

So, About Shakespeare (and the Small Matter of Space)

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(he/him/his)

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You may have heard that Shakespeare did some of his best work while holed up during the plague. This is typically a reference to the year 1606, when the Bard completed *King Lear* while a rat-borne strain ravaged London. It's a fun fact that seems to assure us not only of theatre's stubborn resilience, but that we, too, can be productive during a pandemic. Leaving aside that whether or not you write your *King Lear* is your own business, how can the Bard's plight inspire us today?

Fast forward to 1608, another year marked by plague. Thanks to a favorable leasing situation, the Blackfriars Theatre became available, allowing the King's Men, the company in which the Bard was a shareholder, to take it on as their winter home. The company embraced the intimate, candle-lit indoor space at its upscale locale and quickly made bank selling tickets at a premium. The move was so lucrative, in fact, that it inspired other companies to adopt private indoor theatres as their home – assuming they survived the nearly annual plague closures in the first place. Now, kudos to Shakespeare for spending more time indoors during a plague, but consider his position. The King's Men earned their name because their patron was, you guessed it, King James I, and it was James I who helped sweeten that contracting situation when he disbanded the theatre's previous occupants, variously known as the Blackfriars Boys or the Children at Blackfriars, for taking their usual irreverent fare too far. In this sense, Shakespeare himself doesn't offer us much: unless the next stimulus package is distributed much more

broadly than the first, none of us are going to be doubling our seating capacity without the help of a rather petty sovereign.

This is not to say that growth is impossible, but it may require us to reconsider even our most foundational attachments, including to that most precious commodity, the one the King's Men obviously recognized the value of: space. Thankfully, new paradigms are already being explored through online content that is streaming from all around the country. While these teleconference festivals and archive shareables are mostly a stop-gap measures, we would do well not to discard them at the first opportunity. Naturally, theatre in person and theatre on Zoom are not the same, partly because there are special kinks in any streamed encounter, just as there are in any work conference. And while it does present a potential boon to accessibility, it is worth remembering that stable, quality internet access remains a luxury to many. Still, rather than recoil at the thought of "sully" theatre by webcasting, consider that the value of *being there*, for those who can, has never really, truly dissipated – in fact, it is only being burnished by this enforced separation. Assuming there is nothing to lose, let audiences have more, even if it is on their phone. For those with means, why not even maximize the age of handheld recorders, multi-platform engagement, and interactive projections by making theatre and streaming work together? Imagine *Lear* played out on stage *and* screen, forcing the deteriorating monarch to confront just how fractured his legacy has become. Theatre has always absorbed new technologies and creative enterprises into itself, and this move even further indoors should be no different.

Of course, space in the age of coronavirus is a fraught in more ways than to stream or not to stream. Countless people in our country are navigating through newly constrained pathways and debilitating separations, and we can expect to see these anxieties exorcised on the page and

stage very soon. Now, it is worth pointing out that while *King Lear* was completed during a plague, it was never *about* the plague. Like many of Shakespeare's plays, it is haunted by the contagion because in those days, it was a brutal fact of life. That one of his most celebrated plague-time works confronts life touched but not ended by the plague should liberate us in two senses: first, from having to make theatre *about* COVID-19, and second, to chart the ways compromised spaces make themselves evident in our margins. Often, it is in the margins, both of our texts and our lives, that the true scope of disaster is felt; witness how the virus ravages the communities already least served by our systems. Good dramaturgs will read with an eye to this, and good theatres will act accordingly.

Ultimately, when the doors finally do open up again, we would all do well to revisit our spaces with a critical gaze, whether or not we persist with online content or simply take it in turns to stage the first great coronavirus family drama. Is sharing space really about embracing the “co,” as in “co-presence,” “co-habitation,” and “co-llaboration,” we might ask ourselves? Or are we simply paying lip-service to the idea when really, we just fetishize our brick, our mortar, and our recently remodeled lobbies? Reading our practices and institutions carefully will reveal the answer. It will also show us the degree to which our artistic and communal decisions must be made in conjunction with one another. Sure, a revised approach to space could yield more audience interaction, more street theatre, and more site-specific productions, but it should also invite us to host our colleagues rather than compete for sales, embrace our neighborhoods rather than perform at a dignified remove, and recall that plenty of spaces other than theatres can be shared, meaning the money we would spend in remodeling our Globe or coveting our Blackfriars could instead be spent on the people that actually do the sharing. Embracing a new ethic of space can be regenerative for the art form and bear fruit on both sides of the fourth wall, but only

if we give it the sustenance it needs to grow. Then maybe we can talk about thriving as much as we imagine Shakespeare did in spite of the plague.

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