-Carlee Soto, [Face the Nation](#), April 21, 2013

We no longer set [cats on fire](#) in the town square and watch their little bodies morph into charred flesh and ash for sport, but we are—to a very perplexing degree—tolerant of an attempted assassination on a U.S. Congresswoman, who has been left [paralyzed](#). We are—to a very perplexing degree—tolerant of such unfathomable mass murder at the movies that many kept [disbelief suspended](#) as reality took its toll. We are—to a very perplexing degree—tolerant of a six-year-old being shot through the forehead, [face to face](#) with his gunman. We are—to a very perplexing degree—tolerant of the [slaughter of our citizens by weapons designed with intent to kill](#), maim, and forever alter on our own soil. We are—to a very perplexing degree—detached from this apoplexy.

After the Newtown massacre, I found it difficult to sleep. I had a very visceral, emotional reaction to the news, but then my analytical side would kick in and take over, and I tottered around on this see-saw for days. I find the whole event so disturbing that if I think about it too long, I actually feel a headache start to pound. I have a hard time writing about it, even now. The realization that we live in a culture that cannot and perhaps will not protect small children from death by machine gun is a lot to grapple with. What does this say about us? Only one thing is clear to me: There have been a slew of angry young men who have felt compelled to unleash their anger on the masses in violent and deadly ways, and those of us left to pick up the pieces don’t know how to react. As a result, with Congress as our guide, we don’t react.

Maybe if I had lived in France in 1750, I would have found cat burning amusing, even necessary, though I can barely tolerate the simulated violence of video games today. Yet if I had lived in France in 1750, I imagine my overbearing French father would have had me cat thwacking very early, teaching me that cats were soulless and if I wanted to have a good year I needed to skewer and roast. I might have had little choice but to endure in the great community game of cat slaying. Perhaps I would have found a back alley to puke in, or perhaps I would have been roused to wicked delight along with the rest of the crowd. Hard to know. And while I have a low video-game threshold, I empathize with the impulse. Sometimes you just want to *kill* something. And while we’d like to think that the vicious cat-murdering impulse isn’t ours, in truth it lives in our inherited cultural baggage. That impulse has been thwarted and adjusted by evolution, education, laws, (maybe, at times) video games, and empathy—understanding that a cat feels too.

Empathy is the basis for all we do as theater artists. It is at the core of our work. Theater artists build empathic worlds like no other artists because we are live, we engage presently, and we build community actively. Agree to disagree if you wish, but I don’t believe any theater is amoral. I’m with [Kathleen Chalfant](#). The point is to engage performance and audience, with emphatic empathy, over vital and prescient topics. This is a moral and political cause, always.

And, if anyone has a responsibility to crack through and interpret the haze of confusion, terror, guilt, anger, and frustration, it's theater artists. It really is our job.

I am honored to be part of [Gun Control Theatre Action](#), spearheaded by playwright and activist [Caridad Svich](#). I was involved in the [endeavor](#) in D.C. in January, and will return to a [reading](#) at New Dramatists on April 29th. I also hope to partake in the [Action Week](#), from May 27th to June 2nd, launched by Caridad and [Meredith Lynsey Schade](#). The pieces in the collection range widely. While it might not overflow with 'pro-gun' material, there is certainly reflection on both sides of the argument. The incomparable [Greg Keller](#) is set to read an anger-fueled piece by the ever-provocative [Neil LaBute](#), while [Karin Rosnizeck](#), [Bhavesh Patel](#), [Noah Galvin](#), and [Reyna de Courcy](#) will read a rather satirical piece by the very playful [Gary Winter](#). We will all engage in a reflective and poetic piece by Caridad Svich, and I hear there might even be some [song](#). I believe all of this can be used as an incredible jumping off point for serious exchange and understanding. My mother came to see the pieces in D.C. and she simply said, "That was amazing. It just made you really think about why people are afraid."

I believe we need more gun control. That's my reality, based in the fear that if we don't have more sensible controls, we will continue to be subjected to terror. That's not everyone's belief, and I need to understand that. Understanding, empathizing, and not detaching is going to take work. On the bright side, there is a consciousness shift underway. There is ever-present dialogue and theater is a piece of that. It's the visceral piece. It's not far-reaching, but a small, grassroots movement.

People who don't support gun control need to understand—viscerally—how frightening it feels to live in a country where it seems virtually anyone who is angry enough can buy a weapon, designed to kill, and kill. For pure carnage. People who do support gun control need to understand—viscerally—how frightening it feels to sense the ability to protect, to hunt, and to remain free from governmental tyranny might be curtailed by further measures. How do we do this? How do we react? [For what it's worth](#), we act. We perform. We interpret. This is emotional. We ask people to feel and we ask everyone to be the cat. This is where we start. We read a play, or two, or three, or twenty-four. We start small and hope that more people are prompted to think, talk, and do the same. Those stone-faced Senators are terrified of being burned. Without excusing [their detachment](#), our task is to help these cowards, especially, eventually find empathy. This is deep, deep down.