

We Need to Talk About the Backlog

American playwrights work in an environment of scarcity. Despite all the extraordinary companies, festivals, conferences, and contests dedicated to the production and development of new work, there will always be a surplus of good plays and a shortage of opportunities to bring those plays to life before an audience. This problem is about to get a lot worse.

By the time theaters reopen, hundreds of new plays and musicals scheduled for production in the spring/fall of 2020 and maybe even the winter of 2021 will be cancelled. Thankfully, many (albeit not all) of these works will be rescheduled and will eventually find their way to a stage in 2021 or 2022. However, the rescheduling of these productions also means that, unless theaters create additional opportunities for new work, there will be a large backlog of plays and musicals begging to be seen. Theaters may currently be on hiatus from production, but playwrights haven't stopped writing, meaning we are about to have an even larger surplus of great plays without a home. Theaters need to meet this surplus by doubling down, at least in the short-term, on their commitment to new work.

Dramaturgs, now more than ever, need to embrace their role as advocates for playwrights. Even after this public health crisis passes, we will almost certainly still be in the midst of an economic crisis. It's hard to imagine any theater in the country emerging from this pandemic on stronger financial footing. The budgetary arguments for shrinking programming and dusting off old chestnuts certain to draw a crowd will be difficult to rebut. However, dramaturgs must continue to speak up on behalf of working playwrights. They must remind their colleagues of the heightened scarcity that today's writers face, and they need to propose compelling strategies that can address the backlog of unseen new work.

What might some of those strategies be? Most importantly, dramaturgs need to help their institutions map out a 3-year plan designed to make up all or most of the new play programming that has been lost to the coronavirus pandemic. This means more than just rescheduling those productions that were cancelled. It means devising a strategy that will allow a company to produce as many new works as they would during a typical 3-year cycle. For example, if a theater traditionally premieres two new plays annually, then in 2021 and 2022 they would need to produce three new plays each year if they wanted to compensate for the year or so of new play programming that has been lost. This could be achieved through creative measures like running two new plays in rep on alternating nights or presenting a double bill of one-hour plays (a common practice in the 50s and 60s but now largely abandoned). It could also be done the old-fashioned way by simply devoting more slots in the season calendar to new work. If we have to nix Shakespeare for a couple of years to make it happen, then someone get on the phone with his agent.

Of course, it will not be possible for every company to make up all the work that has been lost or honor every last commitment made to a living playwright. Here, too, dramaturgs have an important role to play. Dramaturgs help shape the values of an institution, and those values

should guide a company as it navigates the difficult task of deciding whose work will and won't get to be seen. I believe dramaturgs should push companies to prioritize the rescheduling of productions by living playwrights, especially if those productions are slated to be world premieres. This can be a useful guiding principle, but it doesn't solve all the thorny questions theaters are now grappling with. For example, should one reschedule a production that was open for only a few nights before closing prematurely? If a play is getting its tenth production, is that as critical to its long-term success as a third or fourth production might be for a different play? When thinking about which shows to cancel and which to reschedule, do we prioritize the work of emerging playwrights over the work of established playwrights who can better withstand the financial hit? And if it's no longer possible to honor a commitment to a playwright, is there something else, such as a commission for future work, that can be offered instead?

Finally, theaters should speak publicly about the new work that they wanted to produce but were no longer able to because of the pandemic. Much in the way that the Kilroy's List and NPX boost the national profile of plays searching for homes, an industry-wide list of works that lost out on the chance to be performed would almost certainly inspire other companies to pick up the mantle and bring these shows before an audience.

By no means is this list of ideas exhaustive. These suggestions might not even be the best or most feasible ones. I wrote this piece not because I want to advocate for one particular solution. Rather, I wrote this piece because I think it's vital that we all acknowledge the urgency of this problem and begin the process of brainstorming and implementing a substantive response to it. In the labor market when there are more people seeking work than there are available jobs, people leave out of frustration. The new play economy operates on the same basic principle. There have always been more high-quality scripts than there are production slots. However, with perhaps a season's worth of cancellations on the horizon, the magnitude of this problem has increased significantly. If we want to avoid a lot of very good work falling through the cracks and into oblivion, then we must take concrete steps now. This will not be an easy task, but it's certainly a worthy one.

Marshall Botvinick

He/Him/His

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