

The Register-Guard

Entertainment

CAFE 541: Carnes: Keeping the ghostlights lit

By Rachael Carnes, For The Register-Guard

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When Lin-Manuel Miranda and bestie Andrew Lloyd-Weber are both socially distancing in their respective homes, yet engaging in a good-natured musical theater pingpong match in the Twittersphere, it has been a decidedly weird week in theater.

As a playwright, my first canceled production announcement came from Nylon Fusion in New York City, which had made the painful choice to cancel its coming festival, including the premiere of my new play “Catalyst.” The cancellations, closures and cheerily optimistic postponements exploded relentlessly after that, for me and for every other theater artist and dancer and musician — for anyone who depends on a stage and an audience, not to mention all the people who get people on that stage and audiences in those seats.

That was Thursday. A dimming of the lights, a shuttering, a grief spiral. What will we do?

Well, theater is made of scrappy, communicative, creative people. We collaborate. We design. We dream. We build things that no one has ever heard of before — from scratch — and we work together to make it happen.

By the weekend, a new genre emerged: plays written specifically for video conferencing. If we’re going to be in quarantine, we’re damn well going to do something with our time.

In the past week, I’ve attended the play reading of a new work by Southern California writer Diana Burbano and a reading of a full-length work in New York City with the New Ambassadors — though I joined the call a few minutes late and had a hard time figuring out how this play could really use much development.

“Seems pretty solid,” I said at the break. “Who’s it by?” Turns out it was “Bus Stop” by William Inge. He’s no slouch.

Last weekend I used Zoom to work with a Los Angeles director, Rebecca Lynne, to record a reading of my new short play, a sequel to my international hit “Inertia,” which you may remember from Oregon Contemporary Theatre’s 2019 NW10. The sequel, “Crossing the Amur,” finds Billie and his sock monkey, Minky, attempting to cope with a global pandemic and their issues. During our rehearsal, one of the actors who was supposed to hop into the call didn’t show up, so I reached out to another actor I know, Andrew Gordon in Ohio, who originated the role of Billie. Five seconds later, Andrew had the Zoom link and we were recording the play, to share in a weekend-long festival of online plays. Never done that before!

Creativity abounds, but that doesn’t make up for the huge losses. Artists are forced now to tread water to survive, looking for remote work, tutoring, writing, doing whatever they can to make ends meet. Theaters are turning to crowd-sourcing campaigns and asking their donor bases to help them stay afloat. Theaters rely on people, on audiences, to exist. So, let’s widen the definition of “production” and “audience” — we need music, dance and theater now more than ever. Let’s keep supporting artists and arts-makers, as a light, moving forward.

Theater is about storytelling. Stories uplift. Sometimes, as a writer, you might find that your play is delivered in a new way, to the most vulnerable listener. Today, I received an email that brought a tear to my eye.

“Hello Rachael,

I work for Nelson Hall Theatre in Cheshire, CT. Our theatre is part of an Active Living Community. Nearly every one of our residents must stay isolated in their rooms due to the risk of virus. So, we have been broadcasting, privately to them, small activities and exercises. I read your script CREATIVE LITTLE GARDEN yesterday (loved it) and wonder if you would allow myself and our Performing Arts director to read it aloud to them through our private live feed.

Hope to hear from you very soon. Thanks in advance.

—Timothy M. Gadowski

Production Coordinator at Nelson Hall”

And I hope this play gives someone a little lift.

There’s a very old tradition in theater to keep a light onstage when you leave, a “ghostlight.” This light affords the theater’s ghosts the chance to perform, so they won’t haunt your production. Seems legit. And everyone does it. It’s a reminder of our interconnectedness, and the sense that in plays, in music, in dance, we keep our lights burning. Somehow, together.