

Kingdom Heart: A Dramaturgical Approach for the After

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(she/her)

When I was a Dramaturgy Fellow at Baltimore Center Stage, we would hold artistic season planning meetings under the careful, eccentric leadership of then-Artistic Director Kwame Kwei-Armah. As we prepared to discuss the merits of a play and its potential for a season, Kwame would always ask us to approach the work with a “kingdom heart.” If he ever gave a succinct definition for this phrase, I don't remember it; I kind of appreciate that I've had to define it for myself over the years. But I've taken the expression to mean approaching the work with radical generosity—learning to come to a piece of theater with an open heart and mind, looking for the good and highlighting it for others to see. Sometimes that means standing up for a piece when no one else will. Sometimes that means offering stillness and silence in a world that wants to move, move, move. Often it means just striving to be a better version of myself in my work. In other words, fostering a dramaturgical sensibility.

Dramaturgy is a slow art form. Often on the development side of the work, dramaturgs are farmers, not hunters; our job is to help cultivate and grow. But theater producing moves quickly; every task needs to be completed now—nay, yesterday! Especially in the way we approach season planning, we often prioritize moving through the highest number of potential plays in the shortest amount of time, and in the process, focus on what we don't like about a piece, what isn't working, why we shouldn't do it. Though our intentions are good (we always want it to be the best it can be!), we find we've potentially closed ourselves off to work that is breaking out of a box or may need support in different ways. This unintentional negativity feels like an insidious undercurrent of our industry that leads to at best missing out on a good play and at worst upholding harmful structures. In grad school, I had a professor who would pick apart my essays the way I used to pick every tiny ounce of fat off meat as a child – meticulously and grotesquely. I sat listening to him tell me what wasn't working in my essays until finally I sent him an email critiquing his method of critiquing. He replied with a humble apology, more or less stating, “I thought you knew that if I didn't mention it was bad, that meant it was good.”

I assume that this approach to the work is not unfamiliar to many theater-makers. When time is limited, we have a triage mentality, focusing on the negative, what's wrong, what needs to be fixed quickly. But theater isn't battlefield medicine with life-or-death decisions needing to be made. For however much I believe in theater's vitality and role in keeping the human race going, at the end of the day, a play is a play. And in the world of a pandemic, I'm looking at theater with new eyes.

Today marks six weeks of working from and sheltering at home for me. This number is low compared to some of my friends and colleagues, but like them, I am grateful to still have a job, to still be making art, to be healthy and safe. Two aspects of this time have really struck me. The first is pace. Everything has slowed down. Stores and restaurants are closed. Birthday parties and showers are cancelled. Cross-country trips have been indefinitely postponed. The show is not going on (at least not live). Though aspects of our world are speeding up, so much has taken another pace. We're waiting hours for bread dough to rise. We're taking days to do a thousand-piece puzzle. We're going on five mile walks with our dogs. We are being forced to live day-by-day, perhaps for the first time in our lives, an idea filled with uncertainty—and potential.

The second aspect that has struck me is generosity. My current theater home,

Milwaukee Repertory Theater, launched an initiative called “Our Home to Your Home,” featuring songs, monologues, and workshops, all created to provide work for artists and to help spread joy and hope to our audiences across the world. This is just one of many projects that theaters are producing as a way to keep the art—and hope—alive. And it's just a small blip on the map of the goodness that's coming out of our world right now—from neighbors baking each other bread to people sewing masks for hospital workers to nurses helping patients video chat with their families to penguins exploring art galleries. In a time of crisis, in the face of so much negativity, we are practicing generosity, radically. In a pandemic that has taken so much from us, we are giving more of ourselves. Among the angels of our nature, we are choosing the better ones.

All of this makes me think more and more about the work. The work I'm doing now, from home, in the hopes that our theater's doors will open someday soon. Eventually, we will conquer this virus and go back fully to the art. Artists will gather and read plays, gather and watch plays, talk about plays, live and breathe plays. We will pick up speed and once again will be moving, breakneck. We will make decisions quickly, accelerate timelines, cut cruelly to the point to get things done.

But I hope that when those moments inevitably come, we will remember that in this time of a pandemic, we as theater-makers were not the ones doing battlefield medicine, we were slowing down. If we made theater, it was with the intention to help people, to spread joy and peace, to cultivate and nurture our community.

It took me an embarrassingly long time to realize that the qualities I embrace within a “kingdom heart” model are the very same ones that I espouse as being at the forefront of my dramaturgical practice: generosity, listening, kindness, patience, advocacy, championship, support, cultivation, joy. I don't think I'm wrong when I say that most dramaturgs worth their salt would claim the same. Even artists who don't use the title often talk about having a “dramaturgical mindset” or “dramaturgical approach” to the work, and I do believe those statements refer in part to embracing this “kingdom heart” approach. At the end of the day, making theater is about community and collaboration, about engaging with other humans in an effort to understand our world and ourselves better, together. In many ways, I think dramaturgy points to the core of who we are as humans, when we are at our best.

So while I hope that now, and especially in the after we listen to and lean on our dramaturgs, even more so I hope we tap into our own inner dramaturgs in every aspect of the work. I hope that we as an industry can come out of this softer, more open and aware, leading with a kingdom heart. We have to let this time make us better.

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