

Entwined Viruses and SOLVING FOR PATTERN

BY SEEMA SUEKO

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My fellow SDC Executive Board Member, **Ruben Santiago-Hudson**, taught me some things. At our June 8 Board meeting, as the Board was grappling with the Union's response to George Floyd's murder and the racism embedded in the American theatre, Ruben shared a marketing experience he had at a LORT. He didn't name the theatre, but as he described the situation, I realized it must have been my theatre, Arena Stage. I reached out to him the next day for more info. The details stung at first, but his candidness presented a generous opportunity to learn and grow. I passed along my notes to Artistic Director **Molly Smith**, who received the criticism with humility and an open heart. She recognized we needed to hear more. We spent the next few days on phone calls with other Arena artists who had bravely signed the "We See You, White American Theater" post. They spoke with specificity about experiences they had across the field, illuminating some changes LORTs, Broadway, and Off-Broadway can make, small and large, which have the potential to have meaningful impact. As I write this essay on Juneteenth, we are only beginning the work at Arena Stage. The things we are learning from these conversations will be shared at the senior staff level, with the board, with all staff and ushers. In order to find success with any of these potential changes, we will need broad support and the will from inside and outside of the organization.

It is fitting that these viruses, coronavirus and racism, are entwined in this moment. The first virus disrupted the theatre-making system, creating the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to change the paradigm and rebuild as anti-racist organizations. I don't know if we will succeed, but I am activated to try, and I invite you to hold me accountable.

"Solving for pattern" is the concept coined by writer, environmental activist, and farmer

Wendell Berry. It's the idea of finding solutions to problems while minimizing the creation of new problems and solving multiple problems at once. Here are a few examples of ways I've been working with artists and Arena Stage to listen, learn, and begin the process of solving the problems of our entwined viruses.

Artistic Experiments, Anti-Racism, and Structures

Many directors and choreographers are experimenting with new forms in this time of COVID-19. Once each week, since April 15, I meet online with scenic designer Mikiko Suzuki MacAdams, costume designer Ivania Stack, projection designer Shawn Duan, lighting designer Jeanette Oi-Suk Yew,

and sound designer Andre Pluess. We are engaged in the research question: How do theatre artists make theatre on this new stage—our devices?

We call this project Isolated Theater or Set Model Theater. Most of the artists are part of the design team for our pandemic-postponed production of *Rashomon* at Arena Stage. We are achieving several things through our meetings:

- Continuing our design process for *Rashomon*—this extra time is allowing us to dig deeper.
- Experiments—we plan on building the set model for *Rashomon*, taking photos from outside and within the model for the



Isolated Theater R&D Team (clockwise): Mikiko Suzuki MacAdams, Shawn Duan, **Seema Sueko**, Andre Pluess, Ivania Stack + Jeanette Oi-Suk Yew



Alyse Rockett, Regi Davis, Philip Anthony Rodriguez, Gedde Watanabe, Ashley Park + Conor Guzman in *The Fantasticks* at Pasadena Playhouse, directed by **Seema Sueko** PHOTO Jim Cox

Fichandler (in-the-round) Stage, which will become virtual backgrounds. We will use the costume renderings to make little character dolls, and experiment with them in the model and against virtual backgrounds. We will take what we learn from this and hopefully experiment with members of the cast utilizing the virtual backgrounds. We are curious if this will yield:

- New process—we know we can do table work over Zoom, but can we also stage while we are isolated from one another? Can we stage combat and intimacy this way? Could we even pre-tech while isolated? If isolation continues for long periods, and/or if there is a second wave of the virus and rehearsals are interrupted again, might this be a way to continue rehearsing beyond table work from a safe distance?
- New hybrid product—like claymation and other handmade art forms, might this research yield a hybrid art form that is of this time?

Recently, our meetings have been focused on racism in our field rather than the design of *Rashomon* and Isolated Theater. That seems right. As we try to solve the problem of how

to make theatre during a pandemic, we want to be intentional that our artistic experiments don't yield new problems of racism. In addition, my collaborators, who are all artists of color like myself, shared their personal experiences in our field. The conversation illuminated how our tiered contract structures can inadvertently convey a message to staff that some artists, those in the larger spaces, are more important than those in the smaller spaces. While my collaborators have worked in Arena's larger spaces, that has not always been their experience at other theatres. The tiered budgets, coupled with cramped timelines where "all shops across the country are behind," according to my collaborators, are two structural elements that then exacerbate inequities and sometimes create hostile work environments where BIPOC artists working in the smaller spaces are disrespected and verbally abused.

I had always felt proud of my work in diversifying the landscape of American theatre. I understand now that it has not been enough. Sixteen years ago, I founded Mo'olelo, a community-focused, socially conscious Equity theatre company in San Diego. Years later, I worked beside **Sheldon Epps** at Pasadena Playhouse, utilizing my Consensus Organizing for Theater methodology to engage diverse audiences. In just over two years, we brought in 6,000

new audience members, over \$2 million in grants, and over \$200,000 in new ticket sales from Black, Latinx, and Asian American communities. At Arena Stage, my Artistic Development department includes a self-identified Latina Casting Director/Line Producer; a Black and Iranian American Literary Manager; and me (Pakistani and Japanese Muslim American). In the past five years, the playwrights we have produced have been 53% BIPOC and women and our directors have been 77% BIPOC and women. But the honest conversations with my Isolated Theater collaborators taught me that **diverse programming and hiring alone do not make for an anti-racist organization**. **We also must look at the structures**. These inequities, brought to light by BIPOC artists, give us an opportunity to develop humane structures for all in our field.

