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STAKING OUR CLAIM

I have been thinking a lot about what kind of theatre we can or might return to once this pandemic crisis has eased, and frankly I don't have a very clear picture. I'm not sure anyone has.

But I do have the uneasy feeling that the early stages of the comeback will likely feature smallish plays in smallish spaces, and (unfortunately) something like comfort food for the battered soul. The least challenging, most attractive kind of theatre that will lure people back into their seats and put up the least resistance to their return. That will grease the rails, as it were.

And, ironically, this will probably be exactly the opposite of what I suspect our most creative people, especially our playwrights and translators and theatre-makers, have been spending their time on while sheltering—exploring the paradigm shift this viral pandemic has forced upon the world in general and theatre in particular. Shall we write for theatre at all? Will there be theatre? What shall we write about, what kinds of plays shall we stage? What is our duty to the community? Is it our duty to create community? Am I writing for myself, or for others? Shall I tell them what they want to hear, or what they need to hear? Or what I want to say? Or what I need to say? In other words, I greatly fear that actual theatre practice, especially in the early months or years of the recovery, may be the exact opposite of the radical re-examination of the culture of theatre that most artists and theatre-makers have been exploring during

the hiatus when there was no theatre. A diet of old chestnuts and new pop in a fancy presentation, rather than a more substantial meal. Not by choice, but by necessity.

I hope I am wrong in my fears.

But I also hope that theatre will quickly reclaim what is one of its most valuable tasks—informing and educating audiences and building communities, not just entertaining and comforting them. I would love to see a return of big plays with big themes. Wouldn't it be wonderful if, after months of self-isolation, we had crowds not only in the seats but on the stage? Wouldn't it be wonderful if our audiences were challenged by new ideas and new forms, and left our theatres smarter than they came in? Wouldn't it be wonderful if new plays were less like doctored TV scripts and more like the sprawling, theatrical wonders of the Golden Ages of Greece, England, and Spain? Plays you walked away from, talking about the breadth of the world presented there and the depth of the ideas and arguments that fueled that world, and not about the stars, sets, and special effects.

This could be an opening for us *comediantes*, and for the *Comedia,* I think, in all its multiplex unfamiliarity. The staging possibilities on already existing Shakespearean stages are enormous. The worlds are new yet familiar; the language—if our translators have done their job—is as enticing as it is surprising; and the ideas, the themes, even in our comedies, sharp, relatable, and challenging, vistas into another world and yet windows into our own.

So when theatres re-open, and they will, let's be bold. Let's stake our claim. Let's assert our right to be there.

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