What Is to Be Done?

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This essay offers a view of the American theater, especially the American nonprofit theater, in historical perspective, real and imagined. The essay understands the current state of the American theater as a phase in a 2,500-year history of the Western theater, and sees its present form as a high-priced commodity to be anomalous and contradictory to the goals inherent within the art form. The essay imagines a future world where the current organization of our theater seems strange and inexplicable, and tries to elucidate, for the sake of that imagined audience, how we've ended up here.

If we survive this calamitous century, the time will come when technology lifts Adam's burden. We will no longer require the labor of most of humanity to create abundance for all. Indeed, we are already far down that road. But when productivity is no longer our primary measure of human worth, how will we measure the value of human lives?

There are two wildly divergent answers to this question. Either we will value every human life for itself, without reference to productivity or transactional value, or we will view humans as valueless because they do not or cannot produce, and we will treat them as disposable objects. The first alternative envisions a deeply egalitarian society in which every human being is of equal worth; the second, a ferociously unequal society in which a few hoard the wealth and abundance that could support all. That second, dystopian society would require enormous amounts of violence to control the dispossessed and to police the boundaries between the haves and the have-nots. Socialism or barbarism.

We can more easily imagine the catastrophic future because so many of its features are already taking shape around us: the resurgence of authoritarianism, the exploding inequalities of wealth, the base appeal to tribal identities, nationalism, and state-sanctioned violence. The benign, more utopian future is harder to imagine because it would seem to require so many miracles to come into existence. But as Tony Kushner wrote in *Angels in America*, "only in politics is the miraculous possible."[1] Besides, as artists, it is our job to imagine the not-yet-visible, to conjure the longed-for home. So let us imagine that our species survives and flourishes, which will only happen if we learn to live in deeper equilibrium with each other and with our planet. If we do, we will look back on the first quarter of the twenty-first century with astonishment, dismay, and not a little alarm.

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Because the theater is my field, let me start there. The future will look back with disbelief on a time when art, indeed almost all the products of culture, were seen not as the common property of humanity, but as commodities to be purchased, available only to those who can afford them. Theater, as an art form, was created to bind communities together. It will seem bizarre that the method we use to distribute theater – selling it – undercuts the very premise of the art form. Our descendants will be able to see clearly our commodification of theater as the historical anomaly it is: for the vast majority of mankind's time on this planet, theater has not been something to be sold. Even during the last four hundred fifty years, when that began to change, the commodification was only partial and contested, ensuring that theater was still something enjoyed by a broad cross section of society.

At its very inception, Western drama was created as a tool to support democracy.[2] Democracy and the theater were created in the same city and in the same decade: Athens, in the last years of the sixth century BCE. Attendance at the Festival of Dionysius was required for all citizens; it was a civic rite, as well as a civic right. It was financed by the wealthy, who were assigned by elected officials the job of paying for and producing the plays. From what we can ascertain, the wealthy were honored and privileged to undertake this task. They understood that it was not only their civic responsibility to use their wealth for the common good, but that doing so added to their own prestige and status.

Attendance was mandatory because the theater was a tool of democracy, teaching the fundamental practices, principles, and beliefs that made democracy possible. Once you accept that power flows from below, that leadership can only come from the consent of the governed, you must reject the idea that there is a singular truth (as there can be in a monarchal or authoritarian system). In all things in life, there are multiple points of view, and the truth emerges from the conflict between them. This is precisely how drama operates. No one can possess the truth in drama or there would be, literally, no drama. The theater teaches us that truth can only emerge from the clash of differing points of view. It also requires that the audience empathize with the different people holding those points of view, coming from often quite diverse perspectives: to be an audience in the theater is to be constantly asked to practice empathy, and to be able to change one's point of view. It requires a generous ability to identify with others, one that recognizes the validity of numerous points of view. The oldest extant Greek tragedy, Aeschylus's *The Persians*, looks at the great Athenian victory over the Persians in 480 BCE from the perspective of the Persians. Theater, from the beginning, demanded that we imagine the other.

Finally, the fundamental principle of drama is change: at its heart, it is the art form that reveals how people change. Like democracy, it posits that the world and the people in it are constantly evolving, that whatever seems fixed is not, that instead of eternal religious truths, the world is in a constant state of motion, and we must also be in motion to be an effective part of that world. Euripides's masterful

Herakles begins by tracing Herakles's god-like return from Hades to save his family and then, suddenly, spins into reverse. Madness, incarnate as a spirit, is sent by the gods to afflict Herakles, who then slaughters his wife and children. He is both hero and victim, god and human, capable of extraordinary achievements and of suffering the most horrible of losses. Euripides's drama forces us to confront the constantly mutable, never controllable nature of the world and our very selves.

