

The Necessary Theatre
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May 30, 2020

*Did you take this time to risk it all
to let down your guard
to break down walls?*

*Did you open your doors and let in the light,
deepen connections
bond together and fight?*

*Did you write it down along the way,
to tell future generations
about covid days?*

*Are you stronger today
having been through the fire,
can you show me the way?*

One of the greatest strengths of theatre is the ability to create worlds. We imagine and invent what was, what is, and what could be. By nature, our work is constantly changing and ephemeral. So the phoenix's mythology of rising from the ashes is an apt symbol for our art form—and our time.

As a director and dramaturg, I find myself wondering what story we want to tell. Taking this time to pause and reflect, what if the question isn't what will theatre be like when we're together again, but what do we *want* it to be?

During this time away from our stages, we can lay a foundation for a vibrant, necessary theatre; one built on more access, diversity, collaboration, advocacy, and outreach. We can use this moment to create more equitable systems and environments. It is our responsibility to expand our circle, not turn inward. By embracing new and old voices, fresh and familiar faces, we will grow stronger in our broken places.

If we really want to change the way we create and experience theatre, we need to alter the power structure. Top-down hierarchies led by artistic directors don't match theatre's collaborative nature. Imagine a shared, horizontal power structure, like an artistic co-op, where artist and audience, admin staff and artistic director all have an equal voice. Where all artistic disciplines collaborate and share resources. Where small companies—the foundation of any artistic community—have as much influence as large union houses, and freelance artists and theatre staff join forces to ensure the sustainability of our field. When we support each other, we all reopen and collectively prove the existence of a necessary theatre.

What if we gave power to people who don't usually have it? Or invited the community into the conversation and asked them what they need and want? This wouldn't just change the way we create theatre. It would change the way we advocate for it. A survey by Americans for the Arts on behalf of Artist Relief discovered that, due to COVID-19, 95% of artists have reported income loss and 62% have become fully unemployed. We saw too clearly how artists had to fight to be recognized in recent stimulus packages and it's not nearly enough. We need to advocate for ourselves, not depend on someone else. The necessary theatre is bipartisan and creates meaningful relationships with representatives in order to have more of a voice in local, state, and federal funding of the arts. Dramaturgs can serve this effort by documenting stories from our field to demonstrate the economic and cultural impact theatre has on communities.

When we reunite, there will be hugs and kisses, laughter and tears. Simple moments will be more special because of their simplicity. But what happens a year or two from now? Once there's a vaccine, and a routine sets in, will everything go back to the way it was?

Our future may include intense venue cleanings, masks, hand sanitizer, and more social distancing. We'll need to relearn how to be in the same space with one another. An audience will add a more intense level of stress than before, especially the first time someone coughs or sneezes. How will we respond to and with an audience in order to create an experience that's worth whatever risk—real or imagined—comes with being in a crowd?

Our future productions will need different ways of creating, producing, rehearsing, and performing to ensure the safety of both audiences and artists. The necessary theatre encourages and embraces that change in subtle and dramatic ways.

- Reduce the wage gap between artistic directors making six figures or more and staff or guest artists living paycheck to paycheck.
- Those with power and privilege need to be proactive in ceding that power to make room for voices we don't hear enough from—more women, people of color, people with disabilities, LGBTQIA+, youth.
- Hire local artists. They will be the first to return to theatres—as staff, gig workers, and audience members—but the artist-institution relationship is neither reciprocal nor equal. Hiring all local talent shows a commitment to those artists and allows companies to work for longer rehearsal periods or on varied schedules without having the additional expense of travel or housing. Plus, it puts money back into local economies, which supports individual artists and theatre companies.
- Extend rehearsal periods and incorporate alternating or rotating schedules for casts in the room.
- New plays will capture this moment, but playwrights need time, space, and money to create. Not every writer has finished a new script during this time. Build (or rebuild) a new play development program that serves the artist, not a predetermined production schedule.
- Embrace flexible spaces, outdoor venues, and site-specific locations that offer seating configurations that shake up the traditional division of performer-to-audience spaces.
- Celebrate small audiences. People may be in a rush to reopen, but they're not in a rush to sit together. There will be empty seats (by design and by default), but there will be people. Cultivate these initial, brave audiences and make them as involved in theatre's survival as we are.
- Accessibility is crucial. We are all experiencing this pandemic differently. Our theatres can be places of comfort and celebration—if all people are welcome, represented, and no one is excluded by the price of a ticket.
- Commit to community work to create longterm, reciprocal relationships—partnerships that work year over year, not just for one show. If audiences don't return to your theatre, bring your theatre into your community. Go where they feel safe and welcome.

We have an opportunity to create a theatre where ritual meets risk. One where the tradition of performance and the thrill of discovery births new forms, new languages, new methods. Never lose sight of how we feel right now. These months of virtual play readings and live streaming performances have shown us what is essential to create connection. We must hold onto it when we're back together. This urgency—this need to come together and share a story with a community—is the essence of theatre. It is the foundation of the necessary theatre we now must build.