

It mattered. And theater matters.

We want this time to matter. In the future we will want this time to have mattered. That's the nature of the human experience seen through the lens of history. *This* event plus *that* event added up to this meaning. And it mattered.

Rarely in the midst of the experience can we know *how* it will matter. We know that something has changed more dramatically than usual. This pandemic is a singular event for most people alive today. We're in crisis mode right now, so our job is to get through it, not to determine all the ways it has meaning. We're told (and understand) how at this moment some people are "essential" and some are "non-essential": those labels make sense as we get through the immediate crisis.

But those labels – helpful or not as they are – aren't permanent. More people will find themselves in the essential bucket sooner or later, and I think theater artists will be among them. Because we're among the folks that will put perspective and meaning on how this time matters. Will matter. Mattered.

It probably won't be immediately felt or understood, however.

I don't think theater will rise like a phoenix, because it didn't naturally reach the end of its life to be reborn anew.

Theater will, as always, absorb new information and experience and begin the long and sometimes subtle process of conveying what has been learned to help people today process what has happened and to lay the groundwork for people in the future to understand why and how it mattered.

The 1980s AIDS crisis gave us a few years later Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* and eventually a generation later Matthew Lopez's *The Inheritance*. The Depression forged a generation of voices that shaped 20th century American theater. Civil Rights, Vietnam War, Gulf War, 9/11. Events that mattered found meaning in theater, sometimes as an immediate response, sometimes and perhaps more often as a longer view. In an essay about why he wrote *The Crucible*, Arthur Miller said, "Fear doesn't travel well; just as it can warp judgment, its absence can diminish memory's truth. What terrifies one generation is likely to bring only a puzzled smile to the next."

News headlines, journalistic think pieces, political hashing, and internet memes will fade out of memory, but theater will keep memory's truth alive.

The immediate business for many producers coming out of the pandemic will be survival – how to keep a theater or a show afloat, how to support artists and fulfill contracts, how to reassure and welcome back a potentially skittish audience. Maybe the first shows will be the equivalent of comfort food: known titles, authors or stories; much loved revivals; comedy, musicals, escapism.

Eventually the healing and the search for understanding will require the next wave of *The Crucibles*, *Angels in Americas*, *Sweats* and *9 Parts of Desires*.

Theater will return less like a phoenix rising from ashes and more like a growth spurt, taking what was, pushing new boundaries, finding new voices and engaging in new understanding. And theater will tell us why *this* time matters.

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