

Unexpected Benefits: (Or, Dramaturgy---That's So Extra!)

“What are the unexpected benefits of sheltering in place” is a question I’ve seen floating around on social media, as we’re all grasping for some sense of optimism and hope while the tragedy of lives lost to coronavirus continues to tick steadily upward. My stream of consciousness immediately jumps to a small thing first, as my brain begins to bubble and percolate with other ideas as I have noticed some unexpected benefits to my overall financial, physical, and environmental health as we work from home. First of all, on a small scale, I’m not buying a cup of tea to keep me going as I rush to the theatre. I’m not filling my car up with gas. I’m not buying some sweet treat to keep me awake as I drive home late from work. I’m not eating take-out food at odd midnight hours because I didn’t have time to eat a meal at a normal time. And I’m certainly not buying airfare, train fare, or hotel rooms for festivals and conferences.

I’m one of those Americans who have a hard time keeping \$400 in my savings account*. As we started to shelter in place, I immediately felt guilty that while so many theatre artists were facing unemployment, I saw a steady rise in my savings account because I wasn’t consuming that Wawa coffee and Tastycake as I jumped in the car on the way to work. As Americans, we’re socialized to stay busy as a sign of success, often at the cost of needing to consume so much on the way to wherever we’re scheduled to go next. The cost of staying busy is a heavy toll that starts accumulating in small ways, and it’s hard to slow down and notice them. I can see it now that we’ve all come to a hard stop.

Right now, we have the time to unpack these fears and I know I’ve packed them up tight in a box in a dark corner. What I fear, though, as I see this momentary cushion return to my bank account, is a question I have suppressed for many years, as a product of the gig economy---can I afford this profession?

When I was an emerging dramaturg, I remember sharing with a professor that I knew in my heart that I was meant to become a dramaturg. His reply, instead of encouraging me, was to say, “Artistic directors see a dramaturg as an expensive diamond ring.” Standing at the door in my youth, I desperately wanted to prove him wrong as I crossed the threshold into the workplace---that we’re not this extra expense and an auxiliary helper, we’re central to the process of creation!

I heard the same sentiment in the economic recession of ‘08, after my former Artistic Director had me research what other theatres were doing to cut expenses. After I gave him valuable data for a board meeting of what other theatres were doing---furloughing staff or even shuttering their doors---he then let me go. For him, a dramaturg wasn’t just a staff member to furlough, but an expense he would never bring back.

As I ventured out as a freelancer, a constant underlying fear in any relationship with a producer, was that my presence in the room was an added cost to a production. It’s sometimes hard to be your creative best when you know you’re just an item line on a spread sheet. So, I realized what I needed was to create my own side fund of a savings account to take care of up front travel and other business expenses. Basically, I had to pay into this system just to get to the job---even after all the training I invested in and debt I accrued to get my MFA in Dramaturgy.

It’s more than just a cup of coffee on the way to the theatre. What is a theatre company saying when they’ll cover a director or designer’s travel, but not the dramaturg’s? Over the decade, only one institution would reimburse me and the rest was on me to report on my tax returns as a business loss. I’ve continued to invest in this

system by paying for my expenses, but since those expenses never made it to a ledger or spreadsheet, I know I'll be forgotten when it's time to "save" the employees that matter.

This hard economic reality is not just for freelance dramaturgs---these are the kinds of expenses that any gig economy worker---from Uber drivers to unpaid interns---are expected to pay up front to have a career in the field they desire. I'm not even talking about asking an employer to pay healthcare and benefits (heaven forbid I ask for *that* as a production dramaturg), which I've always had to pay for out of my own budget as an independent contractor (thanks Obama, Nancy Pelosi and others for ACA!).

It goes deep into my subconscious, of being told constantly that my presence is Extra, and not necessary to process, to get up the courage to ask for my hidden business expenses that fuel an artistic process back. But more important than my own ability to make a living, let's just name the thing now that we all know to be true---this all prevents emerging artists from historically marginalized communities from gaining access to this profession.

At the moment, through the magic portal of Zoom, I can enjoy some benefits to my overall financial, physical, and environmental health. I can drink a cup of tea that I made in my house while I watch, and even eat dinner on time with food I bought at a grocery store. I've gained energy back as I've shifted to a routine where I can get better quality sleep, which studies have shown impact overall long-term health. As an asthmatic, I don't have to worry if a hot, humid day is going to trigger a flare up with setbacks while I'm rushing to a Fringe theatre space tucked under an overpass where I'm breathing in fumes of cars racing down I-95.

When we return to our dark theatres, we must ask our leaders, even in this time of job loss and added expenses, to consider economic justice for all employees---yes, dramaturgs too. Maybe if I do, others will. We know it's not just us---how many other artists are asked to put production expenses on their credit cards? School teachers are not the only ones who are asked to buy classroom supplies out of their own pocket.

In the interim, as I watch this savings account that I've built over the years, as I take a percentage of every stipend I earn (like you do for taxes) to build up a business expense account---flourish, I know what I'm going to do with that money---reinvest in writers.

What if I take that money I've always used to cover hidden expenses that certain institutions never pay back, and instead, spend that side fund on playwrights? I don't know how it will work in the end, as I'm still afraid of how long it will take to convince other theatre makers that dramaturgy is necessary first and foremost, but that's what I intend to do. Give my seed money to make writers I believe in flourish.

