

Gazing through Windows

by

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The window by my kitchen-table-turned-desk overlooks a rooftop leisure area of my Downtown Phoenix apartment complex. Dozens of my neighbors' windows edge this now-abandoned common space, each offering a tiny glimpse into someone else's socially distant, stay-at-home routine. Before the desert furnace turned summer on early, an ambient soundtrack drifted in through my open windows: barking dogs, music, murmured dialogue, and the random clinks and clanks and noise of life, granting me the semblance of being a part of a community, one person in a haphazard collective whose lives border on each other's. Now, with the windows sealed tight to keep in the cool recirculated air, these windows have become yet another set of screens, little performances played out for those who care to watch. Promising connection, they leave me feeling ever more isolated. They are better than solitude, so they'll do – for now. Yet they serve as a potent reminder of what I miss most about theatre – vital storytelling told through bodies in space, in front of other bodies in space, together.

COVID-19 has revealed that we live in a world of polarities, of weakness and strength, of distance and connection. It has made painfully clear how fragile our bodies can be. Not just individual bodies, hundreds of thousands of which have been ravaged by the virus, but also social bodies, as we watch the same old hateful divisions bubble up, threatening to erupt to rend us further apart. We are forced to recognize that we are vulnerable, put in jeopardy by an invisible force that we are ill-prepared to resist. And yet we can still catch glimpses of beauty and resilience in this suspended moment: in the singing of shared melodies from balconies, or the exuberant applause echoing through city streets during hospital shift changes; in sidewalk chalk drawings and hopeful messages left for passers-by, or a friendly wave and a pair of smiling eyes, six feet away and behind a mask. The virus spread throughout the world with incredible efficiency, making its way to every continent but Antarctica within months. As vast as the planet is, this quick movement reveals how interconnected we are as a global community. One world, one climate, one family. However far away, we are in communion with each other.

The pandemic has also made visible the vast gulf of inequality that marks our lives and separates us from each other. Those within the United States who have been systematically marginalized through centuries of oppression – indigenous people, people of color, working people, impoverished people – are succumbing to the virus at inordinately high rates. Though the tracking of COVID-19 deaths by race/ethnicity is not being captured with any regularity, the data, however incomplete, clearly reveal that people of color are dying at disproportionate rates. This is amplified by the reality that the majority of essential workers – those who cannot work from home and who must therefore put their health at risk by going to work in food production, grocery stores, warehouses, public transit, public service, and the health professions – are overwhelmingly people of color, while those who are able to stay in and continue earning paychecks (and whose children are able to learn from home on the comfortable side of the digital divide) are predominantly white. Privilege has always been a form of protection, and that is painfully evident today.

And yet it strikes me is that, as much as the virus has tested the world, and as much as it has threatened the theatre community, suspending or cancelling our productions, stressing our budgets, and putting us all in limbo, it has also reaffirmed our most deeply-held beliefs. We must not waver when we come out of on the other side of COVID-19. As a field, we are committed to vulnerability. We know the power that is found in painful openness. Our post-COVID theatre must be one of urgency, theatre that screams its verities. Plays must be unflinching in their storytelling, artists uncompromising in their commitment to the complex and honest depiction of the human condition. As dramaturgs, we must press for this exposure of the unabashed, often ugly truth, for performances that grapple with humanity's capacity for sublime grace and horrific cruelty. Theatre also revels in connection. We inherently understand that, if ignored, a difficulty for one will quickly spread; it is in our collective self-interest to alleviate hardship. We know that we are at our best when we are in collaboration with each other, when problems are shared and solved collectively, and when accolades are spread among the group. Dramaturgs must continue to foster intense connection, both within the theatre and outward to multiple communities. Finally, theatre is reckoning with the EDI work that has yet to be accomplished within our field. We cannot return to what was before. The post-COVID theatre must instead be decidedly *anti* in the way that Ibram X. Kendi discusses. It must work, actively and deliberately, to create greater equity. Dramaturgs have been at the forefront of this mission, guiding the difficult conversations that must be had. We must redouble our efforts and prepare for a sustained fight. If privilege is being solidified through the pandemic, we must to commit to its undoing, working diligently to dismantle structures of exclusion and oppression.

I no longer want to gaze through windows or peer into screens. Instead, what I most look forward to is gathering in space together – in rehearsal, in conference, in conversation, in audiences. I want to feel my body next to other bodies, as we breathe and laugh and weep and gasp in astonishment together. I want to feel the presence of people next to me. I want to suspend my breath in tune with the action on the stage. I want to feel my body brace with overwhelming emotion prompted by what I bear witness to. Theatre must emerge from this pandemic even more committed to that which defines us: vulnerability, connection, inclusivity. That is my radical dramaturgy.