

DRAMATURING THE PHOENIX
A Challenge for LMDA Members
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The Next Normal and the Right Now

To reflect in any way on the right now, I need to assemble some facts about what was. The Before Times through March 11, 2020 and my last show of the 2019-2020 theater season included a year that had been subsumed almost completely by two leadership positions that I was happy to take on, yet absorbed all light and energy in the room. A black hole that absorbs all in its path. That kind of suckage happened during this first year of my tenure as chair of the executive committee of the American Theatre Critics Association and a second consecutive year as chair of the New York's Drama Desk nominating committee. And then, a door shut for all of us.

When Broadway, then all New York theater, and then theater and events around the country shut down in March (the final preview of SIX on Broadway on March 11th was my last show of the season, what was yours?), I had decisions to make from within that black hole. Big events for convening critics nationally were cut off and reconceptualized, and final decisions making for an awards committee in New York City were re-designed.

For the [American Theatre Critics Association](#), an annual conference which a few of us spent many hours planning, designed to fold into parts of the April 2020 Pacific Playwrights Festival, was cancelled by March 13th. Hotel contracts, terrific playwrights and theater creators were lined up, and we had planned to award our Steinberg-ATCA New Play and Osborn playwright awards, worth over \$40,000, during the conference. Disappointment encouraged creativity, and in May, we released a first-ever [ATCA video award ceremony](#) for those four playwrights. And since August we have been deep in the throes of planning our 46-year-old organization's [first truly national and digital conference](#). Without geography rooting us in place, we are exploring our profession's "Next Normal" using Zoom as the tool, and a stage manager-producer (as well as some amazing content) to hold the event together.

The awards season in New York City continued in its own odd way. Some programs continued, some punted, and the Drama Desk decided to proceed with honoring 2019-2020 shows that opened as of March 12 (so excluding SIX which did not, in fact, open). Drama Desk nominators met on Zoom calls in two long meetings and concluded our review of 200 shows rather than 260 or so (March and April were PACKED with offerings). Watching the cancellation notices come into my inbox and the news breaking on March 12 was wild and worrying. I recall as I recorded notes and deleted 40 scheduled shows from my calendar scheduled from March 12 through April 19, the last day nominators would see all the eligible shows for the season, I felt an accumulation of shocks. Like the Rachel Maddow 'poof' board of presidential candidates who left the field during the season -- "poof" there goes another show. And each time, an ache. And each time, a question: what comes next? In this case, [the Drama Desk Awards ceremony](#) also went virtual, also in May.

What does all this mean? Seeing theater and writing and thinking about theater informed my days, and administrative tasks absorbed most of my time. And pandemic shutdown forced creative adaptation on several fronts. And dramaturgical, what, wherewithal, inspired new ways of looking at what might be possible.

Along the way we are all observing, often breathing through masks and washing our hands at the same time, what new models are emerging for the art form we adore, theater involving humans on a stage. Our "next normal" is a new constellation of parts. Potent storytelling, in whatever form remains my religion -- from the rehearsal room or through developmental work with a playwright or from the seats as a critic and writer. The truths of theatrical storytelling will see us through, with some of us holding a few too many meetings to keep the mechanics running. Take your place in whatever role you are playing, and let's walk forward, together.