That's what I've got for now---I'll go make another cup of tea on my own stove and think on it further.

I will also take a deep cleansing breath and repeat this mantra---"A dramaturg is not extra. I am central to the creative process." I'll keep practicing this one until I get up the courage to say it to an AD when I get a chance to stand in the same room with them, six feet away, and look them in the eye.

---**Heather Helinsky** (she/her/hers), 25 May 2020

(*If you've never seen the statistics, as of 2019, 40% of Americans would struggle to come up with that amount in an emergency. But I assume most of you know that because as theatre artists---we live it.)

*Speaking of Extra---the poem-like thing that came out of the first draft of this Phoenix essay
(and Ken Cerniglia encouraged me to include it, so I'll take a risk and share it with the LMDA community.)*

The Unessential of the Unessential Professions, a poem

*"The doctor has just left me. At last I have got at something definite! For all his cunning, he had to speak out at last. Yes, I am soon, very soon, to die. The frozen rivers will break up, and with the last snow I shall, most likely, swim away...whither? God knows! To the ocean too. Well, well, since one must die, one may as well die in the spring. But isn't it an absurd to begin a diary a fortnight, perhaps, before death? What does it matter? And by how much are fourteen days less than fourteen years, fourteen centuries? Beside eternity, they say, all is nothingness---yes, but in that case eternity, too, is nothing. I see I am letting myself drop into metaphysics; that's a bad sign---am I not rather faint-hearted, perchance? I had better begin a description of some sort. It's damp and windy out of doors. I'm forbidden to go out. What can I write about, then?"---Opening of *The Diary of a Superfluous Man* by Ivan Turgenev*

What poetry and grief have in common is that they do not "really" require words;
so, this poem to my profession will be 920 words too long.

Take a moment now to Brechtian silent scream all your emotions about coronavirus.
(Brecht has never been my dramaturgical model, sorry, but right now, he'll serve this poem.)

A robin sits on her nest in a pink-flowering tree near my home office window;
A fox trots by every morning, over-confident that humans are sheltering-in-place.

Every human interaction I have now is a fourteen-day guessing game,
Masked or unmasked---two weeks, two years, two centuries, what's the difference?

For two years, as a Barrymore Judge for Theatre Philadelphia, I gave up so many bright,
Spring days to sit in dark theatres, brushing against bodies to my seat in the back corner.

Article after article pinned and posted online declares we should have been more
aware of America's ineptitude---we should have been woker than woke. Before

Theatres shut their doors on March 12th, 2020, dramaturgs were already being told that we were
the unessential of unessential professions by the next generation of artistic directors

Positions elided as new structural models of leadership created. Yeah, because why do we need
Dramaturgs when we're trying to solve problems? Very unessential profession, sit down, stop raising
your hand like the smart kid at the front of the class.

Imagine, having a trained advisor, who has gone to school (and into debt) for this very thing:
To advise and counsel you,
To support your work and vision,
To hold your hand, and the hands of all the artists in the building
To engage with audiences who are now scared to come into our buildings...

At school one day, we did a word problem. Calculate if a deadly virus travels at the rate of X.
In which city will it arrive faster: a plane flying to Italy en route to NYC,
Or on a boat carrying Walmart merch from China to San Francisco? Which city gets it first?

You don't have to lead American Theatre through the next chapter of its life as a single parent,
Struggling to teach your child new math. Do you really want to say, "Only I can fix this?"

Glaciers melt, yet in this interconnected world, we go about our lives
As sea levels rise, superstorms flood theatre basements, fires rage in the West,
And as the Delaware estuary seeps in the parking lot (no fence can hold rising waters back),
Surprising subscribers strolling out of Bristol Riverside's "Putnam County Spelling Bee"
With a murky water mess, should we shrug, "Park at your own R-I-S-K,
Hope you have insurance, see you next time for *K-i-n-g-L-e-a-r!*"
Or,
Should dramaturgs---theatre's bright minds---be tasked with planning ahead,
With relevant new play selections and new models of theatre-making,
As the ice cracks with a booming sound cue that can't be adjusted in tech
Echoing across Earth, this is only Scene One of more climate change disasters to come.
What other glacial shifts must arise Now, so that the theatre artists who remain are
Not as blinding white as a snowstorm in Greenland....

For the moment, we've retreated into our homes, fighting off loneliness in Zoom rooms.
#Alonetogether.

On a rainy day, a robin sits on her nest in a pink-flowering tree near my home office window, unfazed;
The fox trots by again, head high, over-confident that humans are sheltering-in-place.

Renewal will happen, theatre will not die in the spring. The essential workers, will need a place
To laugh, to cry in darkness. They have been to the darkest place, comforted the dying.
(Doctors and nurses and grocery store workers, take a moment and silent scream in self-care.)
They will want to disappear in the audience, and mourn together. Why not give them
Free tickets for life, out of our gratitude? (Too much or not enough?)

All we ask of you, is simply to make space for us, the dramaturgs:
To let us back into the rehearsal room,
To be present at your next board meeting,
To be the one you call when making a tough decision.
We are your shoulder to lean on through this difficult time.
We'll cry with you as you have to make choices for theatre's survival.
We're another soldier in the fight, if you allow us to fight the good fight with you.

---H.L. Helinsky, dramaturg

30 April 2020