

A Future in Community

6 May 2020

It's just after 3pm and I'm hitting the leave meeting button after City Theatre's daily remote staff call, another afternoon in the land of COVID-19. I rub my eyes and stretch, think about getting up to force myself to move, and try to resist the urge to grab my phone. The overwhelming feeling of the last six weeks has been one of surreal isolation. I'm fortunate to still be working, as so many of my colleagues are suddenly marooned without pay in a field that's been tossed into a seemingly indefinite hiatus. I'm also lucky to be sheltering in place with my partner and our feisty canine companion, who, if nothing else, provides endless distractions and he snores, snuggles, and zooms his way through each day with a seemingly impossible to faze sense of doggy joy.

Sitting in my bedroom, watching the shadows of raindrops slide down the walls, the day feels infused with an undercurrent of anxiety. The future is uncertain. As we make varying contingency plans there seem to be more questions than answers. Will live performances be able to resume in the fall? How can you create social distance in a theater space? How do digital offerings and the potential to live stream theater change the medium itself?

Existential crises are at least good for giving us time to contemplate big questions. Field wide quandaries that are often left underexamined in the hectic day to day minutia of producing theater are suddenly at the forefront of our minds. The current moment will irrevocably change our industry, but perhaps within the turmoil lies the possibility for invention.

I've been thinking a lot about why I became a dramaturg and what drew me to this profession. And above all else, above plays that made my cheeks flush, the technical wizardry that took my breath away, the performances that broke my heart, it was the deep sense of community; of work created in real time, in a room full of people that culminated in the integration of strangers into the art making process, filling darkened rooms with a collective breath. I work in a regional theater in Pittsburgh and I'm convinced that the way forward involves theaters serving as community centers, using art as a vital conduit for human connection. In a moment where we are unable to share air space, that might feel like an impossibility, but we're already doing it. In zoom calls and online conversations, we're finding ways to engage with artists, staff, and audiences in real time.

It is imperative for theaters to expand the voices planning, creating, supporting, and consuming our work. In this moment, we need to ensure that antiracism work is a core tenant of how we move forward. As a white ally, I know this work is continual and we must remain vigilant. Not only in discussions, but in the concrete ways that theater

develops to survive. We can start by investigating how theaters as organizations serve our community and ensuring that people of color, women, and members of the disability and LGBTQIA+ communities are leading this transition. As institutions across the country remain dark, we can look to fellow non-profit organizations on the front lines of the pandemic and forge partnerships, supporting storytelling and connecting our audiences to important resources.

Listening is a key theatrical skill, paramount for dramaturgs in particular. We often serve as the nexus point for communication on productions and can serve that same role now by initiating these conversations. Rather than building collaborations based around a single production, we can look for organizations with shared values. I have been part of similar initiatives through our theatre's City Connects program. In listening to partner organizations, our joint efforts spanned activities from hosting an immigrant artisans network market in conjunction with performances to an on-going collaboration with an arts and activism collective that included everything from talkbacks to creating music for production soundtracks, and DJing the theatre's annual fundraiser. These organic relationships can push us to investigate how we use our space—are there ways when it's safe to open our doors, that we can expand how we're using our lobbies, theaters, and production facilities? In these conversations, ask the hard questions—what do our cities and towns need in this moment? What prevents community members from attending performances? What makes an audience member feel at home when they walk through a space's doors? If we're using technology to share our art, what are the barriers to that? How can we protect and support artistic integrity while still fostering digital innovation? Since my first introduction to the professional theater world, I have been part of an endless series of conversations about the impending collapse of the subscription model. Perhaps this will push us to change the way we program. Can we build a financially sustainable model where we work show by show allowing theater to respond in the moment to the world around us?

Within these questions, lie a world of possibilities. Even facing the very real financial challenges of sustaining artists, organizations and careers, we can use this time to move forward and reemerge with a more equitable, nimbler field. As practitioners, listening to the needs of our communities will ensure that the next evolution of theater is a vital force not just in the arts, but in the world.

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