A New Delivery System: The Arena Stage Theater Artists Marketplace

In the seventh week of the pandemic, before George Floyd was murdered, I had a painful week calling fellow theatre artists and informing them that productions we had planned would be postponed. I wanted to make the kind of calls I used to make, calls about opportunities and possibilities. Then I realized: *Artists and audiences still exist, both still hungry for each other. It's only*

our delivery system of "gather artists, gather audiences, and mix" that is broken. We can create new delivery systems and new ways to earn income now rather than wait until theatres produce again.

I proposed that Arena create an online marketplace where the public can commission a theatre artist or purchase a work of art directly from the artist online and with no physical contact. Websites like Cameo.com already exist where people can buy a greeting from a celebrity. This is the theatre version of that idea, which embraces the art form and artistry. Regional theatres are networks, linking artists and audience. This is a way to monetize that network, keeping it alive while we are dark.

AS WE TRY TO SOLVE THE QUESTION OF HOW WE MAKE ART AND GET PAID WHILE THE THEATRES ARE DARK, LET'S NOT CREATE MORE INEQUITABLE STRUCTURES, BUT INSTEAD BUILD THE THEATRE FIELD WE WANT.

I reached out to Arena Stage artists, artisans, and technicians to inquire if this would be of interest to them. Actor Dawn Ursula replied, "I would absolutely like to participate. This means so much. I can't tell you how much this means." Actor Nicholas Rodriguez shared, "Since we've been in quarantine, I have recorded 13 videos or lessons, and done multiple interviews and Q&A's for theatres, and this is the first time someone has figured out a way to pay the artist."

The artists determine what they want to offer on the marketplace, the descriptions of their work, and their pricing. The majority of the income goes to the artist and Arena receives 15 percent.

Arena Stage's Theater Artist Marketplace (www.arenastage.org/artistmarketplace) launched June 23, 2020. The diverse offerings include personal concerts and greetings, original music compositions for a loved one, one-on-one acting and vocal coaching sessions, custom-made face masks, conflict resolution, a custom-designed and performed puppet film of a person's life, a cooking class and a song, a writing salon

for you and your friends, original, one-of-a-kind artwork, and beautifully designed rock garden landscape services.

Theatre artists are multi-talented. The Marketplace provides space for artists to bring all their skills and talents, their full selves, and control what they offer and how their work is priced. Before the webpages went live, I gathered the artists and Arena Staff who built the site for a Zoom toast. I asked everyone to collaborate on making the Marketplace an anti-racist place.

New Employers

Theatres cannot hire directors and choreographers now. I am interested in surfacing new employers. Here are some ideas:

- Individuals: Building on the Arena Stage Artists Marketplace idea, any of us can deliver art directly to people. We can borrow from websites like Upwork.com to create a system of a robust talent pool of directors and choreographers, opportunity postings, matching, and secured payments. We would need to be intentional that we don't inadvertently create an unbalanced patronage system of wealthy white people hiring BIPOC artists, but rather a transparent, artist-centric, anti-racist one. (Thank you to **Leah C. Gardiner** for bringing Upwork.com to my attention and fleshing out the idea with me).
- Non-arts businesses: Several hospitals in the US, Canada, and UK already have writers in residence to serve the staff. Many businesses have been operating throughout the pandemic, and their staff are stressed: grocery stores, tech firms, law firms, construction businesses, nonprofit associations, faith organizations, etc. A creative outlet might be just what they need. Can you reach out to the frontline hospitals and businesses in your community and offer your service as a resident artistic director?
- Arts EAP: An employee assistance program (EAP) is a confidential service that enables employers to help their staff with personal growth or workplace issues. EAPs are not limited in what they can assist workers with and now cover a broad range of services. EAPs come at no cost to employees but are paid for by the employers, and they may be delivered via phone, video, or online interactions. By offering an EAP, employers get a happier, healthier workforce who feel valued and supported by their employer. Can we collaborate with existing EAPs to include

theatre artists among their roster of experts? Even more ambitious, can we create an arts-focused EAP and market it to employers across the nation?

- International: Some international theatre markets are opening before the US. Here is a resource to find international festivals and funding opportunities: <https://www.midatlanticarts.org/grants-programs/international-festivals/>

As we try to solve the question of how we make art and get paid while the theatres are dark, let's not create more inequitable structures, but instead build the theatre field we want. Molly Smith always says, "First you hear it, then you know it, then you do it, then you become it." We are hearing it: **our art, which requires empathy, has been surrounded by structures and people who sometimes lack it.** In this extraordinary moment when these physical and social viruses are entwined, let's know, do, and become something extraordinary by solving for pattern.

I thank my fellow SDC Executive Board Members Sheldon Epps, **Lydia Fort**, Leah C. Gardiner, Ruben Santiago-Hudson, and **Seret Scott**, who bravely spoke up in our meetings. **SDC**



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