The Theater of Dionysus was a workshop of democracy. How could you charge for that? The theater was free because Athens needed its citizens to learn what the theater had to teach. Nor were the Mystery Plays of the medieval period sold: they were collectively created by communities who used them as a way of reaffirming their spiritual beliefs, retelling biblical stories for the largely unlettered population. They were for and by the people, empowering ordinary folk not only to observe the theater, but also to make it themselves. These were no dogmatic or museum-like recitals, either: their versions of the Bible were funny, bawdy, contemporary, of their own world. They took ownership of the ideology that underlaid their lives. Again, the theater bound the population together – art-making as a spiritual practice that was also profoundly about community building.

Only about four hundred fifty years ago, in late sixteenth-century London, did theater begin to be a commodity, were tickets sold. These were the early stirrings of capitalism: Shakespeare was not just a playwright and actor, he was joint owner of the company that produced his plays and one of the six shareholders who owned the Globe Theatre. The Lord Chamberlain's Men, later the King's Men, were allowed to perform by royal license, but they needed admission fees as well as patronage to fund themselves. Yet even with those fees, Shakespeare's plays were watched by all classes of people, at the Globe or in performances elsewhere. Illiterate groundlings saw the same shows the queen did; highly educated Oxford and Cambridge graduates sat side by side with merchants, laborers, and members of the nobility. Although tickets were sold, Shakespeare's theater still reached an astonishing cross section of English citizenry who sat together, experiencing the drama at the same time and rubbing shoulders with each other.[3]

A play is a machine for taking individual spectators and turning them into an audience, a community. To keep his audience, Shakespeare needed to write plays within which all in that kaleidoscopic audience could see themselves. By writing plays that spoke to different classes, he also reminded those classes what they had in common with one another. The Globe was nation-building, teaching the English who they were as a united people.[4] Two hundred years later, the Duke of Wellington could proudly say that all he knew of English history came from Shakespeare's plays and that was all he needed to know. In a very tangible way, Shakespeare created the nation; he made England England.

What followed was four centuries of struggle between theater as a community-building force and theater as a commodity-generating business. The struggle mir-

rored the struggle of capitalism to displace all other value systems and the struggle of the market to become the exclusive determiner of value.

When they study the past century, our descendants will note with approval many victories in the United States for a theater that serves society. They will applaud the upsurge of radicalism in the 1930s that led to the creation of the Federal Theatre Project, the largest investment our national government has ever made in the theater, and they will bemoan the redbaiting anticommunism that destroyed that noble effort.[5] After the defeat of fascism, they will approve of the democratic experiment of the GI Bill and the 1965 creation of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), which fostered an enormous expansion of who was entitled to enjoy our cultural riches.[6] They will appreciate the rise of the regional theater movement in the 1960s and 1970s, when nonprofit theater decentralized, spreading out across the land to every state in the union, until the country could boast of hundreds of professional theaters.[7] In the same period, the rise of independent ensembles like Pregones in the Bronx or El Teatro Campesino in California embodied the complex and myriad ways that theaters could spring from and serve their communities.

But those who live after us will view with dismay the Thermidor, the reactionary revival that first took power in the United States in November 1980 with the election of Ronald Reagan. They will watch, aghast, as the National Endowment was made a political football, and gay artists were demonized to destroy bipartisan support for the arts. Robert Mapplethorpe and the NEA Four (John Fleck, Tim Miller, Karen Finlay, and Holly Hughes) were only the most prominent artist scapegoats in this wildly successful strategy: the NEA remained crippled for decades, and today its very existence is endangered.[8]

Our imaginary historians will be distressed at the withdrawal of national support from the regional theaters, as the government was crippled by these political attacks, and private foundations were forced to move their support to the rapidly fraying social safety net, on which the forces of reaction worked their will. Told to be more "entrepreneurial," the theaters responded by relying more on the box office than on philanthropy, undercutting the core of the noncommercial theaters' very premise. Urged by their boards to become more fiscally responsible, the theaters complied by becoming more timid and more homogenized, and the vibrancy of the individual communities and regions of the country ceased to be reflected in their theaters, whose programming looked more and more similar. Their ticket prices, already prohibitive for much of the population, began to soar into territory that rebranded theater as a pastime for the elite.

