Changes

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In March 2020 I came home from a theatre conference with a nagging cough, which I had been fighting for some time. Yet, it deepened and strengthened over the next few days. In the following week, symptoms accumulated and were strange and fluctuating: an experience with which I would become all too well acquainted in my COVID journey. Two weeks later on a second telemedical appointment a doctor heard me describe the coughing and chest burning I felt—where it almost felt like a sunburn—and told me it sounded like I had COVID. The inhaler she prescribed helped, but I originally dismissed her diagnosis. These were the early days when a test could not be found or taken, so I lacked confirmation that my body would verify to me for the months following through more drastic measures. A year later, after ongoing and prolonged symptoms of costochondritis, fluctuating high heart rates, difficulty breathing, and a multitude of costly hospital and specialist visits—including now being a part of the Post/Long COVID clinic in my state—I am changed. My health, like most of our lives this past year, follows a path of uncertainty and unknowns.

I moved to Pennsylvania to start my first tenure-track job in fall 2019 as Assistant Professor in Theatre at Susquehanna University. I understood what a rarity getting this job was after being contingent faculty for two years prior. I had planned to spend the late spring and summer of my first year exploring the area and state I now called home, hundreds of miles from family and friends. I was to direct Annabel Soutar's *Seeds* in late April 2020, which, like everything else, disappeared as an experience to look forward to once the lockdowns began. Suddenly this plan to move across country, away from anyone and everything I know, had its drawbacks magnified. I managed the spring semester like I managed my unknown growing health problem: without an ability truly to grasp what it is that had happened. My summer was spent working on my book about plays about nuclear threats, which now took on a life as the compass to keep me functional and forward moving through the loneliness, fear, and changing physical circumstances I experienced. Summer introduced me to new and strange symptoms: COVID toes, numb limbs and fingers, weird temperature regulation, strange sensations in my legs including leg cramps, daily pain, shortness of breath, and surging heart rates that sent me to the ER on Father's Day. I became accustomed to the range and variance of symptoms, and I knew that the next week they would be different, and the week after they would change again. My issues seemed to have no reasoning or rhythm, and their unpredictability was predictable. By medical professionals I have been officially told when describing sensations, "Well, that's weird." Yes, it is and continues to be.

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As fall approached, my department transitioned to hybrid and Zoom performances. I taught remotely the whole fall, uncertain what my health could handle. It was not ideal, but what *was* during this past year? I adapted a Zoom-inspired production of *The Three Sisters* that was to be livestreamed on YouTube. I am thankful to work at an institution that has taken all the possible safety measures, does exhaustive testing, limits classroom size capacities, and where everyone masks and double-masks without question. Unfortunately, Halloween festivities sparked a COVID spike, and we went fully remote again right before the performances were to start. Before the tears fell, the cast and I voted to put the recorded full-dress rehearsal up instead of scrambling to livestream four nights of Zoom theatre under drastically different circumstances; too many students were going home to places where Internet was much spottier than on campus. I felt loss and grief, again. The feeling was compounded by the realization that I may not have had my close friends nearby, my family, or even my health restored, but at least I'd still had theatre. However, despite all the calculations and measures taken to make this safe production work, it still could not exist in a way we imagined. Onward we still went, but I couldn't help but wish for more for our students.

I did not see loved ones or travel over winter break, unwilling to take that risk for anyone, myself and strangers included. I instead worked on my book, gauged my breathing and heart rate daily, fought to get into the Post-COVID clinic, and composed a short musical book around public domain songs. We had planned that a musical would happen in spring 2021, and we are trying one: it is skeletal, lighthearted, and based on 1920s radio. There will only be a few dancers masked onstage at times and everyone else performing remotely, likely with prerecorded music and other aspects not live. There will be many technological problems to solve and issues I know I have not yet estimated. I am thankful for colleagues who have learned the possibilities of Zoom theatre from technical perspectives that I cannot fathom. I hope we make it to the live run this time, but we plan for contingencies.

In the past month I started physical therapy due to Long COVID to increase my strength, help my ongoing chest and rib pain, and to see what my heart and lungs can handle staminawise. I will attempt to do some light choreography for the show, but I will continue to wear a health monitor watch to tell me when my heart rate and I need to take a break. I have had multiple cardiology appointments over the past year and many heart exams. The good and confounding news is that nothing seems to be wrong with my heart. As for the many others with Long COVID, answers are few and questions remain. The research can only move so fast, and we who had it early know we often have been ahead of the medical knowledge curve. I have been a member of support groups for several months, including the Body Politic, and there have found fellow Long COVIDers who have helped me know when to seek more help, or when to try something else, and have offered me solace and comfort. They have been critical to my physical and mental health, and more than that, they offer a space where we can be heard and validated. Medical gaslighting is something we almost all have experienced to some degree, and it honestly is worse than any physical symptom. For example, a week before I went to the hospital in June for my high heart rate, I went to the doctor stating my heart felt unusual and I felt surges in my chest. I walked away with a prescription for anxiety medication. Months later, my post-COVID doctor would

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acknowledge from a heart monitor test in July, that yes, my heart had been doing some abnormal things during this time. And yes, I sensed that and recorded that accurately. No one acknowledged that with me for months.

As a scholar/teacher/artist, everything in my life has shifted because I have changed. I have had to think about my health and mortality in profound ways. I have attended meetings about third-year review and tenure and cannot even think that far ahead anymore. On the good days I'd think, "Don't they know I haven't seen my family and barely feel like I have a life here yet?" On the harder days I wonder, "Will I still be healthy or even alive by then?" In the two years I have been at this job, the majority of the time has been during a pandemic. I grieve a life I feel like I moved here to start that I have not been able to yet. I have been scrupulously cautious this past year after my acute illness, because that night in March 2020 when I could not breathe and called the hospital COVID hotline, where they had little help to offer, changed me. My students now meet a professor who is transparent about all of this, not to scare them, but to allow them to be vulnerable in a year that asks all too often for the social mask of being okay instead of the honesty and reality of our experiences. Extensions are always granted, late work always accepted, absences are not questioned, and apologies are not needed. Actors working with me have seen the key mission of the work is not the product or even training, but an opportunity for us to still feel that glimmer of a thing we love and feel alive because of it. Heading into my last production of the year, the process will be one filled with as much joy as possible. The production will be messy, flawed, and in no way emblematic of my best work. I am not my best self, so why would I anticipate otherwise? My hope is we still sing, dance, and laugh, even through our masks and Zoom screens.

I feel lucky to be alive and that my heart, even when too fast, keeps beating. I feel lucky to still be able to make theatre, even on computer screens. I feel lucky I still have a job, even when I have technology issues in a hybrid class. I take none of this for granted in a year when suffering and loss is so profound for so many. I long for the day when we talk about this time as a past experience instead of a lived present, when we can commune, and when we can all watch and make theatre together. But I have also learned not to hold my breath—and mostly because it isn't very good for my heart rate.

Jeanne Tiehen is an assistant professor of Theatre at Susquehanna University. In addition to directing productions and predominantly teaching acting classes, her research focuses on science plays, theatre theory, and play analysis.

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