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U.S. World Theatre Day Message 2020 ART IN THE TIME OF CORONA

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English version

As I sat down to draft these words, I had initially intended to illustrate the importance of theatre by sharing some personal insights surrounding our theatre and our artists. I planned to tell some of the stories we accumulated during Theater Breaking Through Barriers' 41-year history: How we began as a company that integrated blind, low vision and sighted actors during a time when theater by disabled performers was considered more therapy than art. How we eventually expanded our mission to include artists of all abilities and disabilities and how we fought -- and continue to fight -- for full inclusion for our artists and our company, both here in New York City and in the world-at-large.

I intended to argue that people with disabilities have been discriminated against since the dawn of time and negative perceptions surrounding disability have been hard-wired into each of us from infancy, even though disability -- just like hair or skin color -- is merely a human characteristic that doesn't devalue a person's inherent significance.

I wanted to comment on the many discussions in which we've participated concerning diversity, equity and inclusion -- and how they all focused on race, gender, and sexual orientation, virtually segregating disability from each conversation. This was particularly troubling since disability is the only diversity that exists within all other diverse populations -- it knows no age, race, religion, gender, or sexual orientation -- and if we could gather together the entire 15 percent of the world's disabled population into one place, it would become our third largest country.

As we honor world theatre by celebrating all that makes us unique, we must not allow our differences to divide and polarize us, as it has with the politics of our world today. Before we celebrate diversity, we must first recognize all that makes us the same. Until we can look beyond the physical and realize that we all have common needs and desires, our differences will matter very little. It is only when we can recognize ourselves in others that our differences shine and become worthy of celebration.

Theatre, our profession, which iconically celebrates the human condition – and which we celebrate today – teaches and enlightens us, allowing us to empathize and grow. Theatre transforms us and makes us different from who we were before experiencing it. It grabs us by our imaginations and takes us places we can only dream of going. To put it simply: Theatre is life without limitations.

It is our company’s overarching mission to alter, once and for all, the negative misperceptions surrounding disability in our world today. We work rigorously to create theatre where disability is woven seamlessly into the fabric of each of our productions and our artists are not recognized for their disabilities, but for what they, as artists, bring to the work.

To accomplish our ambitious mission, we are working to build an international coalition of arts organizations, who, like us, feel that amplifying the voices of the underserved will only strengthen the art we all strive to create. We’ve traveled to Europe and Asia and have begun partnering with companies who share our common ideals. After 41 years as a New York theatre institution, we are finally just beginning to see positive breakthroughs in our industry for our artists.

I planned to conclude this address by making a final appeal to all of you: Be bold in the artistic choices you make. Reach beyond yourselves. Explore what you fear. Dare yourselves to embrace other cultures with open arms. Finally, do not fear those who appear different than yourselves. When you look closely, you will see at our core that we are all truly the same, despite the myriad of differences that make each of us a singularly unique and sacred vessel.

This was to be my address commemorating International Theatre Day, 2020...

And then quite suddenly, our world swiftly and sharply changed.

Within hours, our entire country ground to a complete standstill as the Covid-19/Coronavirus pandemic took center stage – disrupting international travel, restricting all social gatherings, canceling all forms of group entertainment, closing schools, shutting down our theatres – and literally slamming our world to the mat with a crippling and morbid shutter. Life as we know it will never be the same.

While the physical, social and economic ramifications of what we are all now experiencing remain to be seen, one thing is absolutely certain: All of us in every corner of the world are now living with the disability of a global pandemic. As one of our great disabled U.S. playwrights, John Belluso, once said: “Disability is the only minority class which anyone can become a member of at any given time.” It appears that a minority population has – at least for now – become the majority.

As the hours pass, our plight becomes more and more grim. We are being forced by circumstances beyond our control to self-quarantine and remain confined. We must distance ourselves from others avoiding contact at all costs. It appears as if the divisions that have gripped us these past several years have now mutated and are symbolically expressing themselves in a way never before experienced in our lifetime. We are shocked and we are shaken to our very core.

And yet, we are all in this together.

As this global outbreak unfolds and continues to restrict us from practicing what we celebrate here today, perhaps this time of confinement will ultimately help to burn away the polarizing walls that divide us, revealing a strong, unbreakable framework that links us all together. Perhaps this disruption will force us to slow ourselves and take stock in what truly matters. Perhaps one day soon we will gather together in celebration to tell an age-old story about an evil dragon that threatened our world – and how we all banded together as one to defeat it. Perhaps.

It has often been said that the most severe trials and harshest of crucibles will ultimately generate the richest and most significant art. If this is true, then it is my wish for all of us during this World Theatre Day that the ordeal in which we currently find ourselves will ultimately deliver us to a global renaissance of new art and a lasting fellowship, the likes of which have never been seen!

Be safe. Stay healthy. Happy World Theatre Day, now and always.



International Theatre Institute

The **International Theatre Institute (ITI)**, an international non-governmental organization (NGO), was founded in Prague in 1948 by UNESCO and the international theatre community. Today, the mission of ITI is to promote the international exchange of knowledge and practice in theatre arts in order to consolidate peace and friendship between peoples, to deepen mutual understanding and increase creative co-operation between all people in the theatre arts. www.iti-worldwide.org



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The **Global Theatre Initiative (GTI)** is a partnership between Theatre Communications Group and Georgetown University's The Laboratory for Global Performance & Politics (The Lab).