

Mycelial Dramaturgy: Unseen Connections
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April 29, 2020

Liminality is an important aspect of my religion—“For where two or three are assembled in my name, I am there among them” (or as the Rev. Dr. Stephen Cady puts it, “Life exists where God exists, in the space between you and me.”)—and it undergirds much of my dramaturgical practice as well. For the last several years I have pondered what a “slow theater” would look like and mean. Here amongst the slow down of this global pandemic as we exist at a juncture between two eras, I am starting to find some answers.

I have been thinking about the idea of fallow land and fallow time, which for me is related to the idea of Sabbath and the importance of rest. There is even a Sabbath Year called the Jubilee in the Old Testament that all of the Israelites were to observe. It was a total agricultural, economic, and social reset as people returned to their homelands and all debts were forgiven. Early in the Bible God established a precedent of rest that our current world doesn’t always abide by. The rest, the fallow time, exists in-between. It is an essential part of the work, and the worship.

I have been reading Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing’s *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, and finding it affirming. The book focuses on matsutake, the most valuable mushroom in the world. It only grows in human-disturbed forests such as the ones near Hiroshima or areas of Oregon where logging destroyed the landscape. These fungi help forests to grow in near-impossible places through their reliance on capitalist destruction and collaborative survival between species.

While I will not pretend to be even an amateur mycophile, I have always found myself drawn to fascinating fungi. There is nothing quite like the visceral (and often vocal) reaction I have when discovering a particularly beautiful - or gross - mushroom. But I have learned that mushrooms are only the fruiting bodies of a MUCH larger organism. I use the term organism because fungi are their own kingdom; they are neither plant nor animal. They are something distinctly their own, and yet have properties of flora and fauna.

This in-betweenness has led me to think of the work of dramaturgy as much like mycelium. Mycelium is the part of a fungus that is usually found below ground, made up of a mass of interwoven filaments called hyphae. Under every step that we take, there are hundreds of miles of mycelia penetrating down through the soil and rock. As Tsing puts it, “fungal eating is often generous: It makes worlds for others. Fungi break [other species’ bodies] down into nutrients that can be recycled into new life. Fungi are thus world builders, shaping environments for themselves and others.” Moreover, “By leaning on fungal companions, trees grow strong and numerous, making forests... The fungus forms a network across plants. In a forest, fungi connect not just trees of the same species, but often many species.”

If we were to replace “fungi” with “dramaturgy” and “trees” with “theater”, one would be hard pressed to come up with a better definition. A good dramaturgical mind has the ability to break down a play into its component parts and understand what makes it work. Dramaturgs help, often in many unseen and unacknowledged ways, with the process of world building, of communicating, of facilitating networks. And in the same way that the mycelia of fungi connect trees (including mother trees to younger trees in the forest to communicate and share nutrients), dramaturgs help foster relationships between theater

artists. While there is often the perception that playwriting is lonely work—and it can be at times, make no mistake of that—playwrights draw on sources all around them. They are influenced by culture, the political climate, past experience, and often by conversations with other theater-makers. No one creates theater in a vacuum.

The hyphae, the threads that make up the mycelium, are both the main structural component of the fungi that connects all of its parts, and serve to connect the fungi itself to other organisms. Dramaturgy *is* hyphae; it is what makes a piece of theater work structurally, and simultaneously it is what connects ideas and people. While many theater-makers call themselves “hyphenate artists”, dramaturgy is an inherently liminal act of processing. Dramaturgs help disparate parts communicate and fit together into a more cohesive whole, both in the structure of a play and the production process. Delving into research, working with a playwright on a new play, observing and cohering the elements in rehearsal, or even connecting audience members are all means of both casting out a wide net and weaving tendrils together.

All of this leads back to my earlier questions about slow theater. While it often feels as though mushrooms pop up overnight after a rainstorm (I expect to see many tomorrow after the downpour of today), they only are a small part of a larger organism. The mycelium is always there, even though we almost never see it. Nonetheless, the effects of its work are all around us: the mushrooms, the decomposition of dead plants and animals, the literal creation of soil to nourish new growth. I believe that leaning into processes that allow for more fallow time would strengthen many theatrical endeavors. We must trust that the undergirding is there, the ideas are strong, and the connections are reaching ever outward. But like the growth of mycelia it takes time, beginning delicately with a single connection that grows ever wider with patience and care.

So let us look to the matsutake, and know that even in places that appear to have been decimated, there is hope. Through the act of collaborating, sometimes even in unseen or unexpected ways, we can create anew. For now, I wish you rest—physically, mentally, and spiritually—so that when you and the work are ready, you can mushroom.