



The Solari Report

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**The Playwright on
Not Playing Ball
with John Patrick Shanley**



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C. AUSTIN FITTS: Well, I want to thank you very much for joining us on the Solari Report. You are our first playwright. We normally cover economic topics. Our wonderful production assistant, Michael Linton, had the opportunity to see your play *Sleeping Demon*, which is absolutely extraordinary. You were kind enough to make a copy available to me, and I've read it, and it's just – it's remarkable. I mean, it's just really remarkable. It's part of a series called *Church and State*, which started with, I think, one of your most famous, which is both a play and a movie, *Doubt*.

JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY: Yes.

C. AUSTIN FITTS: So maybe if we could begin, you could tell us how you came to write *Church and State*, and the evolution of it.

JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY: Absolutely. Well, I guess – I was raised in the Catholic school system as a kid and was educated by the Sisters of Charity, who were an order of nuns who wore these sort of peculiar black bonnets that you didn't see generally when you saw depictions of nuns. And later in life, I thought, just on the most simplistic level, "Oh, I should do a play sometime about those nuns, because nobody's ever seen those outfits except the few of us who were educated by them." But over time I realized that it was a great backdrop for some of the larger questions that I have in my life, and the biggest one probably being the fact that I function from a place where I know that I don't know anything and yet I want to be an effective member of the community. So I want to act with a kind of certainty and assertiveness to be an effective member of life, and at the same time acknowledge that I cannot truly know anything for certain. So how do I get those two things to work



together?

And *Doubt* sort of came out of that, together with childhood experiences that I had where I had teachers who I saw were molesting others – not in the Catholic church, by the way; these were lay teachers – and yet were not molesting me, were actually great educators of mine, and how could I reconcile those things. Which I think in some level is something that every kid, adolescent, and probably adult goes through, that people are a mixed bag, and parts of them can be quite dark and destructive towards some, even if it's not towards you. And how do you take the good and leave the rest, or should you?

And then in the society around me, I saw that – American society – that there was an ongoing conflict, attempt to resolve the distinctions between church and state, where one began, where the other ended, and if they did; and where morality and spirituality fit into public life.

C. AUSTIN FITTS: Well, I've spent a lot of my life sort of grappling with corruption, how you stop it, how you clean it up, more on the financial side. And the thing that's – I haven't seen *Defiance*, which is the second one. But what weaves through *Doubt* and through the *Sleeping Demon* is sort of grappling with this corruption, both of systems and people, at a very intimate level, and how murky it gets. And you feel that incredible struggle. I know in *Sleeping Demon*, you really feel it, and it's the same in *Doubt*.

JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY: Well, there's this character in *Sleeping Demon* who's a minor political figure in New York. He's a Bronx borough president, and is not any real Bronx borough president, but one in my imagination. And he had the history that when he was a kid – he was half-Latino and half-Italian – that he was raised by a father who had a little storefront church and was a Pentecostal, and that he admired his father greatly and wanted to become a preacher just like his father had been. But then at a certain point he saw his mother crying, sitting at the kitchen table, and asked her why, and she said that she'd had to support all of these children and her husband, and that she was fighting diabetes, and that she was exhausted and didn't know if she could continue to go



on in the vein that she had.

And he at that moment chose to help people in this world, with this world, the material world, and decided to become a politician. But that conflict between his mother's influence and his father's influence had remained real, if dormant, in him, until he comes into a conversation with a guy who started a storefront church and isn't paying his rent, and as a result of that, the woman who owns the building, a little two-story building, is gonna lose her home. And this brings out the latent rage that this politician has at his father for being irresponsible to the material concerns of this world. And so he sort of enters into a prolonged struggle, ideological struggle with this preacher over what is moral and correct in this world that we live in, and in whatever way that it overlaps with any other worlds that might exist.

“He at that moment chose to help people in this world, with this world, the material world, and decided to become a politician.”

C. AUSTIN FITTS: One of the reasons that Mike wanted me to read *Sleeping Demon* – do you know the expression "fraudulent inducement"?

JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY: I'm not sure that I do.

C. AUSTIN FITTS: Okay, it's a legal term. If I'm a bank or a financial institution, and I make you a loan, and I know something about your circumstance or the future that you don't – if I have reason to believe you won't be able to pay it back and I don't tell you about that, I don't share that information – that loan could be deemed to be fraudulently induced, and you may not be liable for all or some of it. And one of the reasons Mike wanted me to know about you and your work was, one of the things I was very concerned about in the '90s is I kept saying the banks are fraudulently inducing these mortgage loans. And a lot of these mortgages may not be legal because they're loaning to people when they know, in fact, incomes are gonna fall and the people who are borrowing don't realize. And one of the things you do –

JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY: Right, and even if many of those people did not – even if their incomes didn't fall, they couldn't afford those loans.



