

The Work of the Theater; and why it is not the same as your job

By David Bruin (he/him)

The greatest threat to the theater today is the theater industry. When I say *theater*, I mean a practice, a habit of assembly, a set of traditions passed down and remade by social life. It is a technology and a medium that enables people to gather together and call into question what it means to be together, to be sent by one another and for one another. In the theater, we “consent not to be a single being,” to quote Fred Moten, who borrowed the phrase from Édouard Glissant. Drawing upon the resources of the stage—dramaturgy, theatricality, spectatorship, and so on—the theater lets us ask: “Why are things so bad?” and “How can they be otherwise?” which is also to ask “How are things already otherwise but endangered?” or “How can we save what we already have, which is one another upon the earth and under the heavens, which is to say, everything?”

As a practice, theater belongs to no one. Those who gather in its name are indebted to the theater. To ask how this debt can be repaid—how one can receive credit in the theater—is to misunderstand the radical gift that is shared in and as theater. What is shared, what we hold in common, is nothing less than social life and the persistence of social life in the face of an ongoing war against the commons—a war that for the past half-millennium has targeted the global majority, who bear the burden of its causalities and costs, to say nothing of the earth and the heavens, whose changes with regards to climate unleash havoc on the people least responsible for them. In this light, theater of war is a redundancy. Survival has always been the theater’s highest calling. The work of the theater and the work we do in the theater is to help one

another survive and—maybe, even for a moment—flourish, find pleasure, and receive wisdom amidst a set of unbearably alienating, brutal, and, for many, genocidal conditions.

The theater *industry*, on the other hand, is the institutionalization and privatization of the theater and the social life that takes place in its name. Theater “credits” only make sense in the context of the theater industry proper, that is, when the theater is subject to the terms of private property. As an industry, working in the theater takes the form of a job, a role that an individual plays under the auspices of an institution, whether that is a production, a nonprofit theater, a professorship, and so on. Jobs come with responsibilities. The employee must respond to the needs and objectives of so-called stakeholders. (These individual responsibilities may *overlap* with others, but to say that they are *shared* risks distorting the radical generosity of sharing, and I am not willing to surrender that radicality. Whether or not there can be something like “shared leadership” in the theater industry is a question worth asking, always and everywhere.) Ultimately, employees receive compensation for their labor.

At this moment, (almost) everyone needs a job to survive. This is one of the absolute worst things about working in the theater industry, but it is not something specific to the theater or something that the theater, on its own, can change. It is one of the conditions brought about by, among other things, the war on the commons, whose many fronts include white supremacy, racial capitalism, settler colonialism, and many other forms of subjugation, exploitation, extraction, and so on.

Furthermore, jobs can be good things to have. I have had many jobs in the theater, and I am not ashamed of any of them. “How can I do a better job?” This is a worthwhile question to ask whenever and wherever people labor. Needless to say, there is a great deal of work undertaken by a great many people—especially those struggling for Black lives, for Indigenous people, for queer liberation, for trans lives, for those with different abilities, for the poor, for the earth, and for water—that have put forward visions of how the theater industry can be just, safe, equitable, inclusive, sustainable, and artistically excellent.

But, perhaps now more than ever, doing your job in the theater is not the same as doing the work of the theater. The two can coexist, even harmonize or achieve synergy. To believe that the two can be seamlessly integrated is, however, to risk indulging in naivete. Already, this pandemic has offered numerous examples of institutions—ostensibly committed to doing the work—ready to save themselves first and foremost. Already, we have seen how unevenly the risks and resources of the theater industry are distributed. Already, we have seen how bad things are and are left to wonder how much worse they can get.

This is not a call for amateurism. This is a prompt to consider what types of terms might be useful in the shared project of imagining a world in which the difference between professional and amateur, between working and “not working”—which could mean taking care of children or elders, building community, healing oneself and others—is not the difference between “making a living” and what Lauren Berlant calls slow death.

The situation of the theater has been awful for a long time. Some individual institutions and individuals at those institutions are to blame. We need to hold power to account, and we all owe a debt to those who have and continue to do so.

At the same time, some individual institutions and individuals at those institutions deserve to be celebrated. The Movement Theatre Company, JACK, Target Margin, Soho Rep, and many others have led the way. So too has the example of We See You White American Theatre and many other collective, grassroots movements. I am nominating these enterprises as exemplary, because I believe that what they share in common is a commitment to understanding the relationship between the theater and the theater industry, and negotiating that relationship in practice, showing us through their radical imagination that another world is possible and, indeed, is already underway.

Needless to say, this pandemic is a catastrophe for the theater and the theater industry. If this moment is an opportunity of any kind, then it is because the dangers that the theater industry poses to the theater have never been more felt, legible, or concrete. This does not necessarily mean that the industry is more pliable to change. Some aspects of the profession are entrenched now more than ever. Nonetheless, the theater is worth saving even as it is under severe threat.

To that end, anytime we work together, we must ask ourselves: How can the theater survive the theater industry? How can we find a way to do the work of the theater while still doing our jobs? How can social life survive and thrive over and against the conditions of labor that seek to

alienate, privatize, and commodify it? Does the institution—which is also to say, the individual—need to be abolished?

Those of us who practice dramaturgy—regardless of how they labor—have, as always, something to contribute to the shared work of the theater. We can see, name, and question how the theater works; what work can take place in and in the name of the theater; and how the industry can host and protect the theater and the social life from which it emerges and to which it returns. What traditions might guide us? What traditions do us harm? How can we see what we already have and what we already know, which is everything? How can we give the gift of theater to one another and for one another until the distinction between “one” and “another” fails to reflect the forms of life that sustain our practice and our survival?

Whether dramaturgs should receive more or less credit; whether dramaturgs and literary managers “deserve” to be paid more or less for their jobs; whether a professional as a professional can have a better or worse, more or less equitable relationship with their boss, employees, or clients. Whether making ticket prices \$35 instead of \$75 makes theater more or less “accessible.” These are worthwhile questions. They are necessary to doing a better job. But they are critical to the theater only insofar as the theater industry and one’s job within it helps save the theater from the same industry that threatens to consume it.

Our task now—against the backdrop of this terrible pandemic and the ways it has exacerbated the lethal forces of white supremacy, racial capitalism, settler colonialism, and so on—is to renew our habits of assembly through practice, study, and solidarity. The theater industry needs

more resources—people, time, money, property—but we must preserve, at all costs, the theater as a space where people can come together to share their needs with one another. That is the true source of the theater’s wealth, and in the end, the theater exists above all to show us that our needs are all we have (to give).

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