

Who Gets Left Behind?  
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The impact of coronavirus hit our home on day sixteen, when my three-year-old once again asked to go to school to see his friends. I reminded him that we needed to stay home a little longer to be good neighbors. His eyes dimmed, he crumpled in the corner, and asked for “sad Johnny Cash songs because my heart hurts.”

When these moments of pain and loss overwhelm him, there is one thing I’ve found that helps him process his emotions. We role play. One of his favorite games is Family. When he is Mama, he demonstrates what he needs from me, and as Baby, I can connect words to his behavior. Our scenes usually involve a retelling of some event that has happened in the last few days. We’ll role play a scenario, then stop, talk about what we observed, and then improvise different approaches until we find one that solves our problem. Yes, I’m using Boal techniques with my toddler. The more we play, the more we both are able to understand and support each other in this difficult time.

I opened with the anecdote about my son and Boal because it illustrates the healing power of theatre. But Theatre of the Oppressed wasn’t created to help an overwhelmed toddler- it was created to empower marginalized communities. With theatre around the world shut down right now, we are trying to justify our relevance. If we are going to return as not just relevant, but vital, then we need to embrace the voices that are often overshadowed, if not completely left out, in the theatre community.

Right now, we are all experiencing disruption related to coronavirus, and there’s a term for that- collective trauma. In a recent *Psychology Today* article, Danielle Render Turmaud tells us that one of the impacts of collective trauma is that the disruption leads to a fundamental reworking of the fabric of society. The need to re-imagine our current theatrical season planning and practices is more clear than ever.

We may be experiencing collective trauma, but we can’t pretend that everyone has been impacted equally. We like to think of theatre as a place where we can champion and celebrate diversity, but right now POC (especially Black and Indigenous) artists are fighting for their lives on multiple fronts- their communities are disproportionately affected by coronavirus, those who do fall ill are more likely to receive inadequate healthcare (if they can get it at all), they are more likely to work in sectors that have been decimated by job loss or are forced to risk their lives as essential workers, and incidents of extreme racism and policy brutality are occurring daily. The cost of making art in these conditions is immense, and we cannot ask artists of color to return to a theatre landscape built on a foundation of privilege.

When theatre does come back (as it always does), what kind of community will they be coming back to? Will artists of color be penalized for not producing theatrical content, engaging in training, or participating in the arts community at the same rate as their white peers, who are not in a literal fight for survival?

This is where I get to be a little optimistic. A sizable portion of the theatre community who have been given more time to think. Yes, artistic directors are tremendously busy trying to figure out how to keep their organizations afloat, but the all-consuming efforts of producing live theatre are gone. This is the point in the process of collective trauma where we get to question our assumptions about what theatre can and should be, and how we make sure everyone gets to participate. The temptation will be strong to program “sure things”- new plays by famous playwrights written during corona-induced downtime, revivals of audience favorites- in an

attempt to regain a financial foothold. But if we don't question producing models that reward privilege, how can we become vital members of our entire communities?

Before theatres complain about the costs of producing lesser known works by and about marginalized communities that might not draw in the crowds, it's important to remember the purpose of a non-profit theatre is not just to entertain and sell out shows, but to provide a public good. It's supposed to be the defining characteristic between non-profit and commercial theatre. We know commercial theatre is failing spectacularly at championing diversity, but major non-profit theatre aren't much better (check out the bleak numbers from the 2016/2017 study on ethnic diversity put out by the Asian American Performers Action Coalition). If we really want theatre to be a place of learning, growth, and healing in the wake of coronavirus and protests, then those of us with privilege need to be willing to give up space to support the artists and communities who have been most disrupted.

Theatre is not just a public good to be consumed, but a public service. If we lean into the service side, we might find new partnerships and funding opportunities through non-arts related government agencies and foundations. We know theatre can make a positive impact on mental and even physical health, so why can't we look for ways to partner with the Health Department? If theatre has the potential to address social and legal issues, why shouldn't we get funding from the Justice Department? If we move beyond programming that is "easy" for our audiences, we can find new audiences and funding to support a truly vital theatre.

If we don't want to lose momentum in the fight towards equity, diversity, and inclusion in theatre, we need to program future seasons with the intention to support the artists most in danger of being left behind when we return.

#### Works Cited:

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