

31 May, 2020

Return To The Root

By Brad Rothbart (They/Them)

“You never want a serious crisis to go to waste. And what I mean by that is an opportunity to do things that you think you could not do before.”

-- Rahm Emanuel

I. What's Next

How many of you, when you were young, said, "I want to grow up and create the best audience feedback form ever?" Or, "Someday, I'll be known as the Mistress Of The Spreadsheet." Not one of us stayed up late imagining a career in administration, and yet it is part and parcel of all of our lives. As someone who has traveled around the USA, I have seen some gorgeous theatre complexes with multiple spaces and different artistic visions for each space. These spaces are temples where we worship the Great Goddess Theatre.

Temples are funny things, though. No one ever loves a temple. You might be awed by it, you might be comforted upon entrance, or feel that you have found a home in an otherwise unforgiving world, but temples inspire respect at best. In the same way, those beautiful spaces some of us are call home, the ones that provide seemingly endless resources and an almost unlimited set of artistic options, are cold at the center. Hollow. Devoid of feeling. Prettified capitalism masquerading as art.

Equally troublesome is a pattern that has developed over the years whereby a small, edgy theatre, riding a crest of popularity and civic support, moves into a larger space and finds themselves programming to service their debt. They need consistent 95% occupancy just to cover payroll, which has increased dramatically as a larger staff is necessary to fulfill the promise of their hip new digs. To achieve increased sales, artistic choices become less edgy in

the hopes of appealing to a greater cross-section of people. The result? The very people who had supported the theatre in its infancy become frustrated by the new direction and the theatre finds itself both in debt and stripped of its most ardent defenders. In the best case, this situation is partially ameliorated by carving out or adding a second, often under-advertised space where all the interesting work lives.

This giant spinning hamster wheel of acquisitiveness, resource-intensity, layered administration, and theatrical size-queening seemed impossible to stop, barring a giant systemic shock. Well, here we are. The first step in adjusting to our new reality is clear:

Sell the buildings; keep the people.

Buildings, and all that goes along with ownership of same, create an organization that is rooted, hidebound, and lumbering. In this particular historic moment, we need to be free, open-minded, and nimble. We need to return to the halcyon days we all fetishize; when we had that small, low-budget black box and the freedom to do anything we could imagine.

Theater should address the question, “How can I live in a world in which I am doomed to die?”

--David Mamet

II. Making It Happen

In this case, Mamet is exactly right. The time for theatrical self-aggrandizement is over. It took a pandemic, but we finally have the opportunity to return to our historic place as a driver of cultural conversations. The theatre functions best as a vessel for the dissemination of information, an open, non-judgmental space where that information can be absorbed, and a mirror that is held up to the dictates of culture, so the audience can understand the forces behind the creation of the information we present.

Not only is this our common purpose at this moment, but it will also forever be our *raison d'être*. Auteurism must die in times of emergency- it's a luxury we can't afford. If you are

convinced you must have a performance space, fret not. There will be plenty of empty storefronts.

An Immodest Proposal For Post-Pandemic Theatre: Using Our Talents In The Service of Society

Conceptualizing the pandemic's effect on theatre not as problem but rather first principle opens up imaginative solutions. For example, re-opening safely will require small shows for small audiences. At the same time, we realize the coming economic depression will increase homelessness. Committing to a theatrical investigation of compactness, we could choose to perform in a series of bijou container homes. Outfit each container home with practicals, and donate it at the end of the show. Simplify the costumes for the shows, lowering those costs, and use the savings to make blankets, scarves, and sweaters with the theatre's name and logo. Through a commitment to serving the people, we improve our cultural standing, leading to better name recognition and increased revenue. Another avenue would be street-theatre productions. Immediately accessible, they provide opportunities for artists to reimagine social distancing as part of a new theatrical grammar. Adding thematically relevant box lunches would allow us to feed both mind and body.

As to the productions themselves, we have some fantastic structural gifts to work with. Everyone needs a mask, which can be theatricalized to suit each piece. Is the mask part of a larger PPE ritual? Is it delivered individually? How? By pneumatic tube? Backscratcher? Robot arm? I'm sure temperature taking can also follow guidelines while serving the theme of the play. Are plays streamed live on Twitch? On video screens? On Zoom? Can we use zoom-bombing as a theatrical technique? The demands inherent in post-pandemic theatre give us a chance to explore the creativity that tight str(u)(i)ctures offer. The chance to create a new theatrical grammar should thrill us.

We have tried, for years, to make theatre part of the lingua franca and appeal to that mysterious everythem. With a few notable exceptions, we have failed. Throwing resources and high concepts at the public hasn't improved our visibility in mainstream culture. Theatre is still a

niche experience, unlike a baseball game. Fully utilizing the possibilities inherent in our current paucity of means allows us to demonstrate that a vibrant theatre is a necessary part of any healthy society.

THE GREAT WORK AWAITS. EXCELSIOR!

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