C. AUSTIN FITTS: Right.

JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY: There was a lot of loans given out under the most blatantly – the math just didn't work.

C. AUSTIN FITTS: And one of the things you get into – the woman who has borrowed the loan just – or she's got two loans. She's got a mortgage and she's got a – well, that's one of the things that impresses me. You get all this in somehow without it getting overly complex. But she's got a mortgage, and she took a second to finance the tenant in the storefront church. And her husband is a CPA, who's now sick, and it's interesting because the problems – a lot of the default problems on the mortgages come not just from falling incomes, but from health problems. And so the husband, Max – we open up with Max meeting with a banker and going through all of these different issues of the morality of sort of how the mortgage game is working, both on the morality of the banks and what they're up to and the morality of the people borrowing and what they're up to.

JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY: Yes. Well, I mean, it certainly hasn't seemed as if morality hasn't – it didn't enter into it on the bank side of the equation.

C. AUSTIN FITTS: Right. Right. But all the different issues of "what in the world is going on here, and why are we behaving this way, and how did we get into this mess in the first place" sort of come out as a part of the context, because, of course, the main story is the individual people and then struggling with consciousness.

There was a – I just have to read one part, because I was laughing so hard I was crying. I just want to read this. This is Max when he's meeting with the banker. It says, "This country was built by giants. They died, and midgets moved in. Tiny people were walking around inside this republic like a nine-year-old boy wearing his father's suit. When the tiny people got in power, they changed what was taught in school. No great books. No big people, everybody's tiny now." That's one of the – I mean, I couldn't believe it. It was so powerful. I was blown away. And then he says, "Greatness is real and giants come along, you might be one.



The opportunity is there right now."

JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY: There you go.

C. AUSTIN FITTS: It's very hopeful, because it reminds us we're all – we are in a time where we're all being tiny, but we don't have to be.

JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY: Well, there does seem to be, at this time, a worldwide leadership vacuum that, from time to time, visionaries come along and reorganize society based on an idea that is so powerful that it cannot be denied. And it organizes and unifies societies to go boldly in a single strong direction for a period of time. Certainly, the United States of America was such a phenomenon, 'cause the intellectual brain trust, and moral brain trust, formed this republic in a way that was deeply impressive to the entire certainly Western world.

And over time, I would say that at this time the brain trust, which in that period was put to the purpose of the betterment of all of society, in our time the best minds have been put to work to how to better themselves, and to the detriment of society, and also, in effect, over time, to their own detriment, because it was basically short-term profits over long-term viability that was going on in this latest economic crisis. There was no way that the financial model that was being used just prior to the mortgage crisis could hold. So it was simply a case of do what makes today feel good, even knowing that you are destroying the near future's possibility of remaining a positively functioning economic model.

C. AUSTIN FITTS: So one of the things that happens in *Sleeping Demon* is, the borough president is then squeezed by the top executive at the bank.

JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY: Yes.

C. AUSTIN FITTS: And we get him sort of in this conundrum of, is he gonna do the right thing for the people or is he gonna get squeezed by this bank president. And the issues are not all black and white; it's kind of gray. And it's very –



JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY: Well, as they usually are, you know?

C. AUSTIN FITTS: Yeah. It's very painful. You're squirming as you live through it. And I don't quite know how you manage to do that. You must – I'm tempted to ask you how you know so well what it's like to get squeezed.

JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY: Oh, I think every adult knows what it's like to get squeezed. But basically, when I write, I'm inviting you into the house that I live in. And by that I mean I have a point of view, and I see the pluses and minuses and the moral constraints and hedonistic impulses within myself, and they inform my responses to the things around me.

And I basically want you to understand how I see things and how I experience complex questions, because it can be as simple as buying Apple stock and having to face the fact that some of the factories in China are not honoring quality of life among human beings, and how do you reconcile those things? Do you reconcile those things? Do you buy a tobacco stock? Do you buy an oil stock? And certainly, like with the question of oil, whether or not you should own an oil stock is extremely complicated because, certainly, oil is used to many beneficial purposes. Tobacco, maybe not so much.

