



*Skin*, display windows.

Claudio Valdés Kuri\*

## What's to Become of Theater?

In uncertain times, speculation bubbles up in the human mind. We are especially attracted to apocalyptic designs portraying the end of the world as we know it. Collectively inclined to agonize over what's to come, the theater community can't help but join in the hubbub. In this text, I propose that we take advan-

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tage of a theatrical tool that can help broaden our perspectives: memory. Let's travel in time so that we can gaze and think back upon that which we sometimes forget.

For as long as we sapiens have inhabited the Earth, some of us—even if just a few—have been engaged in drama. To cite Jorge Dubatti, "Theatricality is an anthropological attribution. It's the human capacity to organize the other's perspective, to reconstruct the other's perspective. . . . It's the basis for the social order." Theatricality has existed since the dawn of our interper-

sonal relationships. With the passing of time, we've given the establishment and accumulation of theatricality certain shapes, spaces, territories, materials, and sounds, culminating in a physical space that ultimately yielded its name to the profession itself: theater.

Ever since theater has existed as human craft-art-practice, it has survived multiple critical junctures. In the history of Western theater, after the great theater of Greek tragedy and the Roman circus, the Middle Ages followed —and its ideological canons greatly differed from Greek and Roman values. Among other changes, the great amphitheaters and colosseums of the past were abandoned as performance venues. In the face of ecclesiastic dogmas and the proliferation of deadly epidemics, so-

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ciety grew alienated and isolated. The church used theater as a means of spreading its ideology, and with that, theater relinquished its status as a space for philosophy. Nonetheless, there was some resistance to ecclesiastic censorship and social distancing on the stage, finding a voice among minstrels, troubadours, and buffoons: people-characters who pressed on with theater’s



Photo: José Jorge Carreón

*Of Monsters and Prodigies. The History of the Castrati.*





Photo: Ulises Velázquez

*Of Monsters and Prodigies. The History of the Castrati, rehearsal.*

oral tradition despite the challenges, sharing dramatized stories from town to town.

Then, in the Elizabethan era, the proliferation of plagues meant that theaters were shut down for 78 of the 120 months spanning 1603 to 1613. Shakespeare lived through this time and had to reinvent his own theater paradigms to stay the course. In fact, it was under these circumstances that he wrote several of his most significant plays. Also during this period, the bubonic plague pushed one of the most important theater troupes out of London, which ultimately brought theater of the highest caliber to towns outside the capital that would otherwise have never had the chance to witness such performances.

After some time, the English Civil War broke out and the Puritans took over, banning plays on the grounds of moral indecency. From 1642 to 1660, for eighteen years, theaters remained closed. A number of large amphitheaters were demolished, but theater bounced back once the political situation stabilized — and, at this point, women took the stage (before then, female characters were played by men).

More recently, we may observe another time when theater faced severe limitations: the period of Latin American military dictatorships. Totalitarian regimes wielded unfathomable mechanisms for the censorship and persecution of artists who didn't

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stand by the ruling ideologies. The only theater allowed exclusively revolved around certain principles that aligned with the regime. Nonetheless, artists heeded their vital need for expression and found innovative methods that paved the way for unprecedented modes of production in small venues, with plays in people's homes and other alternative spaces.

Today, theater is facing yet another critical juncture: the impossibility of being present. But this isn't the first time, nor will it be the last. What do the critical junctures of the past share with the pandemic we're currently up against? What opportunities might arise?

First and foremost, we should highlight theater's resistance to disappearing—or humanity's resistance to theater disappearing—either through spaces for intimate creation, in which artists conjure up the projects of tomorrow and rethink the products and task of theater *per se*, or through proposals to promote and

develop new action mechanisms. We artists of today are like the minstrels of the Middle Ages or like the Latin American theater troupes of the dictatorships —and we are still resisting the disappearance of theater. And in doing so, we're working up new forms and formats of representation.

Second, let's consider the transformation of the means of production. In the face of limitations, the spirit of theater will always seek out new outlets for sharing and survival. The lockdown, together with digital-technological developments that are now at everyone's fingertips, have given way to a new genre, virtual theater: these *mise-en-scènes* unfold in real time and are viewed by audiences around the world through technological devices.

Analogously, just like the plague pushed English companies to places it had never trod before, today's virtual and recorded theater has reached audiences that would have never had access to such expressions otherwise. These productions travel through time, crossing borders, languages, and social classes.

Our moments of crisis have allowed us to push the limits of what we once conceived as theater, uncovering surprising pos-

sibilities. Nonetheless, despite the new opportunities that virtual theater offers, many of us yearn to meet again at the theater in person.

From one day to the next, our craft became a mortal weapon. Two of theater's main principles —making contact and coming together— were unveiled as the main adversaries of humanity. Given the risks, along with the comforts of staying at home, why go back to in-person theater?

Like little else, theater satisfies our need for fiction and association. To be in a community in space and time, with a shared purpose, as we mingle with people in a safe space, might sound simple, but it's far from banal. Every day, fewer and fewer spaces let us mingle with strangers and be in common-unity with them.

For many centuries, theater was our main source of fiction, especially for those without access to reading and writing. Fables, stories, and oral tradition found their homes on the stage. With the passage of time, other mediums started incorporating theater's practices and making them their own. At first, radio and radio dramas shook theater to its core —even before cinema,



Photo: Aline Lemus Bernal

Triple Concert, laboratory.



followed by television and, more recently, the Internet. But fiction has found a niche in each of these mediums, expanding and transforming them in turn. The emergence of these media once seemed to herald the end of theater, but it prevailed with its specific way of telling stories, offering experiences, and converging all our possible universes solely with the actor's imagination.

