

Space on the Sidewalk
by Kirsten Bowen
She/Her pronouns
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My family moves slowly on our daily walks. In our neighborhood in South Philadelphia the streets and sidewalks are tight and narrow, so social distancing requires keen awareness and accommodation of others. We cross the street if we see people coming towards us. We walk single file and hug the wall or step off the sidewalk in order to give others space to pass us. Or we just stop so that they can pass. We nod and say hello as they walk by, and usually they do too.

Right now this slow, deliberate way of moving through the world and making space for others is not only a civil act, but necessary for our health. And as much as I long to resume a life outside without fear for our physical health, I do relish this slower, more mindful pace that forces me to look around, be present, and care for my community and myself.

I think about how this current way of existing applies to a life in the theatre, at least the life I knew. I am currently a freelance dramaturg, fledgling arts journalist, and full-time caretaker of a toddler and baby. However for fifteen years I worked full-time as a dramaturg and literary manager in institutional theatre.

The theatre is where I first learned the value of community and felt like a part of one. Whether I was connected to a creative team, a company, or the overall field itself, I loved being a part of something larger than myself – and I gave it as much of myself as I could.

I am still a member of that community, but now I find more space to fully inhabit other identities – as a mother, wife, daughter, sister, and friend. In my previous life these roles were always in competition with work, often losing out because the theatre took up the majority of my time and focus. After all, in addition to the forty hours a week at my desk there were rehearsals on the weekends. Techs in the evenings. Previews in the evenings and on weekends followed by notes. Talkbacks and other special events in the evening and on weekends. Out of town weekend trips to attend festivals and conferences. And at home, writing program notes or reading the scripts I didn't have the time to during the "work day." Not to mention answering emails.

Institutional dramaturgy is by not the only area with a significant workload and I was not the only administrator in the office past 6PM or on weekends. Directors, actors, and stage managers get one day off a week when they are in rehearsal. In previews designers and production staff receive a note at eleven thirty at night that they must fix first thing in the morning so that they don't get behind on the rest of their laundry lists. In order to survive financially some freelancers work without a break on several productions at once while simultaneously teaching a full course load. Interns and fellows without outside financial means work full-time for the theatre and then leave for their after hours job that actually pays the bills. The strain is even more compounded for people with disabilities and BIPOC workers dealing with predominantly white institutions.

I left my full time job for a family move due to my husband's work, not burnout. I am currently in the privileged position of not having to hustle and work around the clock like so many of my other

freelance colleagues in order to survive. But one shouldn't have to have a partner in a high enough income bracket in order to not be overworked. Rest is not a luxury, it is a necessity.

These days we need it now more than ever, and yet it is at a premium. Theatres are struggling to stay open and produce in ways they never anticipated. Many of the people who were overworked seven months ago have been furloughed, let go, or have had work canceled. Others may be filling in for that loss of support, working at odd hours when they are not home schooling, caring for sick family, or having to share limited space with partners and roommates. If our work isn't mentally and physically exhausting us, living in the world is.

Therefore it is my hope that those in power let their workers exist outside of work. Allow them to set boundaries between home and the theatre. Provide them with time to rest and be unavailable, as well as support so that they are not returning to even more work. Pay freelancers, fellows, and interns enough so that they can take less outside work. Not just parents, because you should not have to have a child, or for staff, because you should not have to be employed full-time, in order to have a manageable schedule, make a living wage, and receive time off.

This will involve a shift in values from what and how often we produce, to the people who produce it. A shift that is happening. People are speaking out about toxic environments, resulting in leadership change. Thanks to We See You White American Theatre, companies are committing to dismantling white supremacy and addressing harm, which includes changing rehearsal and tech schedules and more deeply involving and compensating their artists. Though this work culture is systemic, it is obviously not impossible to change.

Theatre is not the only industry that struggles with work life balance. But how wonderful if this art form that values innovation, risk, and community, could lead the way for others in caring for its people by putting them first. In the new world, may we remain present and careful with each other, moving thoughtfully and purposefully, stopping when we need to for the well being of ourselves and each other.