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THE PANDEMIC LIVES ON ONSTAGE

THEATRE HAS RETURNED. The experience of witnessing a theatrical production is not the same as it was before theatres were shuttered due to the pandemic though. Capacity limits, physical distancing, and mask wearing has not only continued to impact the experiences of audiences but has also been a challenge for the actors, directors, designers, and technicians who make theatre happen. Despite how the drop in cases over the summer has allowed theatre to return, the safety measures used to keep COVID from spreading are still very much onstage.

COVID impacts not only *how* theatre is made and presented but also *what* is made and presented, and the desire to respond to the pandemic by producing COVID-related content presents numerous conundrums for both artists and programmers. The pandemic was a strain on the mental health and well-being of the planet, and consequently audiences might be reluctant to sit through productions that explore isolation, fear, grief, anxiety, and loss of faith in the institutions meant to protect us and keep us safe. That being said, audiences often flock to the theatre for experiences that allow them to consider their social, political, economic, and cultural reality, protected by the fact that what they are experiencing is merely a fiction. In any case, it will be a fine line to navigate.

Blindness, a production of London's Donmar Warehouse currently on tour at the Princess of Wales Theatre in Toronto, provides an example of the kinds of productions that will allow audiences to reflect on the past eighteen months of the pandemic without simultaneously making them regret coming to the theatre to experience pandemic-related storytelling. Not only that, but it also offers a way to make the theatrical experience low-risk for both audiences and performers. In order to adhere to COVID prevention measures, for example, the number of audience members is strictly limited. Instead of trying to accommodate these measures in a conventional theatrical audience configuration, however, the production transforms this con-

straint into an opportunity by inviting the audience onto the stage. Each audience member sits either alone or with a person with whom they have jointly arranged for tickets. If in a pair, each audience member sits hip-to-hip, facing away from each other, looking directly (but physically distanced) at other audience members. Headphones are attached to each seat, and they allow audience members to immerse themselves in a binaural soundscape designed by Ben and Max Ringham. The sound is immersive in the sense that it creates the uncanny feeling that the action of the play is happening around those sitting onstage, and it is binaural in the sense that it creates the illusion of spatial proximity and distance. The reconfiguration of the audience and the use of audio technology are thus creative solutions to what at one time seemed like an insurmountable challenge, as the production accommodates smaller audiences and does not require any live actors.

Blindness is a stage adaptation of Nobel Prize Winner José Saramago's 1995 novel of the same name, and it was written by Simon Stephens, who also wrote the award-winning adaptation of Mark Haddon's novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003). It tells the story of a plague of blindness that afflicts the entire planet, stopping human activity in its tracks. The sole actor involved in the production, Juliet Stevenson, narrates the prologue, in which she tells the audience about a man who becomes blind for no apparent reason and goes to see a doctor. The doctor is unable to determine what caused this mysterious affliction, but everyone with whom the blind man comes into contact also loses their sight, including the doctor himself. This premise is undoubtedly timely and close-to-home, as it clearly echoes our current pandemic.

Stevenson then transitions from being a nameless narrator to being the doctor's wife, who becomes the main character for the rest of the production. Despite being in close proximity to her husband, the doctor's wife is the only person who escapes the fate of going blind, for reasons that remain unknown and unexplained. The authorities eventually come to the doctor's home to quarantine all those afflicted in a prison-like compound, and she pretends to be blind in order to accompany her husband and to ensure that he is taken care of. The episodes that follow are set entirely in the compound where the afflicted are taken, and they describe the increasingly depraved community that comes to populate the compound, which is reminiscent of the cruel and lawless children in William Golding's novel *Lord of the Flies* (1954). The production vividly demonstrates the incredible capacity of the

immersive binaural sound design to create an entire world through sound alone. At times, when Stevenson whispers into her husband's ear to avoid being discovered by the blind cohabitants of the compound, the sound design creates the illusion that the actress herself is right beside you. When she crosses the room to look out the window and yell at the guards, begging for food, water, or compassion, it feels as if there is a real live person across the stage yelling into the wings. The scenes of violence and commotion also create a genuine sense of chaos and calamity, and the horrors witnessed by the doctor's wife are bone-chilling in how they are captured in sound and shared with the audience.

Stevenson's expressive capacity and mastery of voice is virtuosic. Through voice alone, she expresses deep tenderness for her husband, despair as the world around her experiences an unprecedented trauma, and rage against the guards who do nothing to prevent the horrors of rape and violence that occur in the overpopulated compound where people have been dumped with little support. Within minutes she moves from expressing resigned sadness to intense anger to hair-raising fear, all the while creating the illusion of being across the room at one moment and whispering in your ear the next.

The production is not solely experienced by listening through headphones. As the audience is led onto the stage by the ushers, they can see a sign on the back wall that reads: "If you can see, look. If you can look, observe." At one crucial moment in the play, the lights slowly fade up to reveal the house of the theatre, which was previously hidden behind the proscenium curtain. Rows and rows of empty seats, emerging from the darkness, provide a powerful metaphor of the experience of the pandemic and the power of the theatre. The audience is reminded not only of the many people who died of the virus over the past year and a half but also of the beauty of the provisional community that was taken away when theatres and performance spaces closed in 2020.

Bars of light, hanging horizontally and vertically from the ceiling, also flicker on and off to mark the passage of time and to distinguish one episode from another. For example, the flickering lights indicate movement from one location to another, such as the move from the street where the man is first afflicted with blindness to the doctor's office and finally to the doctor's home, where he joins his wife. When the doctor and his wife are taken from their home to the compound, the lights also drop to eye level, which elicits

the feeling that they are symbolically the bars that keep the afflicted within the compound. These lights also convey the sense of blindness experienced by the characters in the story, as they flash on during certain episodes, and a lingering white shadow produced by these light flashes mimics the description of blindness in the story. It is not a blindness experienced by seeing blackness, like the experience of being in a darkened room; rather, the blindness described in the production is one in which sight is obscured by only being able to see a milky whiteness. The lights thus serve to convey the blindness experienced by the characters, which helps the audience to make sense of the story.

The sensory experience of *Blindness* crystallizes what life was like during the pandemic. Most audience members likely feel cut off from the world, as they experience so much of *Blindness* in the dark. After emerging from the theatre, for example, I felt a disorienting sense of déjà vu while walking down a well-populated downtown street. This experience of déjà vu will likely continue as theatres, shops, and malls begin to open and more and more people navigate being in public for the first time in months. No matter what story is presented, the experience of returning to the theatre will be profoundly informed by the pandemic.

The intimacy of the theatre is often assumed to be correlated to its liveness, as actors typically embody and express intensely vulnerable emotions as they pretend to endure difficult and high-stakes circumstances in the immediate presence of the audience. However, *Blindness* shows that technology—or, in this case, audio technology—can also create a sense of intimacy by facilitating a direct connection between audience and actor. Theatre is back, and the world of public entertainment, social activity, and face-to-face commerce is also waking from a long period of dormancy. Both the theatre and this waking world demand that we reorient ourselves to how we live and how we live among others.