

Rethinking “Here” and “Now”
Lucy Powis, She/Her/Hers
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“Why here, why now?” If you’re teaching a class on dramaturgy, those questions will likely come up as cornerstones, whether you’re planning a season or asking about a character’s motivation in a scene. While seemingly basic and sometimes cliché-feeling when uttered during a meeting, they’re questions that should be key when working in an artistic medium that is specific to a time and place.

As eager as we might be to get back into theatres in the wake of COVID-19, it won’t be easy. The ideas of sidling past someone to get to my seat, of standing in the conveyor belt of a women’s washroom line, or of diving into an immersive experience all carry a sense of anxiety that they didn’t before, and I don’t know that that will change any time soon.

So what are we coming together for? How does a theatrical experience mandate that you have to leave your apartment and face that sense of dread? What are the stories that we need to hear right now, that we haven’t heard before, that might have taken on a new meaning after spending an indeterminate number of days separated from in-person communal experiences? Now more than ever, it isn’t enough to produce theatre for the sake of it, to fill subscription slots half-heartedly, or to label a play “timely” in its press release without sitting down to ask the question of how. We’ve all had to take a step back, and my hope is that we will take this opportunity as not just a pause but a moment to look back at the work that we and our organizations are doing and regroup. What was the initiative you always wanted to start, the audience you wanted to reach, the playwright you wanted to program but never got the chance to before? What systems were broken to begin with, and how can you avoid returning to them? With every programming decision, can we ask the questions of “why here, why now?” not passively but with the urgency of knowing that bringing a group of people together in space is not one to be taken for granted—that it never was?

We’ve also seen, now more than ever, that “here” and “now” don’t have to be in a physical space or in one, unrecorded, moment. How can we expand our theatrical experiences to take advantage of the digital technology we have at our fingertips—not to replace in-person gatherings, but to augment them? When I worked in the literary department of Williamstown Theatre Festival in 2018, we livestreamed many of our post-show talkbacks, allowing audience members to ask questions on Facebook Live in the moment or to watch the talkback at a different time. Why not make that the default so that you don’t miss out on a panel if you can’t make a specific performance or have to weigh being on time for your train or your babysitter against staying for a half hour longer? If theatrical experiences can be created solely for Instagram, as we saw with [Contagious Closet Dramas](#) and [WP Theater’s Pipeline Festival](#), then why restrict the world of your play just to a building? Why not make an Instagram play of your digital marketing, instead of just using production photos and pull quotes? If your company has video footage that they have the rights to air, why not make your last Sondheim production available to stream for a limited time before you begin previews for your next one?

A theatre experience that has stuck with me unlike any other is The Mission Business’ [ZED.TO](#), an “8-month narrative told in real-time through an integrated combination of interactive theatrical events and online content.” ZED.TO told the story of a pandemic (ha) by creating characters who you could follow on Twitter, by sending audience members on scavenger hunts across Toronto in between live events that played out like more traditional immersive theatre pieces. You didn’t have to attend every event or follow every social media arc to enjoy the piece, but the multiple levels of entry allowed you to dive into

the world as much as you were inspired to and choose your level of engagement. On a less daunting scale, I also think back fondly on [Yes Let's Go's *The Godot Cycle*](#) at the 2011 Toronto Fringe Festival, where audience members could come and go as they pleased, either online or in person, to a 54-hour marathon of *Waiting for Godot* performances, with the same actors playing Vladimir and Estragon throughout.

I would never argue that every play needs to have someone playing its characters on Twitter or mandate livestreaming across the board. What I do hope is that theatres will be more conscious of providing multiple levels of entry, which have the possibility to expand the world of your play to allow further engagement and make your work accessible to those who otherwise might not be able to see it. My hope is that we will take what we have learned about how to make theatre when there are no physical theatres and allow it to imbue our work when things return to “normal” with a sense of adventure and creativity, with a willingness to push boundaries of what our field is. And, of course, with an extra eagerness to ask those pesky dramaturgical questions: why here? Why now? And what are “here” and “now”?