

**Playing with Fire:
Connection and Creation in Times of Chaos**

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On March 11, my mom and I sat at Steppenwolf Theatre's Front Bar and briefly discussed the increased attention the coronavirus was receiving in the media. The bar was full and our conversation quickly turned to other topics, namely my excitement at seeing Carrie Coon onstage in a Tracy Letts play. Steppenwolf's production of *Bug* had been on my radar since they announced their season the previous spring. As the lights went down in the theatre, the coronavirus and its consequences were all but forgotten. The following day Chicago closed its theatres, prematurely ending the run of shows throughout the city, *Bug* included.

I've thought about that production many times since Chicago announced their shelter-in-place order. I've been quarantining with my parents and my mom and I have talked more than once about how strange it was to unknowingly bear witness to the show's closing night. How I had noted the crowded theatre, not in a "wary at the lack of social distancing" way, but in an "it's great to see so many attending live theatre on a Wednesday night" way.

And while most aspects of this pandemic experience have been awful, I continue to be reminded of and inspired by just how many people in this world love and support the theatre. On April 23, I toasted to Shakespeare by watching the Globe's production of *Romeo and Juliet* online. The day before, I streamed the Goodman Theatre's final preview of *Schoolgirls; Or, The African Mean Girls Play*. I excitedly await the National Theatre's new releases of past productions each Thursday. Whereas nothing on Netflix seems to capture my attention lately, streaming live theatre feels different. It feels, well, alive. I see the actors engage with one another in real time. I laugh along with the on-screen audience. I take a bathroom break and top off my wine glass during "intermission." I feel connected, even in isolation. The theatres may be closed, but what they can offer their audiences feels more important than ever.

What awaits us in the coming weeks and months is uncertain, but social distancing seems here to stay, at least for now. When theatres are allowed to open once again, it is likely that small storefronts will lead the charge. Seating will be further apart, resulting in smaller audience numbers. So let's relish the intimacy and immediacy that these small houses afford. Rehearsals will favor small casts and crews over large ensembles. So let's savor the deep character studies that will be featured onstage. I challenge all of us to view this loss as an opportunity. Let's use social distancing as the push we needed to reach out. Listen to what our community, our city, our world needs from us.

There are those for whom theatre was always distant, whether that was due to a lack of arts funding or barriers that made venues physically inaccessible. So how do we use this time apart to make theatre more inclusive? The recording and streaming of live productions should live on, even after theatres open; not only to reach those for whom theatre continues to be inaccessible, but for companies to sell their remaining "seats." But the invitation into our theatrical homes cannot stop there. We have the unique opportunity to open dialogues between theatre practitioners and audience members that have not

existed before. Virtual performances are great, but they are a form of one-way communication. In order to survive, audiences need to feel invested. So let's give them a chance to be part of the process. Use video communication platforms to invite them into rehearsal rooms. Ask them what excited them. What moved them? What bored them? Use dramaturgs to incorporate this feedback into playwriting and performance to showcase a better understanding of the audience and the present moment.

Show them the intricacies of costume building through online lessons. Present monologue workshops with company members and playwriting classes from resident playwrights. Invite them into tech rehearsals and explain the process. Advertise these opportunities at a price but offer discounts for those who cannot afford it and encourage further donations from those who can. Reach out to schools and offer virtual lessons with teaching artists to engage students who need a creative outlet. By inviting audiences to engage, theatres open themselves up to learn from those they don't yet know. Theatre thrives most when it is collaborative, and while there is not one way for the arts to recover, if we invite in more collaborators we stand a stronger chance of doing so.

The final moments of *Bug* feature the characters Agnes and Peter burning their motel room to the ground; and just as I'm sure we've all had moments recently where it feels as though the world around us is going up in flames, if you look closely, there is hope. Theatre is resilient because it is the art of telling stories. The means and platforms by which we create and share these stories will change, but we will never stop telling them. It can be hard to see through the flames right now, so reach out and tell a story while the smoke clears.