

Let It Burn

I can't stop thinking about the fire.

The mythological phoenix who inspired this challenge is a glorious bird. It lives for centuries and is known for its strength, its ability to heal, and its music. But, before any of that, what it is perhaps best known for is burning to death and then being reborn from its own ashes. And, in these deeply challenging times, try as I might, I can't quite imagine what the glorious, strong, healing, resurrected phoenix of post-coronavirus theatre will look like. Instead, I keep thinking about the fire.

In some of the mythology, before its triumphant rebirth, the phoenix is responsible for building its own pyre. Can theatre artists do the same for our field? There are so many assumptions, habits, and perspectives that are worth setting ablaze. Exorbitant ticket prices that keep prospective audience members from seeing theatre? Exclusive training opportunities that prevent talented artists from moving forward in the field? Let them burn. Glorification of overwork and underpayment? Stratification of artists, administrators, and audience? Let it burn. Artistry as an excuse for bad behavior? Bottom lines as an excuse for risk-aversion? Let it burn. Audience behavior policing? Under involvement in the local community? Let it burn. There is so very much indeed that we should do away with.

But, of course, we aren't building the pyre alone. This pandemic is an unwelcome collaborator, setting alight things that we might not otherwise wish to part with. It is said that immediately following the phoenix's miraculous rebirth it would embalm its predecessor's ashes and deposit them on an altar. In addition to mourning the very real losses that the world is reeling from at present, there is loss within the theatrical realm as well. I mourn for the plays whose productions have been cancelled or postponed and for the plays that, newly unsuitable in whatever post-pandemic life looks like, might never see production. I mourn the theatre companies who will not survive this and for the staff who become the collateral damage of the ones that do. I mourn the artists who may leave the field, driven by financial precarity or disillusionment. And I mourn the audience members who won't return to the theatre because they no longer feel safe there or because they can no longer afford to.

Part of why I struggle to imagine the gloriously reborn phoenix of the theatrical landscape is because, as is currently abundantly clear, our lives and our work in theatre is deeply interconnected with the world at large. We don't know what post-pandemic society will look like, or what the theatre's place in it might be. Will a government that doesn't invest in its arts and humanities be consumed by the fire? Will a culture of divisiveness, unkindness, and incivility? Will an economic system that benefits the very few? Without a radical transformation of American society as a whole, the emergent phoenix may not be a totally transformed creature but rather a hodgepodge of old habits and new perspectives. (Though, I'd still take that over no transformation at all).

So what is a dramaturg with a newfound interest in metaphorical pyromania to do in this moment when it feels like much of the world is already on fire and much more of it ought to burn? Honestly, I don't really know. I can contribute to the pyre by interrogating my own personal artistic practice and stripping it back to its essential elements. I can extend compassion and aid to those who need it. I can advocate for change that will make this a better country for its people, and, therefore, a better country for its theatre. Is that enough? I don't know. But maybe, if you do this too, and we hold each other accountable, we can join together one day soon and not just imagine but actually create a glorious, strong, healing, resurrected phoenix of theatre.

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