

# David Byrne and the Utopian Imagination

Benjamin Gillespie

*We're not fixed, our brains can change.  
Who we are thankfully extends beyond ourselves . . .  
to the connections between all of us.*  
—David Byrne, *American Utopia*

For as long as I can remember, I've been an enthusiast of singer-songwriter David Byrne. At a young age, my father introduced me to his music through the Talking Heads commercial breakthrough album *Speaking in Tongues*, a textured art-rock compilation that shaped New Wave music of the 1980s. The album contained well-known tracks like "This Must Be the Place (Naive Melody)," "Slippery People," and "Burning Down the House," and has remained in Byrne's repertoire since the band split in the early 1990s, at which time he launched a successful solo album career while collaborating with numerous artists spanning music, film, theatre, opera, and visual art. But Byrne is not only a brilliant musician: in conceptualizing his concert performances, which might be more aptly described as full-on theatrical productions, he functions as an *auteur*, collaborating with artists on everything from the set, lighting, and costume design to movement and choreography. He produces conceptual frameworks for his performances that serve to foreground his dynamic stage presence and powerful voice. His work unreservedly crosses artistic boundaries and borrows elements from a wide range of cultural sources, from Noh theatre to downtown experimental dance. More than any other popular rock artist (perhaps aside from Laurie Anderson), Byrne continues to collapse the boundaries between the mainstream and the experimental, always hovering somewhere in between, drawing disparate audiences together that might otherwise never cross paths while remaining part of the cultural zeitgeist.

Byrne's performances seek to derive an embodied response from audiences: his rhythmic playfulness and off-kilter lyrics necessitate an immediate kinetic reac-

tion, further accentuated by his high-energy stage persona, motivating spectators to move freely and dance together in unison. His penchant for theatricality was famously captured in the live concert footage featured in Jonathan Demme's renowned 1984 film *Stop Making Sense*, the first recording I ever saw of Byrne on stage, which expanded my understanding of his vision as a performer. The film showcases his frenetic, ecstatic movements on stage, at times reminiscent of ritual dance or even evangelical preaching. This comparison seems appropriate when considering the ways his songs have the power to induce a trance-like state as he immerses audiences in heightened theatrical worlds. He possesses a keen awareness of the audience and the uncanny ability to make everyone feel connected, creating a theatrical utopia of sorts as a true citizen artist.

*Stop Making Sense* begins with an empty stage and stripped-down sound; as it progresses, the space slowly fills up with musical equipment, band members, and set pieces so that we see the genesis of the music as the energy crescendos and more and more bodies take up the stage who echo Byrne's vocals and movement. Byrne oversaw all elements of the stage performance captured in the film, collaborating with lighting designer Beverly Emmons (who had previously worked with Robert Wilson and Philip Glass for *Einstein on the Beach*) and director JoAnne Akalaitis who Byrne invited to provide feedback on the stage performance (and with whom he would later work on Mabou Mines' *Dead End Kids*). As he has stated publicly, Byrne doesn't want his work to be naturalistic in any way, but prefers his performances to be heightened above the mundane of everyday life.

Byrne's performance style remains markedly theatrical, influenced by a career-long engagement with the avant-garde. His work is both experimental and popular, allowing him to bring different perspectives to audiences who might otherwise never venture below Fourteenth Street. His collaborations include productions with Robert Wilson, Twyla Tharp, Spalding Gray, and Meredith Monk, among many other experimental artists. These experiences undoubtedly pushed Byrne to adopt a more presentational style in his work. Rebelling against the industry standard of authenticity and naturalism with roots in the 1960s, he opts instead for a unified artistic vision that encompasses all aspects of theatrical and musical production. This aesthetic development and his own performance philosophy are the focus of his remarkable book, *How Music Works* (2012), which covers everything from the genesis of music to its distribution, how music shapes collective experiences, and his personal influences and stories from a life spent in music.<sup>1</sup> Byrne's utopian imagination is one that invites audiences into his creative mind for a collectively uplifting experience that confounds any singular genre categorization.

