

A Psychological Case for Theatre Now

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Quarantine has redrawn space and time. Crowded into our homes, our travels shrunk to anxious orbits to the market and back, we stare at a horizon which hangs stubbornly close. Time, meanwhile, drifts away. The entire month of April unspooled shapelessly, with no events to make it rise and fall. What day is it? What time is it? Does it matter anymore?

Theatre, perhaps more than any other art form, is defined by space and time. If it happened someplace else, or yesterday, and you witness it here today, it may be wonderful. But is it still theatre? This existential debate is currently playing out between AEA and AFTRA-SAG as the unions stake out jurisdictions over streaming. If all acting is now screen acting, what have the other theatrical disciplines become?

Theatre practitioners remain expert at space, time, and human behavior. Many of us can instinctively map a six-foot radius around our bodies and counter when another body approaches. We may craft masks with an awareness of their gestural significance—selecting whimsical fabrics or embroidering a smile to represent the sentiment concealed behind it. We peer into the grids of colleagues and friends on Zoom calls, searching the edge of the frame for body language, clothing choices, subtle side-eye—clues to subtext that the microphone can't transmit.

We notice simple acts of theatre – applause from windows and balconies in tribute to healthcare workers; parades of cars or bicycles in celebration of graduates; socially-distanced line dances and tai-chi outdoors – and we recognize that these new rituals have emerged because humans need to perform collective acts in shared space and time. To see our behavior reflected in others, before our very eyes, validates our own existence. Even as the definition of theatre fractures, theatre defines us as human.

We will doubtless continue to redraw space and time for the good of our physical health. But our humanity demands that we also maintain the concreteness of space and time—if only in fleeting moments of collective witness. In fact, our sanity may depend on it.

In March of this year, in response to global restrictions due to COVID-19, *The Lancet*¹ published a review of the psychological impact of quarantine. The review drew on 24 studies, most of which reported negative psychological outcomes including post-traumatic stress, confusion, and anger. Several stressors tended to exacerbate these outcomes, including a longer duration of quarantine; inadequate medical or personal supplies; inadequate information; boredom; and financial hardship. Negative outcomes were particularly associated with quarantine periods lasting more than ten days; and with quarantine periods which were extended past their initial end-date. As most of us in the US begin week

¹ *The Lancet*, The Psychological Impact of Quarantine and How to Reduce It: Rapid Review of the Evidence. Vol. 395, issue 10227, p. 912-920.

eight or nine of social distancing, this list of stressors hits ominously close to home. However we emerge from quarantine by physical or economic measures, we will be bruised psychologically.

How can we recover? Do Zoom happy hours and FaceTime playdates and streamed entertainment keep us sane? Perhaps. But we all ache for more. In fact, we may be fed by moments of collective witness in ways that our conscious brains don't recognize. A 2016 science column in *The Atlantic* titled "Emotions May be Detectable in Air"² described a study in which the air in a movie theatre was analyzed to track chemicals released by the audience's bodies throughout a film. The theater's outgoing air vent was connected to a mass spectrometer which analyzed the gasses in the theatre in 30 second increments. Those increments corresponded to the emotional tenor of each 30 seconds in the film. The breath, sweat, and other chemical secretions of 9,500 filmgoers watching sixteen different films was eventually measured over many showings, and some striking consistencies emerged.

We're all painfully aware that we can transmit germs in a theatre. But that's not the only thing we silently and unconsciously exchange. In the movie theatre study, chemicals such as carbon dioxide, acetone, and isoprene spiked at precisely the same moments during scenes of similar emotions. Scenes of suspense and humor most consistently corresponded to chemical responses. Scientists haven't yet determined whether these chemical secretions are simply by-products of physiological states, or whether our bodies actually communicate via the chemicals we release. But the study demonstrates that witnessing drama collectively can actually alter the air around us.

Shared experiences result in measurable change. And when we are deprived of shared experiences, our mental health is likely to suffer. That is why – across six feet of distance or behind masks and windows – we continue to create them. It may be many months before they begin to resemble the experiences we traditionally perform onstage. So in the absence of traditional forms, we must imagine new ones.

We – dramaturgs and creative producers in particular – must be the thought leaders of the form. We notice subtle, distanced acts of theatre, and we interrogate them. As our time in quarantine drags on, we must become experts not just in cataloging emergent forms; but in identifying their mechanisms for healing and in amplifying that power. When this crisis of our physical health passes – and it will – a crisis of our mental health will follow. We must be ready to join the front lines. We must teach ourselves to be fully human again.

² *The Atlantic*, Emotions May Be Detectable in Air, May 23, 2016.