

# That Doesn't Look Like Change to Me: On how "coming back better" has become "come back soon"

*"I think we just need to focus on getting the message out that we're back. We're back and it's safe. I think that's a big enough task in and of itself."*

This was a statement made toward the end of what truly felt like an endless Zoom meeting at the end of a very long week. I had probably spent five to six hours in meetings just like this one with artists and theater-makers from all over the country. The goal was to talk about reopening theaters now that vaccinations are proceeding at a rapid clip and a fall 2021 return to theater-going seems probable.

I wanted to write about how theaters are planning to not just come back, but to come back having honored the promises they made less than a year ago in the wake of George Floyd's killing regarding race in theater. As the country watches the trial of the man who knelt on Floyd's neck, we're also watching a country eager to move on from anything pandemic-related. I am one of the people who has echoed the sentiment that I never want to read a book, see a film or engage in any culture that tackles the COVID-era for at least the next 20 years of my life, but there seems to be a feeling that the moment of reckoning we experienced as a nation last June was not something separate and apart from the pandemic, but another event that took place *during* it, and the distinction between those two things could lead institutions and organizations toward believing that maybe change doesn't need to come as swiftly as they promised it would.

The reopening of theater was always bound to be a complicated inflection point for an industry that desperately needed a radical reimagining in almost every sense, but especially when it came to equitable representation. While theaters were dark, many tried to use the excuse that the pandemic was giving them so much to worry about, they simply couldn't work on anything else. Anybody with common sense could see that this was a tactic (and a gross one) to forestall real change. After all, if you're a theater at a time when you're not allowed to produce theater, shouldn't you theoretically have plenty of time on your hands to work on creating better theater when the time comes to do so?

Eventually, even the groups that lagged the longest put out plans and oaths to do better, but to those of us on the administrative side of theater, it was possible to recognize the tried-and-true strategies for fending off criticism with assurances that change will happen behind-the-scenes, that it might not come right away but *soon*, and by using buzzwords and academic language leaving anyone listening to perhaps *feel* better, but walk away with any tangible outcome.

This brings us to the current moment, when even the theaters that seemed to be passionately inspired to do things differently are now seeing that passion fracture and split with the reality that reopening is not going to be as simple as throwing the doors open and welcoming audiences back inside their spaces.

In other words, they knew change was going to have a cost, but now they're wondering if it's too high.

That doubt is made manifest in some of the same go-to excuses we used to hear before the pandemic

about why we were seeing the same lackluster titles produced over and over again or why the same actors are cast or the same stories are told in the same ways.

Standard, fear-driven fare like *"I don't think our audiences will respond to that"* or *"I'm worried because it's not a well-known title."*

Apparently it didn't occur to anyone that while the theater industry can make all the promises it wants, there are theater-adjacent bodies that never agreed to a change. I learned that recently while futilely attempting to apply for rights to a play and getting the same run-around from licensing companies that I experienced for years before COVID struck. While that may not seem like something that would affect honoring new guidelines about equity and diversity, better access to titles from all playwrights would increase the number of plays done by people who aren't white. The old licensing model was also one built on elitism and favored companies with more resources, which is exactly the kind of model we wanted to see retired in theater. But how can we change if the people working with us don't agree to change as well? The answer is: We need to insist on that change from people who depend on our business. The same goes for the media that covers our work, and yes, the audiences who see our shows.

Hearing that will most likely inspire criticism from theater-makers that they have no control over audiences even in the best of times, that we're entering a precarious phase upon reopening where we need to remove every barrier in place that might prevent people from coming to our shows, and that we should just be grateful to everyone and anyone who buys a ticket.

Again, how do we expect to change if we're not standing firm when it comes to our outside collaborators changing alongside us? That includes where we get our rights, who writes stories about us, and the people who come see what it is we do. We simply cannot allow the tail to keep wagging the dog in all these relationships. It's understandable to think that internal changes were going to be difficult enough without now needing to create change in some of the industries around us, but what is the alternative?

Even as I pose that question, the voice in the back of my head says-

*We could just do our best for now and hope for change in the future.*

And everyone, that's not good enough.

*"Hoping for Change for Settling for Another Unnecessary Production of The Taming of the Shrew"* might as well be the title of some of the seasons I'm seeing in the planning stages.

Broadway is currently a cultural whiplash pool of some exciting productions like *Thoughts of a Colored Man* to reflect the demand for better narratives on America's biggest stage while the all-white *Music Man* is still going to play one of its most prominent venues.

Like it or not, theater will be coming back at rock bottom, and as bad as rock bottom is, it is also a perfect place upon which to build a new foundation.