His most recent theatre project, *American Utopia*, which ran on Broadway at the Hudson Theatre from October 2019 through February 2020, closed just prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, when theatres shutdown for a year and a half. In the production, Byrne presents himself on a narrative journey from independence to communion with the audience—a kind of Everyman figure for the contemporary world. The Broadway version incorporates monologues and a more vivid narrative through-line for theatre audiences than the world concert tour that preceded it in 2018 of the same name, while keeping much of its original design and choreography. The shift from concert venue to Broadway theatre (and later, to film) required a revision to the original material and design for the show, as well as the addition of monologues spoken by Byrne between musical numbers.

Collaborators include downtown choreographer Annie-B Parson, whom he'd first worked with on *Everything That Happens Will Happen Today* (2008, with Brian Eno). Parson worked on both the concert tour and Broadway versions of *American Utopia*, as did lighting designer Rob Sinclair. For the Broadway version, they brought in writer and director Alex Timbers as a production consultant to assist in dramatizing the narrative. (Notably, Byrne, Parson, and Timbers had worked together previously on the musical *Here Lies Love*, which premiered at The Public Theater in 2013.) The production also inspired an illustrated book project with visual artist Maira Kalman, whose drawings also appeared on the drop curtain in the Hudson Theatre. With the release of a cast recording in 2019 and a concert film in 2020, *American Utopia* seems to have mutated across every possible medium, making it accessible to audiences who might favor one genre over another.

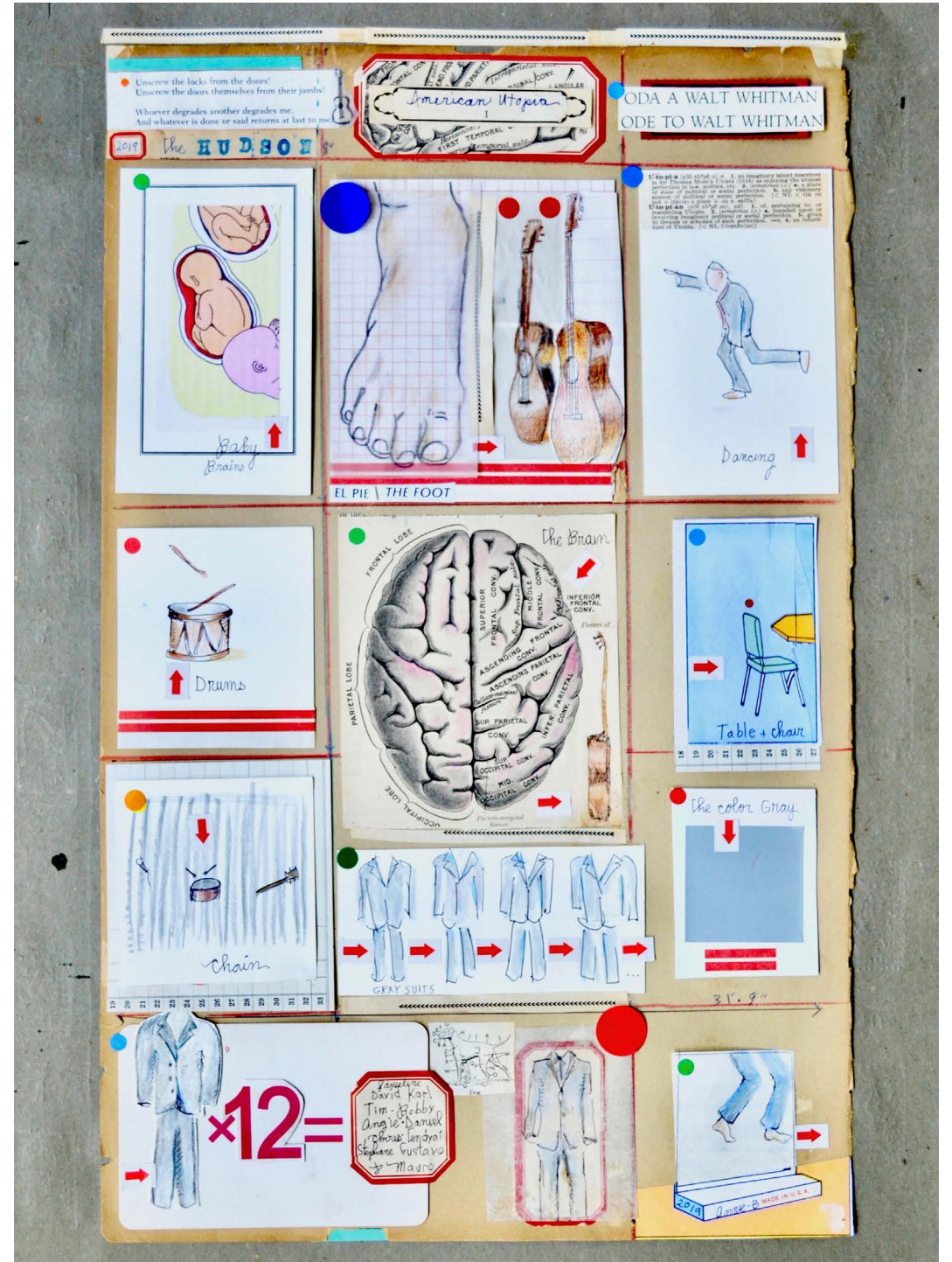
*American Utopia* recalls *Stop Making Sense* in numerous ways: the entire cast wear neutral gray suits; the stage begins emptied out and gradually fills with bodies as musicians and musical equipment are added; and gestures and movements are performed and repeated to create a sense of flow and rhythm with the music. As with the *Speaking in Tongues* album and tour that inspired *Stop Making Sense*, the live performance of *American Utopia* too began as an album tour and became the subject of an extraordinary concert film by another major director, Spike Lee. The film version of *American Utopia* was released in September 2020 at the Toronto International Film Festival and then on HBO's on-demand platform. Overseen by Byrne, both shows mutated seamlessly into different media platforms, increasing the impact and accessibility of the work.