C. AUSTIN FITTS: Well, but what I found in America, we're always easy – it's easy to say, "They did this. It's wrong." To get people to look at how my money's working, whether it's the – in *Sleeping Demon*, it's the pastor who encouraged the money to be borrowed, or the woman who borrowed the money, or the bank who made a loan they shouldn't. You're walking people through our failure to take responsibility in all the different roles involved, at a very intimate level. And in our society, this is the one thing that we don't want to look at. We don't want to look at the intimacy or our complicity or how it works in our money and our lives. We don't want to look at me and see what I can do to deal with me, and yet –

JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY: Well, there's that, but there's –



C. AUSTIN FITTS: – not only are you doing that, but people love to watch the
– these are wonderful, successful plays and movies. So you get people to
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JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY: Well, sometimes. Sometimes.

C. AUSTIN FITTS: – enjoy doing that. That's where you've got me stumped.

JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY: Well, I mean, we are not perfect beings, nor are we supposed to be. And there is absolutely no way that you're going to live your life without causing harm to other people on some level, even just by breathing. And you must make peace with that if you are going to enjoy your life, and I think that that is important. I think that you are supposed to enjoy your life. I think you should do your best to do that, and that was certainly one of the precepts of the founding fathers: the pursuit of happiness, but not at the ruthless and excessive expense of others.

“There is absolutely no way that you're going to live your life without causing harm to other people on some level, even just by breathing.”

But there are going to be expenses incurred in others if you are to live and to have a life that is not completely informed by guilt. And I very much believe that you should do that, you should embrace it, and that it's a matter of balancing these things and also your own individual conscience and consciousness. So the title of the play, *Sleeping Demon*, refers to something that the preacher says of the borough president when the borough president says that he has a social conscience. He says, "Do not wake that sleeping demon. That killed Martin Luther King, it killed Socrates, and it will kill you." To live a life totally of conscience is, in a way, a form of severity that I think is not truly embracing of humanity, and so you've gotta be careful on that front too. I do, for instance, occasionally smoke a cigar. I don't own tobacco stocks, but I'm glad that I can get that cigar.

C. AUSTIN FITTS: Right. Well, you bring all the characters – I don't want to give away the whole story, but you bring all the characters into the



storefront church. And here's a group of people who have been in the business of helping each other fail, and they get in the church and they start getting in the business of helping each other face the truth and be redeemed somehow. It's very New York, 'cause it's very organic and very human. And it's wonderful, and part of it is the stance between the material world and the spiritual world and how to have integrity in both. It's quite – I don't quite know how you did it.

JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY: Well, you know, when they get into that church – which is a kind of arbitrary church. It's a storefront church, so it's a mixed-use, two-story building in the ground floor, which was a Laundromat before. This guy has taken and put some folding chairs in there and an electric piano. He said it's a church, and he sort of sets about inventing a religion. As opposed to adhering to some organized religion with a definite set of precepts, he wants to say something in his sermon that he actually currently believes and feels connected to. And what he's really doing is, he is finding a community. He is re-finding the sort of basic building block of society, which is the local community.

And I think that one of the problems that we've been having in our society is that the community has been damaged. And part of that has been just simply all of us in our homes, on the Internet, becoming more and more separated from each other and forgetting the great communal power that is available to us, which in times gone by has very often taken place in churches and in the halls of government and in the sort of sense like the Greeks did it, where the whole community or a significant part of the community became involved in the political process to the purpose of the betterment of all the people or a great number of the people. And there's been an isolating thing that's been going on in this country, where government has become increasingly insulated from the individual, and individuals become increasingly insulated from each other, so that a feeling of helplessness and cynicism is pervading many people's individual experience of life.

C. AUSTIN FITTS: It comes in a couple ways. You get the feeling – the preacher's from New Orleans and has been traumatized by Katrina and the events –



JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY: Yes.

C. AUSTIN FITTS: – around that. But the most beautiful one is amazing. You have the banker eating a gingerbread house, and as they're having the conversation, they slowly break the house down and eat it. It's the most amazing kind of metaphor image, as the lies fly back and forth.

JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY: Well, and also –

C. AUSTIN FITTS: It's very powerful.

JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY: – the gingerbread house was a present for his son, so he's eating his own son's house.

C. AUSTIN FITTS: Oh, but financially, that's what's going on.

JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY: Absolutely.

C. AUSTIN FITTS: It's just remarkable, yeah. I wanted to mention one of the things I promised Mike I would tell you about, is I served as Assistant Secretary of Housing in the first Bush administration. And I got there, and every day I started to get this increased feeling of sort of free-floating anxiety, and I couldn't figure out what it was. It kept getting worse and worse and worse, and finally realized everyone was coming to lobby me to do something that would make their stock go up, but nobody was lobbying me to improve the health of places. Because the financial system was kinda organized on an industry basis, and so places weren't traded in the stock market, and so nobody made money from a place being successful.