Let's start with the audience-

An audience can absolutely be cultivated and taught to appreciate seeing different kinds of work onstage, but that is where you remind yourself that you are a theater and not a restaurant. You are not

there to apologize endlessly to rich racists from the suburbs because they don't like that you're not doing *42nd Street* for the fifth time in seven years. If they're a donor or a board member, ask yourself if you want your organization to exist on the support of people like that. Remind yourself that conditional support is not *actually* support. Producing something that goes against your new EDI guidelines because some acting hobbyist cut you a \$10,000 check so that they could check playing Willy Loman off their bucket list is not *change*.

If you find that your audience refuses to see anything that isn't a musical based on a movie based on a bad television show, then you need to embrace the idea of a transition in which you will undoubtedly lose audience members and lose money at the worst possible time to lose money and you really have no choice in the matter, because the — what's that word again — the *alternative* is to keep making overwrought garbage for the lowest common denominator.

As my friend Aaron often says, you do not get to come back just because you existed in the *before* times. You have to justify your return.

You may feel as though I'm kicking an entire field when it's down, but let's face it, theater is perpetually down. The numbers barely ever add up. The ticket prices are too high. We've created an entire profession that borrows the worst elements of film, fashion and social media, and combines them into an anxiety-inducing, vanity-driven nightmare that thrives on a lack of imagination and crippling personal insecurity.

But when it is good, it is the best thing in the world, and that's why we all miss it so much.

Some of us miss it so much that we're contemplating compromising on our values in the hopes that we can just have it back as soon as possible.

The problem is, those of us who do theater know that we are the ultimate procrastinators when it comes to big, systemic change. It's easy to put it off, because change does take money and money is never there. It does take a long-standing commitment to places like regional theater where people are always coming and going, making it harder to see any kind of plan through to the end. It does get easier and easier to tell yourself that it's enough to *really* want to do better and that wanting to is enough.

It's not.

It's nowhere near enough.

While the cries a year ago were for theater that better represents, supports and celebrates Black lives and voices, one would hope that time would have been spent since then building more expanded plans that include addressing sexism, classism, ableism and transphobia. I recently wrote a statement for my theater in the wake of attacks against the AAPI community, and it was another reminder that all our tables need to be bigger. Subsequently, the movie industry has already shown that widening the kinds of stories you tell and the hiring pool you employ to tell them is not only morally just, but actually *makes you more money*. So if you're not a particularly conscious individual, but you have any kind of business sense, you still have every reason to never want to go back to the way things were.

If you are one of those people who supports theater in your area and wants to know how you can hold them accountable by reminding them that while last year may feel like a century ago, you still remember the goals they set for themselves and you expect them to follow through on it as they begin

to announce reopening plans, be aware of having those ten-dollar words thrown at you. Be advised that many theaters are not returning to their regular subscription model, which is great, but that means it's going to get easier for them to tell you that the *next* show will be the one that doesn't have an all-white cast. That the next one will be new work amplifying their new core values. That they just have to make a little money first, because *pandemic pandemic pandemic* and then you'll see them do a big pivot, and *Oh, you better prepare yourself, because change is just going to come pouring out of every door.*

I mentioned administrative change earlier, and that's the well-known loophole to getting a pat on the back for looking progressive while still catering to people who might balk at having to watch two guys kiss onstage or a play that addresses things like climate change or white supremacy. Diversify your education and development and marketing departments and then claim that all is well.

All that is great, but it's not enough.

That's why it's important, as people who watch and enjoy theater, to say that you want to see diversity happening *in production*. That means directors, actors, designers, playwrights and crew. If a theater is committed to change, that's where you should be seeing the change happen. It should affect how their staffing looks as well, but staffing alone is not going to cut it.

Nearly a year ago, theater promised to come back better.

There has been ample time for reflection, for organizing, for planning and for building a better infrastructure in which change can not only exist, but thrive.

If organizations did not use that time wisely, that speaks volumes not only about what they *can* do, but what they're *willing* to do.

In other words, if you're going to insist that you have to do things the way you did them before even as the rest of the world has experienced a collective reset, then you are labeling yourself a dinosaur and you will go extinct.

Any business that asserts it can only operate one way with zero flexibility or room for growth is often put out to pasture before very long. It would be shameful if the most creative and adaptable people given the most resources of anybody in history threw up their hands and said, "*Sorry, but we only know how to do it the way we've always done it.*"

After any mass shooting, the Conservatives among us like to tamp down calls for gun reform by saying, "*Now is not the time.*" I'm reminded of that as I write this, because every so often, on one of the endless Zoom meetings, I voice my frustration at some of the passivity I'm seeing, and I'm quickly called to task for being so negative when people are just doing their best.

These are the same people who would call themselves artists — a profession that, from the dawn of time, has spoken out at every inconvenient opportunity to demand change when nobody wants it with the insight that change never happens when people *want* it, only when they have no other choice but to *create* it.

Now is not only the time, there will be no other time.

This is it.

Time to show your work.