*American Utopia* offers an antidote to the dwindling connections in an increasingly isolated and divisive world. Over the course of each evening, Byrne performs the show alongside eleven other band members, transforming the Hudson Theatre into both an intimate concert hall and ritual theatre space as audiences are



Top/bottom: David Byrne and the company of *American Utopia* at the Hudson Theatre on Broadway. Photos: Matthew Murphy © 2019.

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For David: Dance Chart for *American Utopia* (2019). Photo: Annie-B Parson. Courtesy the artist.

inevitably moved to their feet to dance and sing along with the music, emanating pure joy that promises a more connected present and future. Byrne's utopian imagination is defined, it seems, by a desire to expand human connections across perceived boundaries, providing a message of hope in dark times that stave off feelings of anxiety and detachment in our increasingly virtual reality. As choreographer Annie-B Parson has remarked of the piece, "It's very hybrid. What you will see is more like a dance performance. And what you're going to feel is more like a play . . . [Byrne] has completely invented a new form of theatre. I don't know what to call it. But it's something unexpected, visually very different, very minimalist in this beautiful open space, which is very different for Broadway."<sup>2</sup>

Parson and Rob Sinclair collaborated closely to take advantage of the blank gray canvas on stage, placing movement and lighting at the center of the production. Even with a cast of primarily non-dancers without formal training, Parson was able to employ repetition and simplistic gestures to connect the music. Cast members come and go frequently, taking up space and exiting or entering from all sides of the stage. This is a black box (or *gray* box) theatre without walls, replaced by chain-link, metallic curtains that surround the stage space and change color depending on the desired lighting effect. Since Parson had no equipment, cords, microphones, or platforms to contend with, the sky was the limit in terms of how she could use the space. Each song was choreographed as a separate entity before bringing it back to the whole, and Parson considered both shape and line to create what she calls "movement phrases" in the piece. In tandem with the lighting, the musicians/dancers step in and out of focus at different moments as rectangles and circles of light are projected on the stage floor, creating the effect of a living chessboard. The lighting design serves to emphasize Byrne's journey further, moving from monochrome to a spectrum of bright colors; while the color palette starts out on a very limited scale, it then moves into more vivid hues as he discovers the larger community on stage and begins to recognize the presence of the audience more fully.

