Free falling into the story

The last live theatre performance that I saw was *Mr. Burns: A Post-Electric Play* by Anne Washburn. A design run at the University of Massachusetts that, (like so many productions in March 2020,) wouldn't see its full fruition. If you know the play, you will understand its eerie relevance: three acts that each take us deeper into a post-apocalyptic United States where people are hoarding supplies and fearful of the contagion of strangers and ultimately forced to invent new forms of storytelling. But at that moment, it was the incompleteness of the production as well as the story that was prophetic.

Crammed into a black box theatre, we were aware of an invisible threat, but not yet wearing masks or keeping six feet away from each other. The elements of production were still visible: the stage management table was occupied and taking up the front two rows of seats, actors still called for lines or held scripts in hand, the musical director was counting the cast into songs, while playing from the side and jumping in to lead the harmonies. I have always found this to be the most magical part of theatrical process, not a final product with all the frantic backstage work masked, but the times when I've been privileged to witness and be a part of the mechanics of collective creation. Mostly, I remember the whooping of support from company members seated in the audience until their entrance. A collective applause that has echoed through months of social isolation.

The meta-story in the theatre that evening was that Spring Break was to be extended by a week, after which time we would re-gather and pick up the pieces. Even then we were skeptical, realizing that we were being fed a fairy tale ending where containment would be possible, and yet we left our books in our offices and our props on the table, not yet realizing the scope of the epic we were embarking on.

That first week, I occupied myself with postponing travel plans and shifting calendars, still inhabiting my regular day to day and controlling the movement of characters of my own invention across a page. An illusion of control. It was only when I gave myself a chance to look up, beyond my own work, my own family, my own town, my own country, my own story, that I began to comprehend the enormity of the ground swell.

In this swell we have been forced to confront other stories: people dying alone in hospital beds while their relatives mourned from a distance, makeshift morgues, a policeman knelling on the neck of an unarmed Black man until he suffocated, an emergency nurse shot multiple times in her own bed, tear gas and violent responses to protests, people being airlifted out of millions of miles of fire sparked by a changing climate and an outdated ritual. These stories come so thick and fast that we are left without time or a collective space to process them. It is clear that we can't simply return to the season as planned.

Needless to say, in the six months that I have been grounded, I have not written my *King Lear*.

I have written: emergency grants, statements of solidarity, petitions, protest signs, condolence cards, unemployment forms, blog posts, lists, invitations to online play readings, frantic texts to friends, a will… all fragments that, for me, don't stitch up to a complete story.

Meanwhile, a new mode of communication gives me the super power to transport myself Star Trek style with the click of a button from a stressful staff meeting discussion of unemployment to the intimacy of my four-year-old niece's bedroom. She places her mother's phone on the pillow next to her so I can read her a story while she closes her eyes. Both performer and audience, I watch her fall asleep from 3,000 miles away.

Four months later, we have explored the parameters of this medium so much that we are designing full productions on it. Not a replacement for live theatre, we say. Until we can safely gather together, we say. And yet, prior to COVID, our most celebrated theatres spaces were barred to most by high ticket prices, inaccessible locations, language barriers, and most importantly the stories that we chose to tell. On digital platforms, the gates are down, tickets are affordable, you can watch from the comfort of your own home, in your own time and closed captioning is provided.

American theatre makers are trained to control environments in order to allow for complete escapism. So, there is a fear and delight in the moments that go wrong in these digital performances. The actor with spotty internet connection. The chat show host who gets upstaged by a young child. An audience member who unintentionally turns their screen on and enters the stage space. When the illusion cracks, there is no escape from our reality and we have to acknowledge it as a part of the story.

A colleague, when offering feedback on one of my plays, reassures me that endings are the hardest thing to write. Endings are framed by the victors, or at least the survivors. We don't yet know who is going to survive. As the litany of disasters grow, we don't have a steady place to stand and survey the ground, in order to see the full picture and compose a story. Within the structure of *Mr. Burns*, we are still in Act One.

As a theatre maker who works primarily in and with stories of social change, I'm drawn to the shifting perspective. I'm finding poetry in the fragments floating down all around and solidarity in the bravery of those standing up for justice. Immersed in multiple conflicting stories, I'm resisting the temptation to artificially stitch them together in an attempt to control the narrative. Maybe instead of trying to harness a phoenix we need to spend time in the ashes to contemplate what was destroyed. Only then can we lift our eyes up and look through new prosceniums, hoping to find connection.

- Talya Kingston (she/her) September 15, 2020