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Dramaturging the Phoenix:
Dramaturgs, Unite!

by Percival Hornak (he/they)

The biggest thing the pandemic has cemented for me in terms of my understanding of theatre as an industry is that it is truly nothing without the people making it, and at the same time the actual human beings who make up the theatre industry's workforce are valued the least when budgets are made and relief plans get drawn up. The theaters gutting their staff seem to have forgotten that you can't make art without artists, and putting money into maintaining buildings and wiping down lobby surfaces would be better spent sustaining the folks who got those institutions where they are. Companies have taken up asking artists what they need most right now, but the honest answer is money, and that seems to be the one thing not everyone is willing to give artists at this moment in time, because culturally we don't understand that being an artist in the theatre is a job just like being an accountant is and look down on career artists who ask for compensation for their labor.

Theatre work is labor. Making art is labor. Labor needs appropriate compensation, period, end of story. I wanted to work in theatre because I love doing it, but that doesn't mean that what I'm doing isn't work – I'm a dramaturg. That's my **job**. We have all lost income and may be teetering on the brink of losing our very livelihoods because of this pandemic, and no one is paying attention because they understand making art as a hobby, not as labor. When we collectively agree to demand fair wages, benefits, and better working conditions, we'll be stronger for it and will find the power to create deep and lasting change. Theatre artists must stand in solidarity with each other and work together to demand this. If we stop working, there's no theatre. If we aren't able to create because it's not financially viable to continue waiting out the pandemic, theatre can't and won't come back. Institutions need us more than we need them, and moving forward we must stand in solidarity with each other and accept that an injury to one is the concern of all – this industry has done incredible harm to so many within our community, and we need to stand together and organize in order to fix it.

The folks positioned best to help support and even create calls for systemic change are dramaturgs, although we are rarely compensated commensurate with the utility of our skills and what we can bring to institutions and their creative processes. We tend to be excellent observers and are often willing to disrupt the status quo in the name of advocating for people we care about or for change that we believe in. We serve as conduits between different members of production teams or different departments within institutions, and as a result are adept at understanding tiny details in relation to the big picture and vice versa. We hold

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stake in artistic processes without directly creating the work ourselves in the way actors or designers do, so we understand the perspective of both artist and audience. Most of all, we tend to be deeply empathetic and supportive of one another. While the actual practice of dramaturgy changes from person to person and even from production to production, these are skills all dramaturgs lean on in their work, and skills that will be massively beneficial as we consider sweeping changes to the theatre landscape.

The industry seems to have forgotten how necessary the practice of dramaturgy, and by extension dramaturgs themselves, are, but we have the vision to help our industry adapt to this pandemic, weather this storm, and implement lasting change. We need to come together and realize the incredible power we hold as workers and as artists, and bargain collectively for the treatment and the compensation we deserve. We can't settle for small gains – we must hold out until the problems that have caused so much harm are solved and the system truly serves and values theatre artists. Everything depends on what we are capable of wanting and our ability to continue pushing for change. When we see ourselves as one community bound by mutual love for making art and make an effort to lift each other up, we have unbelievable power.

We already have everything we need: deep love for each other and for the community as a whole, a desire to be able to continue doing the work we're passionate about, and ideas about the best ways for making work. Theatre is nothing without the people who make it, and my dream is to see artists working in community with each other, forming collectives rooted in mutual aid, communal artmaking, challenging each other, and making work that excites the group as a whole and explores new ways of creating theatre. Art is labor and we need to view ourselves as workers, and stand in solidarity with each other to demand industry-wide change.