In my view, competing with other mediums isn't what should be worrying us, especially since each boasts its own features, advantages, and disadvantages. While it's true that most human beings might never make it to the theater for a number of reasons, that the diversification of cultural offerings has blunted some people's appetites for theater, and that theatergoers only constitute a small portion of society in Mexico and the world, thousands of people are still attracted to the performing arts, and—for them— all our efforts are worthwhile.

I believe today's seemingly adverse circumstances in which theater is unfolding actually pose an advantage. Given that the-

ater isn't our primary means of communication, nor is it at the cusp of entertainment, we creators of the performing arts can speak about the things that matter to us, proposing novel and unique visions for and about the world. Theater could be conceived as a space of creative freedom for artists seeking to raise and share awareness.

The challenge lies beyond the pandemic itself. With time and perspective, the pandemic has shown that—as always— life goes on.

**The challenge—and the greatest opportunity, too—is the brutal alienation that humanity is drowning in. We live shackled to quick, direct, and simple stimulations that ask nothing of us . . . but complete submission.**



Photo: Centro de Investigación Teatral Rodolfo Usigli (CIRRU)

*Where Will I Be Tonight?, Rehearsal with audience.*

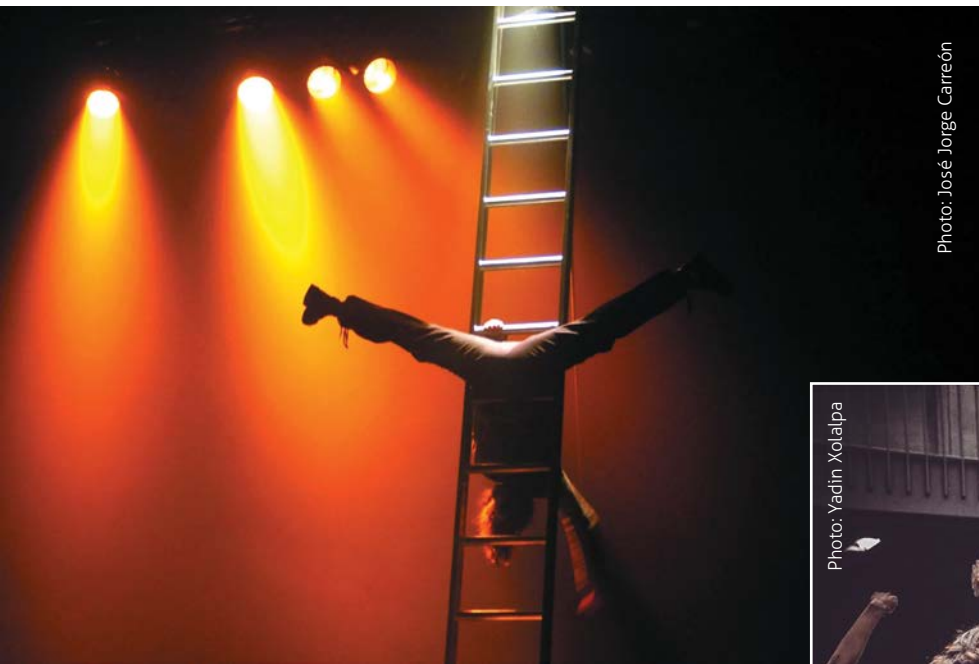


Photo: José Jorge Carreón

*Where Will I Be Tonight?*

The current challenge, which I paradoxically see as the greatest opportunity, is the brutal alienation that humanity is currently drowning in. People live shackled to quick, direct, and simple stimulations that ask nothing of us . . . other than complete submission. In our everyday lives before the pandemic, a number of situations would force people to peel themselves away from their electronic devices: transportation, the office or classroom, etc. Now, our reliance on connectivity has justified the total hijacking of our space and time. The forces that used to demand that we be in the present have come to a halt.

Theater requires a commitment from those who have come together: mutual presence. If the spectator doesn't find the discourse sufficiently compelling, he can leave the room. If he decides to stay, his responsibility toward others will help him escape from escape, and he'll stay, observing and modifying what goes on between him and the stage.

What theater offers the viewer is the possibility of being with himself in solitude, but also in community. Contemplative solitude sets off connections between both hemispheres of the brain: the rational, which deciphers meanings and approves what's being received, and the intuitive, which sets the spectator's feelings in motion, generating reflections on the theatrical discourse between the two hemispheres. In-person theater constitutes a space of connection with the self, beyond the overstimulation of our daily lives.

I believe that, in and of itself, nothing is important to anybody. We have to make theater a need. And we can do so by understanding the conditions and current challenges of the oth-



Photo: Yadin Xolalpa

*Game of Insects.*

er. I believe that theater must start being more than just a mirror—though mirrors can be useful, too, since they offer an array of creative alternatives beyond expanding on repetitive news stories or cinema's attempts at emulation. The artist could see herself as a visionary who can lift her gaze, analyze conflict, and afford creative solutions. My greatest wish is for theater to urgently turn up the planet's vibration frequencies, through discourse that can expand our consciousness in ways as infinite as our ways of making theater.

Ever since humanity has enjoyed unlimited access to information, the era of major social and ideological movements has begun to waste away. The current push toward social well-being is realized in small cells and human groups, with theater boasting the ideal conditions to make an impact as dazzling as it is unique.

We could ask ourselves why it is that we fear circumstances that lie beyond our control and come to understand that the stage of life constitutes the crystallization of our ability to conjure mental creations, that is, our collective and individual thought. Thus, we should revisit what frequencies our thoughts and affirmations are vibrating on. Let us revisit memory as a tool, so that we can keep in mind that the future of theater has yet to be written and will become whatever we want it to be. **NMM**