The smaller, independent theaters, serving specific communities or experimental in form, will have also been hard hit: the philanthropy that supported them was drawn elsewhere, the touring networks on which they depended atro-

phied, and the fierce activism of their founders was not replicated by succeeding generations, who were often administrators more focused on the survival of institutions than the service of their communities. And our future colleagues will view 2025 with deep dismay. The consensus that built the nonprofit theater in the United States will seem to have completely shattered. The government was sidelined, rendered ineffective by right-wing attacks on the arts that centered on issues of sexuality and gender orientation, but concealed a deeper aggression against the idea of a collectively supported democratic culture. Corporations mostly ceased to have any sense of community responsibility, or sense of community at all – denizens not of a place but only of a global financial system, with shareholder value becoming the only measure of corporate success – and corporate philanthropic support for the arts dwindled to a trickle. The private foundations, who did so much to foster the nonprofit arts in the years following World War II, came to believe that only by creating separate, racially specific theaters could equality be achieved. The result was a further balkanization and weakening of the nonprofit theater as a whole. The rich, meanwhile, emboldened in the era of Trump, shed their reluctance to openly assert their power without a fig-leaf of democratic consensus. If they could replace Ivy-league presidents at will, why not build their own theaters? Thus, in the first decades of the twenty-first century, Manhattan saw billions of dollars poured into building theaters: but they were theaters no audience had demanded, and no artists needed. Theaters built as real estate ventures did not, oddly, express the soul of the people.

Broadway, the most prominent stages in America, will have begun serving an utterly different social role – one that will leave our ancestors gaping in disbelief. The great hits like *Hamilton* will have become incredibly scarce commodities, whose audiences are defined by who has the privilege, luck, and wealth to score a ticket. Even *The Lion King*, seemingly a family staple that has been running for over a generation on Broadway, had an average ticket price of $134 the week this essay was written. By its price alone, our most prominent professional theater has utterly excluded most of the population. Even for those who could afford to pay, the theater was made a rare and precious luxury, not a practice that bound them to the rest of society.

When Vice President-elect Pence came to see *Hamilton* in November 2016, the *Hamilton* company addressed him from the stage, expressing our collective anxiety that his administration would make our actors, and the people of color who looked like them, less safe in the world. In response, his boss claimed that Pence had been shamefully treated (although in defense of the company, no one had been calling for his hanging). Trump wrote, with no apparent irony, that "the theater must be a safe and special place."[9] In response, an online boycott of *Hamilton* began and rapidly collected thousands of posts and reposts on Twitter (#BoycottHamilton).

And yet, when one looked through the list of people signing onto the #Boycott-Hamilton thread, it was clear that, in truth, *we* had already boycotted *them*. The vast majority of people on that list were never going to see *Hamilton*: it was not going to come to a theater near them; if it did, they could not afford a ticket; and if they could, they did not have the connections necessary to score one. We of the artistic world had turned our backs on half the country. Just like the economy, the educational system, and the political system, the arts had abandoned the parts of our country most disadvantaged by our society.

We cannot fool ourselves into thinking that we would not be wanted if we did make ourselves available. When our Mobile Shakespeare travels to prisons across New York, we meet hardened, cynical audiences, most of whom have never seen a play before, much less Shakespeare. I watch them, with their arms folded tightly across their chests, begin the performance with a studied defensiveness that appears utterly impervious. But as the play progresses, I watch their arms drop, their hearts open, and the transformation in their spirits as they find themselves invested in the characters and stories of Shakespeare. And somewhere along the way I also watch them swell with pride when they realize they understand Shakespeare, that he is theirs.

Aristotle said that imitation is the earliest and most pleasurable form of learning. Watching children role play, watching the enthusiasm with which students act in school plays, seeing the passion and pleasure that amateur theater brings to so many across all social and economic boundaries – it's clear that the pleasures that derive from theater speak across most human boundaries. Given access and ownership, the theater can be valuable to everyone. And the more enlightened society that emerges from our current struggles will see how we let the theater, the fundamental art form of democracy, become a commodified tool of division. I am not sure what they will feel, but we should feel ashamed.

And how, will they wonder, could we have been satisfied as a society with only the art that the market can support? How could we accept, apparently so eagerly, the isolation and alienation that streaming and digital media created? Did we actually want only the mass-produced entertainment of Marvel movies or the algorithm-generated videos our iPhones offered up to us? Didn't we notice, and abhor, the coarsening of discourse, the increase in rage, the inability to listen, the fantasies of violence and domination that arose from such a culture? Couldn't the theater have done better?

We can only hope that they understand the theater's failings as part of a larger, destructive process that had engulfed our entire society. We hope they see that, in philosopher Michael Sandel's words, we had gone from being a market economy to a market society.[10] They will decry the increasing marginalization of, and contempt for, values that could not be measured in money. The massive levels of inequality – described by economist Thomas Piketty as surpassing that of the Gilded

Age – will seem obscene to them.[11] They will recognize that, because life's value was measured in money, it forced us all into a competitive stance with one another. This inequality could only be supported by massive, conscious efforts to divide people among themselves, to create fear and conflict that would distract from the theft of wealth and resources by the very powerful that is the most striking feature of our society. This will be the only way to understand the terrifying resurgence of racism, misogyny, homophobia, and gender panic in our time. Any way of dividing people is useful to those who exploit, and race and sexuality are always near to hand. Nationality, religion, and culture will also do, and our descendants will weep at how easily we were fooled into mistaking who our enemies actually were.

