

LMDA Review

Dramaturging Coronavirus

By: Yoni Oppenheim (he/him/his)

4/30/2020

How will we memorialize our dead once this pandemic has passed? It was shocking how many friends and colleagues had lost fathers and other loved ones over the course of just a single week of the coronavirus pandemic. A beloved teacher died, and of course the theater community suffered devastating losses within our ranks as well. Each died alone, without their loved ones around them. The funerals – which in normal times would have attracted hundreds – were attended by only a handful of their closest relatives. Shiva or other mourning rituals were conducted over zoom or telephone. No daily Kaddish was said because the mourner's prayer can only be said with a minyan (prayer quorum). Coronavirus not only robbed mourners of their loved ones, but also deprived them of the warm comforting embrace by the community during their time of greatest need. When this is over, I believe theater artists – and dramaturgs in particular – can help members of our communities craft ways to mourn and memorialize their loved ones who died in a time when the traditional rituals to help mediate grieving were severely limited or put on hold.

Theater is about sharing space and story with others to create empathy. In this moment of social distancing, when we cannot share space together, it is worth remembering something director Peter Sellars said during his recent online CUNY Segal Center Talk, "Theater is designed to say none of us are alone. None of us are outnumbered. All of us. It's all about solidarity." Even as the virus rages and social distancing is in place, we as theater artists can make a greater effort to reach out and engage those who are always homebound and who rarely, if ever, have the privilege of going to the theater. Many theaters are sharing content online, making their work accessible to those who have not had the opportunity to experience it in person. However, many elderly and financially disadvantaged do not have access to the internet, to WhatsApp, or Zoom. Folks have been buying groceries for homebound neighbors to care for their physical needs. We can commit to the act of performance by calling the homebound to make them feel less lonely, perhaps read them a story, listen to them, learn from them. My nine year old daughter – in what started as a school assignment during the coronavirus crisis – has taken to sending handwritten letters to homebound seniors. We can embrace the uniquely analog, handmade nature of theater and connect with our neighbors, community members, and patrons with handwritten letters that are not about fundraising, but spirit raising in this dark and lonely time.

In another CUNY Segal Center Talk (yes, these daily livestreams on HowlRound have been a balm for my soul), playwright/director Guillermo Calderón of Chile's message of encouragement to young theater makers in this moment was: "They're going to go through the death of theater and they are going to revive it themselves." After the coronavirus passes, and we as dramaturgs and theater artists help individuals in our communities meaningfully mourn the dead and celebrate the stories of their lives, I hope we can acknowledge that an era of theater in an unsustainable world has died. Let us mourn it, move on and bring to life a new theater deeply rooted in the experiences and lessons learned from this moment.