

What We're Doing When We're Not Working

By Molly Marinik (she/her)
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Most of the theater professionals I know possess a vast and diverse skillset: creative thinkers, effective collaborators, savvy problem-solvers, empathetic team players, humble servants to the greater artistic process, etc. etc. And with good reason. These traits were bred into us at whatever age we became theater-makers, with “thank you five” as customary a tradition at local theater camps as it is at elite conservatories. As a freelance dramaturg, I feel a certain amount of pressure to live up to these standards and do right by my colleagues, particularly my fellow creative team members when I’m working on a show in development. I suppose this comes into play because I see my role as having the privilege of distance. I’ve always felt the responsibility to work in service of those who are knee-deep in the artistic muck, making sure I’m there as needed (whether a 9am rehearsal call or an 11pm notes session). I recognize that this is all part of the deal of having a career in the theater. And it’s true of whatever your department may be.

Pre-pandemic, I knew the commitment of this industry. It required possessing the above characteristics, and being willing to sacrifice my personal life, more or less. After all, theater is not a 9-5 profession. And in my 20’s that was okay. I mean, it wasn’t always *okay* but it was understood. The reality of this hit me hard in my early 30’s when I had kids and moved to the suburbs. Choices, no doubt. But so began the great tug of war, of me trying to grow my career while feeling the hours available to do so slipping away in the quicksand of parenthood.

Then came March 12, 2020.

Everything stopped.

It was hours before I was supposed to attend an opening night when the news dropped that Broadway would be closed, effective immediately.

The shock and sadness of that moment, and everything that’s followed since, weighs heavily on me as I know it does all of us in this industry. It’s not getting easier. In fact, it’s getting a lot worse in many ways. Lost gigs, lost wages, lost art. We are in the profession of feeling, and boy does this pandemic and economic catastrophe come with lots of feels.

I continue to process it all, as I juggle my gigs that haven’t gone away. At the same time, my life more directly than ever involves running after two tiny humans and preparing snacks every 20 minutes. I also see my colleagues’ personal lives much more acutely now, whatever their own day-to-day experience may look like. And it strikes me that the way things were — the lack of work-life balance, the expectation that we’ll give all of ourselves at all times — that’s not good for anyone.

I used to try my hardest not to talk about my kids at work unless someone asked. I did what the other theater parents I observed did — put my head down, completed tasks to the best of my ability, and pretended there were more than 24 hours in a day. Now, my kids are making their presence known, popping up on Zoom calls whether I shut the door or not. Instead of seeing this as a deficit or an embarrassing reveal that I’m pulled in more directions than I want anyone to know, I hope we all begin to embrace the complexities of our human lives outside of the selves we bring to our work. Whether we have kids or not, we’re all dealing with a host of things that have nothing to do with making theater. And those things are as much a part of us as are our professional commitments.

These human circumstances have become so much more visible now that we're letting colleagues and acquaintances into our houses via video calls. We can't hide the nuances that make us who we are. And amazingly, I'm noticing much more grace being offered in these strange work-from-home times. For example, if someone feels under the weather, they're strongly encouraged to stop working and just rest. Imagine that. In the before-times, we were conditioned to power through whenever possible.

When we get back to work and back to the often windowless caverns where amazing art is birthed, nurtured, and set free, I hope we collectively move forward remembering that all of us are more than the process or the product of these efforts. We're people who have family members of all ages and needs, who require physical connection with friends and colleagues (ideally in person, but sometimes virtually can suffice). And we have emotional needs that sometimes are rocked even though it might not look like it. And much of the time, we're multi-hyphenate artists ourselves, whether it's something we self-promote or not. That personal self-expression is uniquely part of who we are, and what we bring to our work as dramaturgs. If these strange pandemic times have taught me anything, it's that our multifaceted lives are as important as how we perform our work. I'm also realizing that we can still be loyal, committed, successful team players if we don't give all of ourselves – at least not all of the time.