

What will the Phoenix look like?

There is an old (well, 1913) Swedish walking tune called “We hike over dew-sprinkled hills..” The fourth verse tells about the destination: the land of the Phoenix.

*Så gladeligt hand uti hand, fallera
nu gå vi till Fågel Fenix’ land, fallera,
till det sagoland som skiner
av kristaller och rubiner,
nu gå vi till Fågel Fenix’ land, fallera!*

So happily, all hand in hand, fallera
we’re off to the Phoenix bird’s fair land, fallera
to the fairyland that’s shining
with rubies and diamonds,
we’re off to the Phoenix bird’s fair land, fallera!

The word “Phoenix” makes this song come unbid to my mind, as part of the flotsam and jetsam from my childhood and teens in Sweden. The picture of Phoenix among “*kristaller och rubiner*” plunks me right in the middle of the vision I have for the new risen post-pandemic theatre. It has to do with treasures of spirit, heart, courage, imagination—but not of money.

Let me explain. I wrote a paper for the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters about the challenges of dramaturging Strindberg in the US. I need not go into details, but practically every thread I pursued in my hunt for the reasons for American attitudes to producing Strindberg led to money. Perhaps “money is the root of all evil”—but must it be the root of all theatre?

My vision is this: The pandemic has spawned/nurtured/fed new ways of “doing theatre” and “going to the theatre.” Many of these new ways are eye-openers! Creative! Refreshing! Startling! Thought-provoking! For one thing, they have invited and shaped TIME in a new way. The old routine—x number of weeks rehearsing, y number of days in techs, z number of days in previews; q number of hours to get to the theatre (for actors and audiences and production staff alike); for actors, w hours putting on makeup and costume, warming up, gargling, frantically locating the lucky rabbit’s foot... And for the audience, getting the car out, waking up enough to go out again after a long week but you don’t want to waste a subscription ticket... sleeping through the first act? There’s always strong coffee in the intermission... The ROUTINE!

Whereas NOW—the last few weeks—anything but routine! Binge watching the National Theatre from London, seeing local theatres put on weekly chats with favorite actors (one at a time), reruns of archived shows from past seasons, Zoom chorales singing favorite opera choruses, Zoom casts presenting 29-hour rule readings of new scripts and inviting audience members in the zoom room to a Q and A after the reading... NOW there is time to ruminate, respond, formulate emails, marvel at the capacity for the new *fora* (plural of forum, yes?) to bring out unexpected balances, juxtapositions, voices, centers of gravity. And to weigh the advantage (?) of seeing everyone in closeup against the disadvantage of seeing

no overall space... All exciting to the home viewer/listener! Though frustrating when your laptop camera and home office lighting makes your face look bathed in lemon curd.

Anyway, the new paths—how many are there?—beckon! The new Zoom paths, both of preparing (rehearsing), performing, and attending, are coyly inviting, half-open doors... Why not open them, walk through them?

And, guess what? They are on the whole FREE! Yes, we know the reason for these new paths is temporary. As it must be, since no money coming in means slow strangulation. But, on the other hand, what can we learn and keep and nurture of the new ways even when salaries and rents and ticket costs and royalties and intermission lattes have been reintroduced?

I think that is the critical question. What can we learn from the present experimentation and inventiveness, what can we keep and nurture of practices which at first seemed only like ways to circumvent restrictions and limitations? If we can find ways to support theatre without always having to look sideways at budgets and balance sheets, without having to consider the lowest common denominator, would the theatrical spectrum be wider? What if a given theatre company could expand its season by including electronic stages?

Would the repertoire be more risky (i.e., by having no TV or film star in the lead, no British import to guarantee a certain audience, no good old favorite for the nth time, no 3,000-seat house to fill)? Would it instead be able to produce more new scripts, cast unknown actors, have a dramaturg (although they cost money and the audience can't see their contribution), commission new translations/adaptations, and schedule enough rehearsal time to tackle "difficult" productions? Above all, beyond all, what if survival depended less on producers and shareholders who treat a theatre production as just another horse race? Some tracks seem to be deadly to horses. Are some theatres deadly to actors?

Two final points: First, there is no denying the power of live theatre, performers and audience breathing in the same space. But could this live theatre be augmented, supported, introduced, made more accessible and more imaginative by the pandemic electronic alternatives? Second, in my vision, which may sound like 'save money at all cost, ' the one resource that cannot be starved or substituted out of existence is live actors and theatre practitioners. It is to them, not to the bettors on the horse race, that the money should go. They are the shining rubies and diamonds in the land of the Phoenix bird.

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