The show employs cutting-edge technology in wireless audio and BlackTrax lighting design, featuring real-time tracking of the performers; untethered from cables, this technology allows free movement across the stage—a sight uncommon for a Broadway show or even a rock concert. Unseeable to audiences, BlackTrax sends positional information to lighting consoles and merges it with Sinclair's pre-designed lighting cues. In a conversation I had with Sinclair, he stated that Byrne had certain rules he wanted the creative team to follow: a) never blackout; b) have nothing on the stage other than the performers; and c) eliminate any equipment and crew from view. Since the cast members wear identical clothing,

perform barefoot, and carry their musical instruments around with them, the costumes could be highlighted or made to completely disappear with a wash of color depending on the mood of each song.

Byrne begins *American Utopia* by talking about the function of the human brain. He informs us about a study he read which found that babies have many more neuro-connections than adults do. Sitting alone at a table placed center stage (one of the only set pieces in the show, which quickly disappears after the opening) he holds a plastic replica of an adult brain. He notes that, as we age, our cognitive connections deteriorate, and we become more closed off from other humans as we prune down our social networks. Singing the first song in the show, called “Here,” Byrne points to different parts of the brain:

Now it feels like a bad connection/ No more information now/ As it passes through your neurons/ Like a whisper in the dark/ Raise your eyes to one who loves you/ It is safe right where you are/ Here is an area of great confusion/ Here is a section that’s extremely precise/ Here is an area that needs attention/ Here is a connection with the opposite side.

The song speaks directly to the times on many levels, especially in hindsight as we consider the cut-off connections resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic. The word “here” doubles for what Byrne points at directly (the model brain), but also functions in a more metatheatrical way to point to a divided and alienated America. But the production’s message remains optimistic, ultimately showing how connections can be repaired and remade.

Relatedly, in 2019, Byrne began a website called “We Are Not Divided” with the sole purpose of collecting and sharing stories of unity to combat the increasingly negative portrayal of the U.S. in the media.<sup>3</sup> “We Are Not Divided” is just one part of Byrne’s *Reasons to Be Cheerful*, a non-profit online magazine that shares and covers stories about positive social change in the arts and culture as well as in climate and environment, economics, education, health and science, and urban life. As the website notes, “Through stories of hope, rooted in evidence, *Reasons to Be Cheerful* aims to inspire us all to be curious about how the world can be better, and to ask ourselves how we can be part of that change.”<sup>4</sup> This description could easily double as one for *American Utopia*. In fact, many of the songs in the show reiterate the theme of positive social connection, even those released decades ago, which take on new meaning in the present. For example, in “Don’t Worry About the Government,” released by the Talking Heads in 1977, Byrne sings:

I see the states, across this big nation/ I see the laws made in Washington,  
D.C./ I think of the ones I consider my favorites/ I think of the people  
that are working for me/ Some civil servants are just like my loved ones/  
They work so hard and they try to be strong/ I'm a lucky guy to live in  
my building/ They own the buildings to help them along.

While the song's meaning remains somewhat ambiguous and is perhaps ironic in tone, when I saw *American Utopia*, it functioned to reinforce the importance of civic engagement. It's meaning will undoubtedly be modified again when the production returns to Broadway in September 2021, as audiences will recall the insurrection and storming of the U.S. Capitol building in January 2021.

