

The New Normal

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A Proposition for Post-Pandemic Community Theatre in the South

In the south, there is a considerable lack of opportunities for those working as dramaturgs in any capacity. This is due, in no small part, to the culture of small community theatres populating the region. After becoming interested in dramaturgy from my high school talented theatre teacher, I started noticing a pattern when attending shows in these community settings; namely, the lack of dramaturgs and other “non-essential” (to steal a term from our current times) designers.

In smaller theatres, there is a desire to keep productions as small as possible, whether it be due to budget shortfalls or an assumed lack of interest in the community. However, one of the best ways to generate community interest is to invest in these shows - developing a reliable audience and by extension securing a more stable and steady income in the form of ticket sales and increased donor-interest. This investment is done in the very beginning, before the season is even selected, by making a space for designers and taking responsibility off of the more commonly used small direction team.

These bare-bones teams, usually consisting of just a Director, Assistant Director, Stage Manager, and sometimes a Lighting Designer can create a hectic atmosphere in which the designers, cast, and crew find themselves over-worked and more stressed or anxious than with a more appropriately staffed production. This can change, though,

with the addition of a design crew, especially a dramaturg or literary manager being added to the team from the beginning. Without this position being filled, the majority of its responsibility will fall on the director and frequently cause that work to feel rushed and incomplete, sacrificing the integrity of the entire production.

The typical work of a dramaturg will cover everything from market research to text and character analysis to making actual edits in material when necessary. When left to another cast or crew member, the majority of these duties tend to be overlooked and the position turns into just one of a 'book report' done on the play and presented at the first table read/rehearsal; the research about the play and playwright will be done, but everything before or after will fall by the wayside, if done at all.

With any community theatre, the first mission should always be to serve the community it is in and to involve as many people as possible in the world of theatre. When opening up these less-frequently filled positions to the general public, or to local dramaturgs having to resort to remote work, this involvement can expand, leading to increased educational and performance opportunities. When a literary management position is added to the staff and a dramaturg is hired per production, it helps integrate a whole other facet of the theatre world into the lives of people who may not be looking or able to make theatre a full-time position. The local librarian may discover their love for theatre through a position where they can sink their teeth into the text and history of a production, or a high school student may decide to pursue a new career path after finding their niche in this type of role.

Dramaturgy deserves a space in the local, small-theatre community, and the community deserves as many opportunities as possible to explore the different roles that go into putting on a show beyond the standard bare-bones team. When more people become involved with a community theatre, the more successful it becomes, and the more it can properly serve its community both as an escape and as an educational tool. Both of which will be vital in the world following a quarantine.

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