

Looking to the Past for Hope for the Future

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The Black Death of 1347 was the most devastating pandemic of recorded time. It killed between 75 and 200 million people in Eurasia, Europe, and Northern Africa. It took nearly 200 years for Europe's population to reach the level it was at previously, and outbreaks of plague recurred until the early 1900s. The total devastation of society led to a questioning of long held values, systems, and beliefs. The sudden drop in population and overabundance of land needing to be farmed led to the empowerment of peasants and the eventual disappearance of feudalism. A distrust in corrupt clergy in the years following the plague led to a gradual loss of faith in the Catholic Church, and a more secular, individualistic society began to emerge. The existing social structure was shattered beyond repair, and a period of greater social mobility began in which a person's destiny was no longer determined by their station at birth. A new society was emerging that would eventually lead to one of the greatest rebirths of art and culture to ever take place: the Renaissance.

One of the great works of literature known to bridge the Middle Ages and the Renaissance is Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron*. Boccaccio conceived of the idea for *The Decameron* shortly after the Black Plague devastated Florence in the mid-1300s. In the book, a group of people decide to leave the ravages of Florence for two weeks and journey to the Italian countryside, where they tell stories to pass the time. These stories make up the bulk of the book, and earned Boccaccio the credit for creating an early form of the novella.

I had fond memories of reading selections from *The Decameron* in my high school English class, and I remember the stories having an irreverent, salacious quality to them that, as a high school student, I found titillating. In revisiting them now, I was struck by the contrast between the vitality of these stories and the horrors happening concurrently in Florence. Boccaccio describes a hideous transformation of society, where people shun their neighbors and desert their own family members to avoid getting sick: "To have compassion for those who suffer is a human quality which everyone should possess, especially those who have required comfort themselves in the past and have managed to find it in others."

In his introduction to the text, translator Wayne Reborn writes a passage which I haven't been able to stop thinking about, particularly in contemplating the question of what will become of the future of theater. He speaks of Boccaccio's storytellers as an antidote to the plague: "As they tell their stories, the group sits in a symbolic circle: they turn their backs to the outside world and face one another, reinforcing their connectedness by looking at and listening to the other members of the group. If life back in Florence had become something like a vicious circle of Hell, the storytellers respond to this by creating a circle of their own, but one that affirms their personal health and social well-being, and thus, in a sense, supplies a cure for the plague." By affirming the connectedness between us, stories are the tonic that can restore our humanity after something so horrendous as this. After all, isn't this what theater is all about?

We obviously do not know how this pandemic will end. It's impossible to predict the ways it will change society, though we know that it will—irrevocably. But if we look back to the most devastating pandemic in history, we can see that the massive structural problems it exposed eventually led to the creation of a more individualistic, humanistic society—one that came to truly value and patronize the arts.

This pandemic has undeniably exposed some of America's great weaknesses: lack of affordable and accessible health care, racial injustice, income inequality, housing inequality, and inequality in education, to name a few. Will we use this as an opportunity to create new, better systems? How can we create our own renaissance? A more egalitarian society will undoubtedly yield a more egalitarian theater, and a more egalitarian theater will help to create a better society. But what will it mean to create theater in a world ravaged by a pandemic? How can theater help us to heal and rebuild? How can we bring people together in ways we never have been before? How can theater actively work to create a new society?

These are the questions we need to ask of ourselves and our collaborators. I fervently believe that when this is over, we will be hungrier than ever for stories that are rooted in compassion and deep human empathy. When we can safely gather again, I suspect we will appreciate the togetherness of collective witnessing like we never have before. Our long gaze into the face of death will make us want to seize life with unfathomable zest. And like Boccaccio's pilgrims, our coming together to hear stories will be what restores us, too, from this hell.