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The Future is Accessible

The COVID-19 pandemic has meant many unexpected changes. Everyone deals with the unexpected differently and for me, it has prompted an intense period of questioning and a need to share those thoughts.

The initial questions were more specific to my profession. Since freelance dramaturgy is not my primary source of income, the questions weren't focused on my own financial survival, but instead on the survival of the profession itself. When the position is already often cut from production teams as a cost-saving measure, will there be work to go back to? Would the role of the dramaturg be entirely sacrificed in the future to have less expensive productions?

Immediately following those questions came the more complex ones about accessibility. Accessibility has a broad definition, but it's commonly associated with people who have disabilities. That's primarily whom I think of when I talk about accessibility because that's my reality; I am part of the community that needs accessibility to live. Accessibility is so integral to my life that it has become the major underlying theme of all my work—hence my concern. Would present and future conversations about theatre include accessibility? What does accessibility mean during the present moment? Will accessibility be sidelined during the rebuilding period that will follow?

Finding a Way to Move Forward

Fueled and guided by these questions, I was eventually able to channel my mental energy into action. In response to the current situation, my first concrete action has been dramaturging a webinar on creating accessible virtual arts programming. With the increase in virtual/ digital content, including livestreaming events and productions, there's an opportunity to reach new audiences in the disability community. Digital content can reach people for whom physically attending an event is just not possible, such as those living with chronic health conditions that prevent them from leaving their homes. Is live attendance at an event really necessary for us to connect with each other? I don't question that there's no substitute for the magic of live performance, but is it always necessary to physically be in the same room? It's unfortunate that it took a global pandemic to force more theatres to experiment with new methods of audience engagement.

While we test our preconceived conclusions about the primacy of attending live performances, we must also think about the role of accessibility in rebuilding. There's a tendency to think about rebuilding what we once had rather than seeing the current situation as an opportunity to create new accessible, and therefore more inclusive, practices. Will we try to retrace our steps to get our

theatres up and running, or will we deliberately choose a new path and cover new ground? How can we shift from thinking of accessibility as an afterthought that organizations address when they're fiscally stable to thinking of accessibility as an integral part of rebuilding? One important lesson that I've learned is that it's always best to incorporate accessibility into anything you do *from the very beginning*. Start as early as possible. In the past, accessibility has usually not been a priority for organizations with already strained budgets trying to address multiple demands.

Any discussion about accessibility isn't quite comprehensive enough without mentioning the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Among the many events that the pandemic has interrupted, or at least altered, were upcoming celebrations for the 30th anniversary of the ADA in July. This landmark civil rights law continues to have an enormous impact on the lives of disabled people. For me, the significance of the ADA is that the law clearly states that I have the right to employment and the right to participate in society without discrimination. People with disabilities were left out of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and instead had to wait over two decades for similar civil rights. And now 30 years later, we're still fighting to not be overlooked. Will accessibility be put on the backburner because "recovery" is more important? When "recovery" translates to achieving the relative safety of financial stability, does that justify not making necessary changes to ensure the inclusion of people with disabilities? It's not possible to be truly inclusive without also being accessible.

Looking to the Future

Practicing dramaturgy has taught me the generative potential of asking questions. That posing tough questions can lead to creative solutions. My hope is that these questions provoke conversations and a reexamination of current and future work. I've learned that, more often than not, the answers will be discovered through the process. But here are a few practical suggestions to begin with:

- 1) Examine your mission. Whether it's an organization's mission statement or a personal mission statement, chances are that it in some way involves accessibility. Are you actively fulfilling that mission?
- 2) Hire people with disabilities. If you're not in a position to hire, then find a way to involve them in whatever you do. Embrace diverse perspectives and incorporate lived experience into your organization, your work, and your life.
- 3) Apply the principles of universal design. How might universal design—design that is accessible to people with a range of abilities—change your work? What does examining the design of your work reveal?

The title of this essay comes from a social campaign created by disability activist Annie Segarra in 2017. “The Future is Accessible” is a call to prioritize accessibility and equity. It’s a demand for recognizing the importance of visibility and the intersectional identities of disabled people. An accessible future must be both inclusive and equitable. For a portion of the population, accessibility is not optional; it’s a necessity. Ultimately, however, accessibility is beneficial for everyone and it must be seen as a cross-cutting issue that deserves action. Sidelining accessibility also means that you sideline inclusion.

I envision a future where there are accessible options for engaging in both virtual and live events. A future where accessibility is so steeped into our work that we automatically think about who can access what we create and how they will be able to do so. Accessibility has to be part of an individual’s mindset and an organization’s internal culture in order to create inclusive environments and practices. By applying the principles of Universal Design to engage with the widest spectrum of people, we can transform our work to connect more fully and more meaningfully.

Systematic change to prioritize accessibility takes time and persistence, but it’s possible—especially now when we have so much time on our hands.