Not only was *American Utopia* staged in the lead up to—and during—the tumultuous presidential election campaign of 2020, but, looking back now, the show is eerily prescient of the longing for connection we would all face as the pandemic brought audience gatherings to a halt and the country was forced to practice physical distancing. At one point in the production, I remember Byrne thanking the audience for coming out of their homes and being there together at the theatre in a singular space and time. Hearing this line echoed again in Lee's adaptation of the production to film made me long for the experience of in-person theatre once again. Another song that changes from its original context is Byrne's "Everybody's Coming to My House," which provided an even more salient message of inclusion when he collaborated with students from the Detroit School of Arts Vocal Jazz Ensemble on a cover of the song in "American Utopia: Detroit." As Byrne writes on his website, "When I saw what the Detroit School of Arts students did with my song, it completely changed the way I thought of it. In fact, it changed the meaning of the song—I realized it was about inclusion, welcoming, and not being alone . . . We are all in the same house—if we want to be. Just goes to show how a song can change (radically!) depending on who is singing it."<sup>5</sup> Of course, the song's meaning in the production will change when the show returns to Broadway after more than a year in isolation and visiting others in their homes is once again possible.

In his monologues, Byrne encourages audience members to register to vote, to have faith in democracy, and most of all, to persevere. While *American Utopia* is never fully steered by political content, there is a sense of unrest that undergirds the production, making it feel like change is on the horizon. The performance directly addresses the racial reckonings happening in the U.S. (and beyond) as Black Americans continue to be unjustly killed by the police, galvanized by the Black Lives Matter movement after the murders of Freddie Gray ("Say his name!"), Eric Garner ("Say his name!"), and Trayvon Martin ("Say his name!"), among

others who are named in a call-and-response format during a cover of Janelle Monáe's 2015 protest song "Hell You Talmbout." In the film version of the show, Lee includes George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor, whose deaths occurred after the closing of the show, in images held up by the victims' mothers during what becomes the most politically charged moment of the film. Racial violence is evoked earlier too when the cast performs "Slippery People," the lyrics uncannily speaking to the street protests that call out these injustices happening before, during, and after the run of the Broadway production:

Put away that gun/ This part is simple/ Try to recognize/ What is in your mind?/ God help us/ Help us lose our minds/ These slippery people/ Help us understand/ What's the matter with him? (He's alright)/ I'll see his face (the Lord won't mind)/ Don't play no games (he's alright)/ Love from the bottom to the top.

Performing beside Byrne is a cast reflective of the diversity of America including Black, Brown, and queer bodies on stage—especially in the extraordinary performances by lead vocalists and dancers Tendayi Kuumba and Chris Giarmo, who envelope Byrne's left and right sides for most of the performance, often stealing the show. Though the performance begins with a focus on Byrne as an individual, it ends with a message of the collective power of a community when it embraces difference.

Byrne's status as an established artist now in his late sixties is also relevant to *American Utopia*, especially since the production foregrounds his own fluctuating perceptions as an aging artist. It seems clear that Byrne is not only interested in actively listening to voices of the younger generation and the protests happening, but that he wants to bring those voices directly into his vision for the future. As he says near the end of *American Utopia*, "Despite all that's happened—despite all that's happening—there's still possibility. As James Baldwin once said, 'I believe we can do with this country something that has not been done before.'" The need for change is captured in the overall metanarrative of the work: despite being a compilation of disparate songs, the production weaves together a clear storyline of collective social possibility that results from restless times, providing a positive message of tolerance and the power of shared experience to combat fanaticism and "America first" policies indicative of the Trump era. Byrne evokes his own status as an immigrant from Scotland and naturalized American citizen alongside the immigrant status of many cast members in his band. "We are all immigrants, and we couldn't do this show without them." This is the kind of exaltation for the change America needs.



The experience of seeing *American Utopia* has continued to remain with me during and after the lockdown in the absence of live theatre, especially with the timely release of Lee's concert film, which echoed the feeling of live performance even from my living room. Lee uses a dizzying number of camera angles to capture the visuals, emphasizing the choreography and highly evolved lighting design of the piece while also showcasing the presence of an audience, especially by filming from behind the performers as well as from the back of the house. When I saw the production live, I sat in the upper balcony of the Hudson Theatre, which provided me with an aerial view of the stage. This was also a perspective captured in the film, and it brought me right back to that embodied experience of being there. In a conversation I had with Parson, she told me this was her favorite angle to watch the show from because you get to see everything: the movement, the lighting design on the stage, and the complex patterns they create in unison.

