

The Harder Disease to Beat

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(he/ him/ his)

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For millennia, theater has avoided destruction by wars, famines, cultural paradigm shifts, turbulent politics, and even supersized egos within. The theatrical form possesses inherent antibodies to combat the infection of fear in an ever tensing populace. Such built-in defenses have been galvanized by communities who, throughout history, have been able to congregate and witness each other's presence, practice, and performance. The separation makes us question if theater can weather yet another massive storm, especially one which prevents our talents from mixing to create something new. Still, a silent, deadlier killer lurks behind the masque of this pandemic.

Our real dangers are not refunded tickets and cancelled shows, but the growing perception that rest is inactive. The idea that theater has ground to a halt is far more violent than the new rhythm in which we find time passing us. If distance becomes disconnection, theater dies. Yes, theater is a place, but it is also a mindset—a way of living. By thinking of this pandemic as a hiatus we run the risk of deactivating what is central to the theatrical experience: imagination. Imagination does not stop, it adapts.

I look at the children at play in my neighborhood, and the innovations parents are making to entertain their kids. I see teachers and caregivers ministering to our collective hunger for social contact by embodying characters, holding space for grief, and reengineering the ethos with brand new modes of instruction. I see people everywhere singing from balconies, making videos to share, and reading, watching, laughing, crying, mourning, and celebrating together on video chat. Is theater really closed? Is drama limited to a formulaic unfolding of narrative? Are we prepared to accept that theaters are just walls, and empty chairs, and framed stages, or is there a secret world beyond the bricks where theater lives and cannot be diseased?

We have permission, like the neighborhood children, to slow down and change our play. This pandemic does not have the power to defy creativity. When theater artists get stuck they don't quit, they change tactics to find a new way through. In a way, we are being asked to make a global beat change. Artists are taking up the challenge of *re-visioning* the difficult given circumstances. Online, we can attend new play readings, archived performances, concerts, home-staged scene work, masterclasses and workshops, and even a few bold new productions that have been pushed to live stream platforms. Let us not forget that we can also retreat to literature, criticism, essays, painting, photography, cooking, and field observation all from the comfort of our homes. Theater happens every minute, everywhere. Do we need to pay the price of a ticket to be forced to notice that the dream is dreaming us all of the time? All of these available outlets feed our imagination and can spark what we will do when restrictions relax.

A precious gift has been dangled before us. We have time to breathe new life into our craft, to stretch our tensed creative muscles, and to recognize a destructive axiom in our midst. The way we think about theater, 'before and after' Coronavirus, is a linear and literalistic trap. For the present artist, there is no idea before or after an event, there is only what happens next,

the next choice, the next breath. We have only to inspire, to draw creativity in through the breath. Theater cannot be marred by distance, sadness, or death. These eventualities are dramatic moments on a cosmic continuum of being together. The musicality of our high-stakes work changes, ebbs and flows, and sometimes shakes us to our core, but we can learn to play the rests, to breathe and lean into the tempo changes, and to find new phrasing and meaning in this stage of the dream.