

Notes from the Sidelines

May 20, 2020

How can you do theatre when people are starving in the world?

He asked me that question on our first date, and I thought I knew the answer. Food may keep me alive, but theatre gives me reason to live.

Twenty-five years later, I'm sitting in our living room hearing that question while he's shopping for groceries. His trip will take three hours. It used to take an hour. But that was before he had to worry a jug of milk could send our children to the hospital.

This pandemic has stirred the fear I have pushed aside every time I enter a rehearsal room. As long as the soul remains invisible, my efforts to feed it through theatre will never position me as an essential worker.

I see the privilege of my distance from the crisis. I have food, my kids are safe at home, and my university employer hasn't yet announced salary cuts. I take daily walks in suburban Indiana, and I never have to worry about coming within (quite literal) spitting distance of neighbors, or, for that matter, getting shot. I rarely get close enough to anyone to need a mask. I'm no Mother Courage. I have never had to cart moldy bread through a war zone to feed my family. I don't even do the shopping.

Still, that first-date question lingers. It may morph as other inequities take their turn in my consciousness, but the way it rubs against my chosen career will endure.

I'm a dramaturg. Instead of throwing myself into the center of a production process, I try to stand on the fragile line between action and reflection, impulse and caution, speaking and listening. And though I know I do my job best when I stay close to that line—neither leading the charge nor retreating fully—I rarely like the feeling.

I think that may be why I'm kind of enjoying this enforced break from the theatre I defended with such passion on that first date.

I've spent the last few months recalibrating with colleagues, reconnecting with collaborators, and reimagining institutions.

Suddenly, we are all dramaturgs.

We're asking questions that are pushing us forward, not positioning us as overthinkers. The research we're gathering is firing our imaginations, not restricting our options. No one is telling

me to get out of my head and live in the moment. This moment, this pause in direct action, has forced us all to embrace the unsettling paradox of active detachment.

As we collectively embrace this dramaturgical sensibility, we are more powerful than ever.

We're stepping back from routines and looking for ways to do better. Instead of going to rehearsal, we're reading and discussing unfamiliar plays, adding new agenda items to meetings, and trying new approaches to communication and decision-making. We have absolutely no reason to do anything the way we've always done it.

We are taking the time to build trust. We are interrogating assumptions and chipping away at unhealthy institutional patterns without the pressure of demonstrating our success. I, for one, am not obsessing over the distance between the discernable action I crave and the private reflections I indulge.

Without the pressure to perform, the knife-edge of uncertainty feels like a platform for palpable change.

I am dramaturg; hear me roar.

June 4, 2020

Tragedy is, then, the distance between knowledge and understanding.

Two weeks ago, I knew I was privileged, and I thought I understood how to use my power.

Today, I see only yesterday's blind spots.

Ahmaud Arbery. Breonna Taylor. George Floyd. They died during the pandemic I could see.

The other pandemic, the systemic racism that sustains my white privilege, has—once again—obstructed my view. I thought I saw it; I knew it was there. I could talk about it with students, colleagues, and friends. But I abandoned the pressure to perform and framed self-indulgent reflection as productive.

Discomfort that feels good isn't actually uncomfortable.

And right now, I need to sit with the discomfort.

As I do so, I need to do the work to make sure my discomfort doesn't become someone else's problem. I need to walk the same line I navigate every time I walk into a rehearsal room, balancing listening with speaking and shifting between support and resistance.

Because that is the only genuinely dramaturgical action I can take.

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