They will look with astonishment at the spectacle of our society, in the first quarter of the twenty-first century, poisoning and destroying our own planet, in defiance of science, popular opinion, common sense, and representative governments. They will be horrified at how selfish private interests, made wealthy by the extraction and burning of fossil fuels, were able to work their will on our common heritage, the Earth. The bizarre intricacies of everything from campaign finance law to deregulating the FCC to federal tax laws will be dissected as case studies of the most elaborate criminal plots ever devised. These complex subtleties, masterful in their cunning, will stand in stark contrast with the brutality of the tools used to protect them: police violence, union busting, and fear-mongering doctrines of racial superiority and hysterical xenophobia.

Future citizens will be baffled as to why we allowed the mechanisms that we built into our nation's founding for the purpose of protecting slavery, the Electoral College, the unrepresentative nature of the Senate, and lifetime appointments to the Supreme Court to continue to function with such devastating consequences over one hundred fifty years after slavery was abolished.

They will view with particular dismay the willingness of progressive people to buy into conservative lies about identity, positing that our racial and cultural identities are so utterly essential to who we are, and so incommensurably different from one another, that we can neither understand, imagine, nor be in full solidarity with those of different races and cultures. And they will note with deep regret how the theater, born as a tool for creating community, ideal for training citizens in the skills of democracy, had become a commodified bauble to reinforce the exclusive status of the elite.

There is no guarantee, of course, that the enlightened society we are imagining will come into being. But that in no way relieves us of the obligation to fight for its birth. And if it does come to pass, its citizens will view us with such distance because their own lives will be vastly different from ours. Since labor as we know it will no longer be necessary, they will have found diverse ways to measure success and to value human beings. People will be treasured in and for

themselves, not for the capital they produce. Society will have found another way to support its people, which might begin as simply as a guaranteed annual income and could lead ultimately to the elimination of money altogether.

Artistry will be recognized as a central attribute of being human, not the sole domain of professionals. There will always be those with extraordinary gifts and interests, who cultivate their talents with more intensity and training, but they will simply be on the higher end of a spectrum that includes everyone. The theater will be, along with all culture and education, a basic civil right that every person is entitled to participate in and enjoy. All will engage in artistry both as creator and as audience because creativity is central to what it means to be human, and our cultural heritage is humanity's common property.

The differences among us will be sources of excitement and curiosity, opportunities to learn rather than compete. The boundaries of our identities will not be policed, but be both respected and violated. The crossover blending of cultural traditions will be, as it always has been, a source of innovation, excitement, and progress. The theater will be woven into our lives in countless ways, from nursery schools to Olympic Arts Festivals. The tools of the theater will be used to unlock the democratic potential of societies and the human potential of individuals. Such a world would be, will be, a better place.

When Bertolt Brecht was fleeing from the Nazis, in exile in Denmark, he, too, imagined how the future would view the past. In 1938, he wrote in "To Those Born Later":

> You who will emerge from the flood
> In which we have gone under
> Remember
> When you speak of our failings
> The dark time too
> Which you have escaped.
>
> For we went, changing countries more often than our shoes
> Through the wars of the classes, despairing
> When there was only injustice, and no rebellion.
>
> And yet we know
> Hatred, even of meanness
>
> Contorts the faces
> Anger, even against injustice
> Makes the voice grow hoarse. Oh, we
> Who wanted to prepare the ground for kindness
> Could not ourselves be kind.

But you, when the time comes at last
And man is a helper to man
Do not judge us
Too harshly.[12]

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ENDNOTES

[1] Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, rev. and compl. ed. (Theatre Communications Group, 2013), 288.

[2] David Wiles, *Democracy, Theatre and Performance* (Cambridge University Press, 2024).

[3] Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespeare Company, 1594–1642* (Cambridge University Press, 2004).

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[5] James Shapiro, *The Playbook: A Story of Theater, Democracy, and the Making of a Culture War* (Penguin Press, 2024).

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[8] Tim Miller, "The NEA Four Case," in *1001 Beds: Performances, Essays, and Travels*, ed. Glen Johnson (University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 99–115.

[9] Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump), "The Theater must always be a safe and special place," Twitter/X post, November 19, 2016, 8:56 a.m., https://x.com/realDonaldTrump/status/799974635274194947.

[10] Michael Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012).

[11] Thomas Picketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Harvard University Press, 2014).

[12] English translation draws from translations by John Willett, Ralph Manheim, and Erich Fried, and by H. R. Hays.