

Julie Felise Dubiner
Dramaturg/Producer/Consultant
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I Dare Us, part 2

Once in the Before Time I presented a manifesto at a dramaturgs' convening. What I remember most clearly was that I presented a big, perhaps impossible, idea and an artistic director—an important person—snorted. We all heard the snort. In some ways I feel like I have been living in the echo of that snort. As a historian, as a dramaturg, as a loud New York Jewish girl, I have understood manifestos to be a way to present those big, perhaps impossible, dreams like the ones we had with our friends talking so late into the night. We must continue to present these ideas with the comforting anger and outrage the passionate know. We must hope that we can still provoke argument or recall or reinvent a time when people actually rioted about theater ideas. And changed.

We are in the Without Time now. Not quite Middle, and unsure when After will come. We are stuck in a permanent present tense. We make choices about staying in our cities or leaving the house. We worry about rent and worry about our children and our parents. As our dead are buried without us, I find myself unable to mourn the losses. I find myself tremendously troubled by my inability to mourn. I know I have tried in Zoom wakes and online Yizkor. It is almost like belief that the future will come that I worry without ritual and remembrance that we will forget. Did so many forget the 1918-19 flu because the loss was too incomprehensible, or domestic, or we were not specifically called upon to remember it? Yes.

I dare us to remember, to create new rituals, but I don't mourn theater. The business we knew is dead, and I won't miss most of it. Next year or in five years or on some random Tuesday, theater will return. It always does. I ask myself and you not to panic now. I ask you and me to try to dream a future we want instead of recreating a broken world.

I want a new world. And I will summon my passion and anger to demand more of us. I dare us to think bigger. Or, as I started the manifesto that elicited the snort: Thomas Paine saw it as Common Sense. We have it in our power to begin the world again.

So.

I dare us to recapture the idea that theater is local. I dare us to throw precedents from the old world away and create theater that prioritizes integrity, kindness, and community as we begin the world again.

Many of us have bounced around from job to job, the only way to move up was to move on. Especially on the artistic teams, almost no one is from where they are. This is especially true now. So many new leaders have come in and brought their own people. That is fine, but we are going to emerge, to begin the emergence, into a hyper-local world. I dare us to create diverse companies of writers, actors, designers, dramaturgs, directors, techs, and staff that can function as a home team. In many ways, that would be a return to the idealistic promises unkept of the founding of the resident theater movement. Make it the priority that people can afford to live where they work. Make it the priority that people can work where they live. I dare you to mentor the leadership that will succeed you. Absolutely imagine a national theater that can be enjoyed from one's home when we can't gather safely and when we have shows that we want the whole world to see and have models for compensating the artists and workers for those streamed events, but these theaters were chartered to provide local professional theater. I dare all of us to take this Without Time to get to know our neighbors. Who came to us before and why? Who didn't? Ask them. Prioritize this.

I dare institutions to dream of a model of theater making where they are beholden to artists and workers.

The last few years of financial crises and searches for new artistic and executive directors left so many lamenting the lack of transparency of boards and leadership. But that was the system. The board owed the staff nothing. Any information was a gift, not something to be expected. It isn't that all boards and board members are bad. I like and respect many board members at my various theaters. However, by definition they are there to perpetuate the institution, not to promote change. I dare leaders to treat your staff like colleagues instead of calling them family and treating them like children. We know that the old economic model was no longer tenable, what other system can you dream up? Can leaders dream up a real collective, collaborative model that prioritizes people over precedents, buildings, and brands? If not, I dare the workers to ask, "What makes you a leader then?"

I dare us to dismantle exclusionary power structures and start over.

I am sympathetic to the current group of leaders as they navigate this present tense. With so many incredible people getting big appointments, this was supposed to be a hopeful time. A time of meaningful change. But, we know that so many of the institutions they inherited were broken and broke, and now they face an actual existential crisis. And yet I will dare to demand that the leaders of our theaters new and long-tenured step back and examine the Great Man model they all work in, a patriarchal structure that does not care who sits in the AD or ED chairs. The top-heavy, corporate board model served the institution and only occasionally served artists and workers. In the last few months as I have watched layoffs and furloughs and some places having the gall to ask for artists' fees to be returned, what I am really seeing is the elimination of what was left of collaboration at these theaters. The remaining staff is almost all management, and the leaders only interact with those managers and maybe other artistic directors in zoom conferences and cocktail hours. The echo chamber is more echoey than ever. How can there be

new, revolutionary ideas when it's always the same people talking? I dare leaders to collaborate with the people you least often interacted with before. I remember when I was laid off I looked around at those of us who had just been deemed unessential to the organization and clocked how many loud-mouthed women were in that group with me. Bring back the people who pushed you, who were disappointed in you, who demanded more of you. I dare you.

I dare the laid off and furloughed, the artists, the pushers, the disappointed, and the demanding to pay attention to when and where and how they are being asked for their ideas and work now and in the months and years to come. These institutions do not exist without us. Pay attention to what leaders are doing now. When we are able to gather again, remember.

(I wrote this essay inspired by the NNPN Conference and the *We've Been Here Before* panel, leaping off from an essay I wrote for LMDA's *Dramaturging the Phoenix* project.)