

Post-COVID Theatre as Imagined by an Emerging North American Dramaturg in April 2020

Despite eloquent Facebook posts cheerfully suggesting otherwise, social isolation has, for better or worse, been a gut-punch to artistic practice. On a personal scale, my still-maturing body of theatre criticism, my plays-in-progress, the in-person performance theory seminars so recently deemed to be integral to my theatre education – they've been irrevocably marred by their intersection with the coronavirus historical vacuum. In truth, the first few weeks of social isolation were brutal, each passing day punctuated by the loss of another contract, another performance, another travel plan. I grieved for lost work: we all did.

In the weeks following, though, something shifted; virtual live-streams (both amateur and professional) rose from the pixelated ashes, accompanied by meaty discourse on what theatre is forced to become when stripped of its liveness. We the dramaturgs, directors, producers, actors, technicians, critics, patrons, playwrights, volunteers – we've been confronted by a new *communitas*, one which we must be willing to stretch and manipulate as our worlds crystallize around us. Dramaturgs – the uniquely-qualified keepers of the amalgamation of history, experience, and articulation – will be the ones to document this new, uncharted territory. We'll keep tabs on the voices being amplified, and, as is our mostly-progressive prerogative, remind our professional circles of the marginalized voices being smothered in the trample for sustained relevancy. We'll review live-streams and pre-records, and in doing so shift the parameters of what criticism must be in the age of solo audience. We'll check in with each other, reminding our collaborators and compatriots of dramaturgical growth that metrics of productivity are allowed to regress during a global pandemic. Dramaturgy will survive, because we're empathetic and ever-cognizant of the lenses bouncing against each other in cyberspace: we will remember

this time, and we will protect it in its inevitable theatricalized form in the months, years, and decades to come.

What, then, do we do in the meantime? It is all well and good to believe in theatre's future, but right now, we must confront this strange reality - one filtered through screens in living rooms and on balconies and under IKEA duvets. We, the dramaturgs, can offer some consolation:

- Even without the luxury of physicalized co-presence, online audiences are still experiencing and changing together as they consume live-streams and pre-recorded archival footage from theatres around the globe. The gasps of fellow audience members are, to be sure, less immediate, but the spectacle itself is closer than it could ever be to us during "normal" times; there is a trade-off, but one that does not have to lessen the theatre-going experience. It's different from the rituals we've come to hold sacred, of course (the mid-row shuffle, the printed program, the Canadian standing ovation no matter the calibre of the show), but it's a ritual in itself nonetheless (in the sense that the performance remains a catalyst for change within the individual). For instance: when I watch a Moscow production of Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* (a performance I'd, without the impact of COVID-19, never have been able to encounter) from the comfort of my Ottawa living room, I knowingly engage with a plurality of communities – the pre-recorded Russian bodies in seats at the forefront of the filmed playing space, and my co-spectators around the globe. My favourite professor and I are able to discuss the implications of the translation and the *mise-en-scène* in real time over Facebook Messenger, unburdened by normal, whispered social cues. We experience the piece *together*, despite being separated by physical

- distance. The dramaturgy of spectator is a laboured discipline, one with footing in the work of Artaud and Di Marinis (among many, many others), but it allows us the theoretical toolbox to prove that even through a filtered lens, we the spectators and we the scholars can still carry theatre and its subsequent discourse through this crisis.
- The release of archival footage and multi-scale livestreams is an unprecedented measure of equitable access to theatre; while it is not a given that everyone has high-speed Internet, certainly a sizable portion of homebound individuals are now able to consume high-grade productions that otherwise might have been out of geographical or financial reach. The National Theatre's Thursday-night livestreams are a strong example of this phenomenon; the opening of landmark theatre archives brings with it a more level playing field for students, artists, and patrons alike, now able to enjoy high-calibre theatre at negligible cost to them. Personally, I have made note of the high-budget theatres working to support local artists and opening their archives to the public; these are the theatres I will be happy to support once they are able to open again. (And the theatres hoarding footage, or keeping it behind unreasonable paywalls? I maintain compassion for arts organizations attempting to salvage already razor-thin margins, but I am wary of this knowing rejection of potential audiences and researchers.)
 - The emerging cohort of Canadian playwrights, directors, and dramaturgs that I am lucky enough to call my friends have reminded me of one thing being certain: artists are still creating. They're still thinking in terms of the theatricalized image – poeticized truth through an anxious prism. I've no doubt we'll see plays on COVID-19 in the years to come, but I also know we will see *non-pandemic plays* right

alongside them. The struggle to maintain productivity during these times is a legitimate one, and I firmly believe that we've earned the right to be gentle with ourselves and our ambitions. But I also know that I, as an artist, have run out of seasons of reality TV to fill my time – that I've revisited old drafts, and rediscovered the joys of world-building and -excavating. The resurgence of theatre will bring with it a burgeoning army of dramatic voices, hungry for renewed togetherness outside the rehearsal Zoom.

These times are difficult; this goes without saying. As a critic, I find it tough to “review” online shows, even knowing their supreme value to the artistic world as it stands. As a playwright, I've had evenings of supreme disbelief in the utility of my art form as the creative world I've come to adore uncontrollably changes. As a student, I fear for my final year of an extremely hands-on theatre degree. As a dramaturg, though, I'm attempting (as well as is possible) to see this unsolicited intermission as what it is: as only a break for us, the community, the ensemble hurtling towards an Act II rife with renewed faith in creation and belief in the history on which it stands. We the dramaturgs will remember these days as the incubator for a new generation of theatre – a phoenix with unfurled and passionate wings.

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