

## ***Radical Civic Dramaturgy***

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I think a lot about space and place. I think a lot about cities and how they are socially produced. These may not seem like the best opening statements for an essay on dramaturgy and theatre, but to me these subjects are all deeply entwined. This pandemic has made these connections even more evident to me, and I believe a key component to the way theatre will emerge from this crisis is by dramaturging space, place, and community in new ways. I believe we are seeing glimmers of this happening as theatre-makers and theatre institutions grapple with the short and long-term effects of the coronavirus.

Take, for example, *Cooped-Up: Drive-In Dances for Cooped Up People*, the dance performances in Seattle that people viewed from their cars.<sup>1</sup> Or take the diagrams of theatre in the round, outside and lit by car headlights, that were floating around various theatre Facebook groups. Or, in another example, the calls to theatres “open your lobby” and provide space for aid during the worldwide protests against white supremacy and systemic racism. This last example is of particular interest to me.

When I teach theatre history, one of the first discussions my students have is “what is theatre?” Usually, we come to the conclusion – not necessarily a radical one – that theatre is people in a place together where something happens. Now we are in the midst of a pandemic when all of those components are the very definition of what puts us in danger. To be in a physical space with people, doing things together, especially for pleasure, is a memory at the moment. I am not worried about theatre dying because of this pandemic. Certain companies and institutions may close, and that is certainly sad. But theatre is empathy and resilience, and those qualities, with all their inherent social aspects, will ensure the survival of the form.

So, when I think about space and place as a dramaturg, I do think about theatres – the buildings and companies and stages, as well as representational space within a playtext and of a set design. But I also think it is important to consider the social – no, the civic – place of theatre within the larger landscape. As we endure this pandemic, we have, I think not coincidentally, also begun to confront many of the social and political systems around us that are broken. So, as we consider what theatre-making looks like, we also consider what all of these theatre buildings – these places where people gather together so something can happen – mean to the communities in which they are

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<sup>1</sup> <https://crosscut.com/2020/04/seattle-drive-dance-event-part-scavenger-hunt-part-performance>

located? Who are these spaces for? Who has access to them? Who has a sense of ownership?

There is no better time than now for theatre spaces to consider these questions and to take action with equity in mind. And I believe dramaturgs can be leaders in these areas. We are experts at context when it comes to representational space; it is important to use that expertise beyond the stage as well. What would it mean to keep our lobbies open permanently, and not just moments of crisis? What does it look like for companies with brick and mortar to fully consider the populace as active partners in creating not only the theatre on our stages, but the life in our city streets? This is a radical civic dramaturgy that should happen now.