

Abundance Around the Corner

Dramaturging the Phoenix

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“What ideal theatre-making will heal the communities, nations, and the globe during the long recovery ahead?” the prompt asks. A great question. A huge question. An optimistic question—one that assumes that there *is* an ideal theatre-making that could heal communities, nations, the globe. I’m overwhelmed by it. But I suspect the answer—an answer, at least—may be buried in the question itself: communities. I want to focus there.

In many ways, it feels like our worlds have narrowed over these past weeks. Despite all the talk of “bubbles” in the past few years, this is a new level. Many of us have gone from interacting face-to-face with many people on a daily basis to just those we share a home with. Many of us who used to commute, travel, and adventure are now confined to a few rooms. In many ways, my whole tangible world is now my husband, our three-room apartment, and the screens onto which other people flicker. It’s tempting to think about this moment in terms of scarcity: what we don’t have, what’s missing. But in other ways, the richness of my local community has revealed itself to me. Mutual aid groups have sprung up in my neighborhood, showing the abundance around every corner. Neighbors are reaching out, asking for help, and helping each other out. Much of what is needed is already here.

In a beautiful essay I had the privilege of editing for the HowlRound journal recently, [Thomas Peterson argues](#) that as an art form, theatre is uniquely positioned to tackle the climate crisis because it is inherently localized, and the changing climate will affect every community in the world differently. Theatre, he goes on to say, is “perfectly suited to the telling of local stories: all of the participants in its creation and performance (save perhaps the playwright), along with its audience, must share a specific physical location.” And local stories, he believes, are the ones we need in order to move people to action.

I couldn’t agree more with Thomas’ thoughts, and I think the point applies beyond the climate crisis, too. The way this pandemic has affected geographic communities varies incredibly widely: no two will need the same things coming out of it. I mean that logistically and artistically—the safety protocols needed will likely be varied, and audiences in different places will likely be drawn to different types of theatre. This time calls for national and international collaboration and best-practice sharing, of course, but ultimately what is needed the most, I believe, is a deep investment from theatres in their local communities.

This can and should take many forms. I hope that theatre leaders are engaged with their local politicians and audience members around when to reopen, and trust them if they say *you should wait*, or *we don’t know yet*. I suspect more damage could be done—more trust could be lost—by attempting to reopen too early than by waiting and playing it safe. And I pray that support (from foundations and the government, in particular) can be found for the many theatres that may need to wait longer than their current funds will allow.

As concerned as my producerial brain is about the logistics, though, my dramaturgical heart is more interested in the art. At my most optimistic, I hope that this pause in operations

encourages leaders to increase their commitment to their local artists. I hope that the large theatres that are used to bringing actors, directors, and designers in from out of town will put more energy into hiring locally, whether travel restrictions are still in place or not. I hope leaders of theatres of all sizes will consider the fact that a play by a local writer, written pre-pandemic or not, will likely speak more strongly to their community than last year's off-Broadway hit, or a re-imagined well-known classic. In my five years administering the [National Playwright Residency Program](#) for HowlRound, I've seen firsthand the powerful ripple effects that theatres investing in local playwrights can have on the whole community. Playwrights may be the only artists who don't *need* to share geographic space with the rest of the artists in order to make theatre happen, but the result is often so much deeper when they are. So I encourage theatre leaders to start local when selecting the works that will reopen their theatres and fill their seasons. Check around the corner. What if everything you need is already there?

Our country is vast and diverse. A farm-to-table restaurant in California shouldn't—can't—have the same menu as one in Ohio. A theatre in one state's season should not look nearly identical to one in another. They shouldn't reopen at the same time or in the same way. They're not serving the same audience; they're not operating in the same artistic eco-system. I hope that when our theatres return, they will do so in a way that takes full advantage of the abundance around them.