Notes From the Field (From the Desk): To Hold

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The last seminar of my "Introduction to Literary Theories" course in the fall semester of 2020 involved really difficult material on gender and race; it was exposing; none of the students had their cameras on. I was nearly in tears. Kept composure. We had been navigating well through the semester, with this and the other first-year module on poetry—subjects adjacent to theatre as a result of my situation within a department of English literature. This semester, I've been more bold, gently asking students to turn cameras on; I remember, though, always, Owen Parry's articulation of audience participation at the start of a Zoom event for the Welsh National Theatre. Some people hang back; some people are highly present (front-row types—I was always one of those); but all of this is good.[1] I've been relaxing my need to "see" everyone out there. As a committed lecturer—a relapsed performer who has found solace in lecture stages—I'm always keen to read the room, normally; to see body posture, faces, engagement or puzzlement, and to respond to this; everything nonverbal that goes on. I was devastated, unsurprised, at the end of a conversation with a colleague on the development of what may become a major "Creative Hub," to hear that our lecture halls might be replaced with sort of multifunction rooms, as if movable chairs meant we could suddenly be free. I think not enough is understood of the theatre of a lecture hall—the theatricality, the performativity, of what goes on—ways this is live, deeply so; ways students are not "passive" at all listening. That we don't need to go to "participatory art" in order to find ourselves within an ethical, social, committed space together; everything of that sort is lost with screens, or nearly. The sentiment of speaking out into a void.

This had shocked me after my first Zoom speaking engagement, a festival run through a dance/arts center in Amsterdam. It was a very *cool* event, and though I was honored to be able to speak, share some thinking on dancing crowds, and such, it was unsettling to be told my setup was not very camera-ready; I had to work out my lighting, and so on. I was sent an external camera that never arrived. Since then, I've taken to shifting my laptop just so, that the bookshelves above me frame the screen; these are the books I write with, in any case; they are always so absent when meeting from my office in "normal" times. Here they are, along with a trove of talismans. I show myself here. But the shock was at hanging up; one speaks into the thing, speaks of dancing, what have you, and then there is the hanging up from the call, and there you are in your living room or what have you. Thankfully, I was able to call a friend and discuss this—the unsettling sort of void, not being fully received. And since then, I've made it my mission, maybe, to think about the dramaturgy of an event like this; a more recent panel discussion, run through The Place in London, involved colleagues in dance/arts

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practice and in health; I voiced wishing to "care" for the event as such, if we were going to be there talking about care. We created a green room to which we could as panelists retreat after it was over. This was a relief. Just to be able to shoot the breeze. It does not quite approximate the bar or the hover at the lectern after a talk, the shy and awkward question that means the world. But it was something. At least we could hold one another in this.

Today, this morning, reading in *The Guardian* about anxious return postlockdown, ways so many will have trouble adjusting back, I've been thinking often about the reverse culture shock, the way some of us have sort of vaguely learned to slow down; the way there is burnout also, holding everything at once, for those of us parenting at home at the same time, or those caring for family and friends. Rhythms are abruptly adjusted again and again and again. Teaching "Experimental Theatre," I realize that we can be in the "space" together and think about experiments in fearless speech, or truthful searching (Grotowski?) and simultaneously hold that, for example, my seven-year-old is shouting out math figures at the same time. I never managed to make the Internet/generalized setup work except to have us side by side.

I don't know what comes next. I remember the forum published in *TDR*, and which I had tried to speak of, to honor, at a talk some months ago—Anna Deavere Smith's 19 May 2020 "I am taking another stance with all of this which is not to know. If I do come up with any wisdom I will let you know, but for now I am speechless." And Elise Morrison's 3 July 2020 response, which was to say she could not find the mental space or time to respond adequately; that this was important also. And her wish for a more equitable future.[2] I can't remember exactly, but I think I cried. Having been a single parent through the lockdowns and having found incredible joy and exhaustion in this, having burned out completely a few weeks ago, flat out, with two weeks of headache, speech gone, and now back on the treadmill again, maybe, nearly, somehow, I think we have to be able to honor, acknowledge, hold ways it can't go back to the same.

Of course it can't.

And for that going *back*, going somewhere, going ahead, or onward, or whatever it will be; for that not to be a further destruction of ways we hold time, ways time is pressured and pressed; ways precarity and inequality are foisted always further on down the line, where colleagues, students, where in some ways we all are so spent we cannot possibly find a way to fight back.

And so if these are "Notes from the Field" (notes from my desk), on a day also where vigils around the country are being held to refuse violence against women and girls, in the wake of the murder of a young woman walking home the other night; and if the past year has been thick and fast with vigils, protests against racism; and if care workers are still not adequately paid—the labor so gendered feminine, racialized—then it has to be that these notes are notes from something of a battlefield; a battle desk; a battlefield that requires loud and clear a more healthy present and future, which is to say a present and future that makes adequate and ongoing space for care and rest.