The first set of songs in *American Utopia*—"Here," "I Know Sometimes a Man Is Wrong," "Don't Worry about the Government," and "Lazy"—show Byrne isolated on the stage, enhanced through lighting effects and blocking; in later numbers, he connects with the entire cast, often moving in unison. By the time we get to "Once in a Lifetime," there is a distinctive shift in Byrne's journey from the solo to the communal as the entire audience is encouraged to stand up and dance. In later songs, such as the pleurably bizarre "Toe Jam," Byrne steps out of the spotlight altogether to allow other members of the cast to be featured. In "Burning Down the House," he becomes one with the ensemble as they parade around the stage in various configurations (including a large "X" as seen from above), signaling a collective revolution is happening as perceived divisions have literally been crossed (out).

Nearing the end of the production, instruments are left offstage and the musicians re-enter one by one to perform an a cappella version of the song "One Fine Day." Byrne's closing monologue brings us back to the beginning of the show to those neural connections in our brains that may have been broken or severed: "Our brains can be re-established and can change. We are still works in progress." As the metal curtains rise up into the fly space, the show transforms more fully into the realm of the utopian as the cast rests still in the space as a single entity, harmonizing together:

Even though a man, is made of clay/  
Everything can change, that one  
fine day/  
Then before my eyes, is standing still/  
I beheld it there, a city

on a hill/ I complete my tasks, one by one/ I remove my masks, when I  
am done/ Then a piece of mind, fell over me/ In these troubled times,  
I still can see/ We can use the stars, to guide the way/ It is not that far,  
that one fine day.

That the production is Byrne's conceptual brainchild is clear from the outset, but in it, he also expresses gratitude for his connections to and with others, and the collaborations required to realize any collective vision for the future. In *How Music Works*, he writes: "There's something special about the communal nature of an audience at a live performance . . . that isn't analogous to the music heard through headphones . . . It's a social event, an affirmation of community, and it's also, in some small way, the surrender of the isolated individual to the feeling of belonging to a larger tribe." After more than a year spent apart, these words take on a deeper meaning than ever before.

In the end, *American Utopia* not only offers audiences a glimpse into the workings of a singular artistic mind, but also the power of having a vision-in-progress for a future inclusive of everyone. A final emphasis on Byrne's utopian imagination occurs in the curtain-call performance of "Road to Nowhere," with lyrics that continue to resonate now:

Well, we know where we're goin'/ But we don't know where we've been/  
And we know what we're knowin'/ But we can't say what we've seen/ And  
we're not little children/ And we know what we want/ And the future is  
certain/ Give us time to work it out

## NOTES

1. David Byrne, *How Music Works* (San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2012).
2. The full interview with Annie-B Parson can be found at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jerylbrunner/2019/10/22/annie-b-parson-on-choreographing-david-byrnes-american-utopia/?sh=1c2ee40c18f1>.
3. More about the "We Are Not Divided" project is available at <https://wearenotdivided.reasonstobecheerful.world/>.
4. More about the "Reasons to Be Cheerful" project is available at [reasonstobecheerful.world](https://reasonstobecheerful.world/).
5. Video access to "American Utopia: Detroit" is available at <http://davidbyrne.com/explore/american-utopia/press/david-byrne-releases-everybodys-coming-to-my-house-video-performed-by-detroit-students>.

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**BENJAMIN GILLESPIE** is associate editor of *PAJ* and lecturer in theatre and drama at NYU Tisch School of Drama, The New School, and Macaulay Honors College, CUNY. His articles and reviews have appeared in *Theatre Journal*, *Performance Research*, *Theatre Survey*, *Modern Drama*, *PAJ*, *Theatre Research in Canada*, and *Canadian Theatre Review*, along with several anthologies. He is a PhD candidate in theatre and performance at The Graduate Center, CUNY.