And so I ended up coining a term called the Popsicle Index, and I wanted to describe it to you. The Popsicle Index is the percent of people in a place who believe a child can leave their home, go to the nearest place to buy a popsicle, and come home alone safely. So let me say it again: it's the percent of people in a place who believe a child can leave their home, go to the nearest place to buy a popsicle, and come home alone safely. The guy in England, he used to call it "room to roam." And



part of the sort of shrinking from the giants to the tiny is, the room to roam for most children has shrunk and shrunk and shrunk, and we've now reached a point where parents don't want their kids to go anywhere unless they have adult supervision.

But one of the things I used to do for years – so I used to say what I came to as Assistant Secretary of Housing is, everybody was lobbying me to get the Dow Jones to go up, but nobody was lobbying me to get the Popsicle Index to go up. So how could we rebuild the balance between the Popsicle Index and the Dow? And I started to do – I did a couple workshops in communities, where I asked people what they thought the Popsicle Index was. And the power of the Popsicle Index was not that it was particularly accurate, but that everybody controlled it. In other words, my Popsicle Index is whatever I feel it is.

And so what it did was it inspired these wild conversations between kids and their parents and different generations about how they felt about whether they were safe in their place. And what came out was this dichotomy that you talk about between the spiritual and the material, or the energetic and the material. And the people needed a way of expressing that energetic or spiritual need in the context of their community, and it was getting eaten alive, and they felt completely stymied. And that's what is so powerful about what you bring out, is this struggle to rebuild that. Does that make any sense?

JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY: Well, it's there. Right after 9/11, in New York, the streets filled up with people having a natural communal desire to help, and it was put to no purpose. There was no way they could find, for the most part, to have this very, very natural and powerful and positive impulse. There was no social mechanism for them to become involved. And it's a thing that people in this country are starving for, because there is an altruistic impulse in people that needs to be satisfied, that needs to be put to work. And there has been a long-term alienation of public services from private impulse that's been going on.

C. AUSTIN FITTS: Is there any chance that *Sleeping Demon* would be made into a movie?



JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY: I suppose. I always take these things one thing at a time. I'm gonna do it at the Atlantic Theater Company in the spring and take it from there. It's a good company, and they do good work. But certainly, when I did *Doubt* at Manhattan Theatre Club, in a 300-seat house, I at that point had no vision that I was gonna then turn it into a film. It just became a phenomenon and moved to Broadway, and then it sorta became more and more inevitable that it would be a film. And who knows, maybe that will happen with *Sleeping Demon*.

“It just became a phenomenon and moved to Broadway, and then it sorta became more and more inevitable that it would be a film.”

C. AUSTIN FITTS: When is it gonna be – when can we see it?

JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY: It'll be at the Atlantic Theater Company in April, in New York City.

C. AUSTIN FITTS: Okay, in April in New York City.

JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY: Yes.

C. AUSTIN FITTS: Okay. And so what's next in terms of your writing?

JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY: Well, I'm writing a movie for Stanley Tucci to direct and be in, called *Where's Chang?*, for Fox Searchlight. And I'm going around the country, giving a few speeches on similar topics to the ones that we've just spoken about. I just came from Waco, Texas, where I spoke at Baylor University, and spoke to a very conservative population, which I'm very interested in doing because, again, I feel there's an alienation between – which is inorganic – between various parts of the United States, and we need to be talking to each other.

C. AUSTIN FITTS: It's amazing. If you look at just from a financial standpoint, real change comes not when you change who's the president. Real change comes when we change how we individually do things. And yet to me, we've been stuck trying to effect change at the macro level, because we've been – it's like we're frozen scared to look at



what's going on in our intimate space. And that's why I'm so encouraged at the response you're getting, because that's what you're doing. The artists always have to go first. But you're taking us into our intimate space, and somehow it's not as overwhelming to look at the ridiculousness of what we're personally doing.

JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY: Well, I'm glad that you think so. I mean, the artist's job is to describe what isn't there and should be. So in a way, I read the newspaper to see what isn't in it and then write a play to fill that blank page.

C. AUSTIN FITTS: Okay, well, John Patrick Shanley, we're very grateful for your taking the time. We're very grateful for this play. And if we can't get to New York in April, will it ever be published?

JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY: Oh, sure. Sure. And it'll be done other places.

C. AUSTIN FITTS: Okay, well, that would be wonderful. That would really be wonderful. I'm also hoping for a movie. It was a pleasure speaking with you, and we wish you Godspeed.

JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY: Thank you very much. The same to you.

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