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She/hers

Imagining Theatre Post-Covid: 3.0

Yeah That Happened: Physical Dramaturgy & The Post-Insurrection Pause

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During early Covid I was asked to write a reflection on theatre through the lens of time, specifically, what might theatre look like once we get through this raggedy traumatic mess of 2020? I immediately saw the pandemic in moving image form: an endless hallway populated by pricked balloons, and all its subsequent associations: startlement, displeasure, surprise, deflation, and a weird and terrible uncanniness where the air is literally changed and charged. The realities we know are far worse. And how my friends do we return from *that*? But if anything, the power of the theatre teaches us to be visionaries, and to place spirit and bodies, literally, in uncharted temporal places, and even more impressively, to welcome the unknown. “Terra-incognita.” Gang, we’ve got this. The theatre is going to persevere.

I think one of the greatest gifts the post-Covid theatre can give us is permission to deep breathe. I predict (with a few centuries of theatre and performance anecdotally backing me up) that the communal shared space will be a literal medicine, if not metaphysically transformative. It’s going to feel so good to exhale together again. Researchers even call it analgesic. I also think about audiences, who are going to gather after a prolonged state of not just psychological isolation but also the physical trauma of fear: for some time, we have been performing and imbuing caution in all our public activities, and arguably held shallow breathe has become the new norm. The new theatre is hopefully going to bring us back into deepened rhythms and the symbiosis of audience and performer. You know, that cool still moment when you look around the theatre and realize you’ve all been transported to a shared new world. I predict some possibly dramaturgically inscribed mediation and maybe the catharsis of deep belly laughs. Something along the lines of what absurdist theorists call “the edge,” a fine line between the explosive joys and melancholies of having survived a world on cataclysmic fire.

I think a lot about time as dramaturgical variant, and wonder how play duration may shift post-pandemic. We will be arriving out of a time where days upon days have seemed to dissolve in a sort of anti-lyrical vacuum of repetition, and I wonder how the post-Covid theatre will comment on this global experience of blurred time. In its most elevated moments, will climax become embodied with poetic image, manifested out of our newly meditative lives? Or will there be nothing but spectacle, dramatic conflict, and explosions, as a way of exercising out #shitshow2020? Or, will the post-Covid theatre find itself reconnected to nature in revolt of cyber-realms, or opposite, become heavily technologically-driven and engaged with the intersection of virtual and real-time worlds. Mostly, I just imagine a rise in pop-up outdoor performances, conjunct with both spontaneous rock n' roll and family-friendly feels: sprawling picnic blankets and lawn chairs and the autonomy and freedom to come and go at will, in a festive aesthetic marriage of Shakespeare in the Park and multi-focus immersive works.

In my dreams now, all the people are masked. It seems the same for so many people I talk to. How is the theatre going to dramaturgically grapple with these strange new subconscious manifestations and the disembodiment of the mask? I also wonder how the act of unmasking may function as a symbol within itself, or how it might dramaturgically inform deeper existential questions, such as of self and mortality, as playwrights arrive out of quarantine with fresh plays. I think about symbols: the uncovered mouth, for example, as a possible site of sensuality (taste and pleasure, including the vibrational pleasure of speech) and as a sign of restored communication, as well as the semiotic role of the naked face. I wonder if there will be a lot of quiet presentations of just "being" on stage.

Most importantly, how do we [cis white abled theatre artists] dramaturg accountability and accessibility post-Covid, and institutionally walk the talk of anti-racist policy and inclusion? How do we dramaturg [traditionally white patriarchal normative] companies with stated missions towards elevating marginalized voices, but don't? I wonder about funding, and what it means to dramaturg boards. I also think a lot about invisible populations, namely those hibernating or (invisible) artists who had no means of physically accessing the theatre pre-Covid, who got left behind in the frenzied large-scale zoom exodus and have subsequently been locked out of virtual doors. How, in post-Covid world, does the theatre dramaturg accessibility from the outside-in? How do we make this (to loosely quote a dramaturg friend), not-high school?

On the heels of the recent insurrection, however, no questions seem more pressing than the application of dramaturgy to real life: how do we even begin to dramaturg democracy, and implement shared theatrical goals like empathetic reach, representation, and idealism? As dramaturgs, how do we begin to dismantle white supremacist culture? If the theatre fundamentally reflects a microcosm of the real world, we have work.

Daniella Vinitzki Mooney is a physically and classically-trained actress through the NYU Tisch Experimental Wing and the Royal Academy in London and has a PhD in performance. She is a contributing writer for Routledge anthology, *Physical Dramaturgies: Perspectives from the Field* and recently signed a book contract with Routledge on the immersive theatre dramaturgies of former NYC goliath, Gale Gates. Daniella has regularly taught theatre at UPenn and holds dual US/Canadian citizenship.