There, as usual, I have written this in one sitting; that's all there is, when time is fragmented, even now; it is not especially joyful; there is of course also a lot of joy; but we are grieving, globally, and I think with grief what matters is that this should

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be held. I am not looking forward to a "return to normal" hard and fast; if we cannot grieve this set of shocks and traumas I worry we are going to be in for a really very difficult and long and arduous spell. So the question is how we grieve this—how we can rest with all that has come about, all that has been lost—and I don't mean the shopping and whatever, the sort of social gadding about, though of course that is a fabric that has slipped, moved to the disembodied screen—but the sense that a whole paradigm of hyperperformativity has cracked. And with that I think maybe there is something softer that can emerge, something that holds space more carefully for all; and there have been so many loved ones gone, so many grieving who will need time.

Theatre and performance are art forms that work with time and social space; while my own teaching is largely "on the page," within a humanities setting, social distancing affects ways we nurture really simple daily bonds; it becomes ever more pressing to recognize that this does not mean theatre is completely or forever transformed, but rather that the care we have always had to offer to one another will need for many years to come, forever really, to be very gently nurtured and held. That "acting" will not be mastery of craft in quite the same way or writing the weaving of a story without these being embedded in and emboldened by a really radical commitment to care of self and others, to truthful, fearless speech. This is what Foucault saw in the early 1980s, looking back at Greco-Roman philosophies of spiritual health—what philosophy then always was, embroiled in medicine as release of anxious cares. So then "care" is worry; just as fearlessness is not the absence of fear but its gentle holding, so too, John T. Hamilton reminds us, being with care requires us to hold anxiety also, hold fear, hold loss; so that "carefree" does not become "careless."[3] If we don't transition "back" into a social space full of proximities with just this sort of openness toward vulnerability, then I think—at risk of repetition—we'll have lost everything I hope we may have learned.

Basta. Wishing everyone out there much and massive best, which is to say ongoing attentiveness to the cracks and fault lines, the saggings and quiet moments we might otherwise, in a rush, brush past. The new era will have to attend to slowing down; to pregnant pauses; and so to listening to the ongoing discomfort that has always rumbled underground. And maybe it will not be a new era at all; but it can be better if that means we lose obsession with the choreographies of distance and proximity, and attend, along with this, to pace.

Endnotes

1 Owen G. Parry, *Myth Lab Drinxx*, Open Access Lab, National Theatre Wales, 29 June 2020, See http://owengparry.com/myth-lab-drinxx/4595081620, accessed 12 June 2021.

2 Anna Deavere Smith, "19 May 2020" and Elise Morrison, "3 July 2020," in TDR Editors, "Forum: After Covid-19, What?" *TDR* 64.3 (T247; 2020): 191–224, at 193, 222.

3 John T. Hamilton, *Security: Politics, Humanity, and the Philology of Care* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 6.

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We Will Remember That We Came Together in Protest and Mutual Aid

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The year of COVID-19 social distancing is a reminder that people can and will gather in person in mass acts of resistance and community care, even in a pandemic. This year highlights how theatres, theatre skills, and theatrical techniques can be a key part of community building and dissent. The examples of the Twin Cities in summer 2020; Portland, Oregon, in 2020–1; and France in spring-summer 2021 showcase the potential for theatre artists to use their skills and spaces to support protest work. I highlight these three examples due to my personal connections (I am from the Twin Cities; live in Portland and serve as a legal observer during the Protests; and, in my scholarship, specialize in French theatre and protest), due to the scale of these actions, and in order to amplify the pandemic protest and performance work happening in these places. Together, the efforts of Twin Cities, Portland, and French activists and artists showcase how, against a backdrop of mourning and anxiety, the pandemic has been a time of invigoration in mass protest, mutual aid, and coming together to try to build better worlds.

Two of the ways Twin Cities artists responded to Derek Chauvin's 25 May 2020 murder of George Floyd in South Minneapolis were by making performance and by using their spaces and skills to support protest work. In terms of performance creation, two productions highlight strategies of this moment: the use of symbolic performance location in the neighborhood of Floyd's murder, the assembly of in-person audiences despite COVID, the dramaturgical use of a multitude of narratives and voices, and a focus on leadership from people of color, in particular Black leaders and artists. New Dawn Theatre's *A Breath for George*, performed with Minnesota artists over 14–21 June 2020, premiered at Pillsbury House Theatre—less than half a mile from the site of Chauvin's murder of Floyd—before traveling to sites around the Cities.[1] The free event presented on screens "a collection of songs, interviews, monologues and short films honoring the life and death of George Floyd, those who have fallen before him and those who continue to fall

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