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## We Will Remember That We Came Together in Protest and Mutual Aid

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The year of COVID-19 social distancing is a reminder that people can and will gather in person in mass acts of resistance and community care, even in a pandemic. This year highlights how theatres, theatre skills, and theatrical techniques can be a key part of community building and dissent. The examples of the Twin Cities in summer 2020; Portland, Oregon, in 2020–1; and France in spring-summer 2021 showcase the potential for theatre artists to use their skills and spaces to support protest work. I highlight these three examples due to my personal connections (I am from the Twin Cities; live in Portland and serve as a legal observer during the Protests; and, in my scholarship, specialize in French theatre and protest), due to the scale of these actions, and in order to amplify the pandemic protest and performance work happening in these places. Together, the efforts of Twin Cities, Portland, and French activists and artists showcase how, against a backdrop of mourning and anxiety, the pandemic has been a time of invigoration in mass protest, mutual aid, and coming together to try to build better worlds.

Two of the ways Twin Cities artists responded to Derek Chauvin’s 25 May 2020 murder of George Floyd in South Minneapolis were by making performance and by using their spaces and skills to support protest work. In terms of performance creation, two productions highlight strategies of this moment: the use of symbolic performance location in the neighborhood of Floyd’s murder, the assembly of in-person audiences despite COVID, the dramaturgical use of a multitude of narratives and voices, and a focus on leadership from people of color, in particular Black leaders and artists. New Dawn Theatre’s *A Breath for George*, performed with Minnesota artists over 14–21 June 2020, premiered at Pillsbury House Theatre—less than half a mile from the site of Chauvin’s murder of Floyd—before traveling to sites around the Cities.<sup>1</sup> The free event presented on screens “a collection of songs, interviews, monologues and short films honoring the life and death of George Floyd, those who have fallen before him and those who continue to fall

due to police brutality and systemic racism.”<sup>2</sup> In a time of solitude and fear, Artistic Director Austene Van used *A Breath for George* to show the “value in people knowing that they are not alone in the way that they are feeling right now. There is also value in speaking truth to people who have never heard our stories or ever been in position to hear our stories.”<sup>3</sup> In late October, as part of BareBones Puppetry, Lelis Brito and Harry Waters Jr. cofacilitated *Offerings*, thirty-three performances created along Lake Street “to facilitate a BareBones response that gives voice to the myriad cultural communities in the twin cities, . . . explores our collective grief, . . . and centers South Minneapolis, the epicenter of current changes.”<sup>4</sup> *Offerings* showcased local artists working with puppets, masks, and found objects in the heart of the protest areas in order to speak to mourning and healing. New Dawn and BareBones expressed their intentions to use their performances to invite “new ways of being” and “to mobilize our citizens nationwide to roll up our sleeves and create radical, lasting change for our future.”<sup>5</sup> To these artists, in-person theatre in these specific locations in the time of pandemic and protest is a way to work toward community building and antiracism.

The second tactic of Twin Cities theatre artists was to use their skills and spaces to serve their communities. Mixed Blood Theatre opened up as a pantry, flu shot clinic, and headquarters for University Rebuild, a group of scenic, technical, and production workers who “clean up, repair, and protect communities in the Twin Cities.” The artists of Mixed Blood and University Rebuild looked beyond theatre performance as a way to consider what theatre people could offer. Organizer Daisuke Kawachi states, “Everything we do is in solidarity with BIPOC (black, indigenous and other people of color) communities and we are taking our cues from BIPOC leaders” and urges others to listen to need and get involved.<sup>6</sup> This work to repurpose theatre spaces and skills was not isolated to the Twin Cities: Abrons Art Center in New York continues to function as a COVID-sparked emergency pantry, the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland set up community services in the wake of the September 2020 wildfires, and Portland Center Stage in Oregon offered their space for activist Linneas Boland-Godbey’s BLM Art Therapy events.<sup>7</sup> These examples showcase the transformative potential not just of theatre performances, but also theatre buildings and artists, in service of work toward antiracism, community care, and social change.

In Portland, Oregon, the actions known as the Portland Protests highlight the potential for people to unite, even in a pandemic, in mass dissent against anti-Blackness. These protests draw on theatrical activity and techniques, and for a year have displayed a defiance of social distancing in service of trying—through multiple and sometimes conflicting tactics—to envision a better, anti-racist, anticapitalist world. Portland Protests is a term that refers to the thirteen-month (and ongoing) series of street and mutual aid actions in Portland, sparked in response to Chauvin’s murder of Floyd, and also Portland’s long-standing history of racial exclusion and violence. Part of a global rise in popular protest in summer 2020, the Portland Protests movement is “singular” in its “continuing commitment to nightly action, the degree of popular support it enjoys from regular Portlanders, [and] the rich new ecosystem of movement groups that provide it with its various functions.”<sup>8</sup> Grounded in strategies and tactics borrowed from Black radical organizers, Hong Kong protesters,

and anarchist practices, the Portland Protests are marked by mutual aid, diversity of tactics, and bloc strategy.

The hallmark use of bloc formation in the Portland Protests highlights theatricality as a way to draw attention to the issues at the heart of protests, in this case Black Lives Matter. Bloc formation draws on the anarchist commitment to protecting identity and presenting a united front through bloc (a group) dressing the same (in all black) as a “tactical form” to prevent “the police from identifying and isolating who committed what gesture during a riot,” and to signify “we are all comrades, we are all in solidarity, we are all alike.”<sup>9</sup> This effort to dissolve hierarchy and embrace equality as liberation strategy is core to these protests, which have attempted to operate as leaderless. Part of what has been particular about the use of bloc in the Portland Protests is how widespread it has been, including chef bloc (dressed in chef’s whites), health care bloc (scrubs), lawyer bloc (suits), AZN bloc (bloc of Asian protestors), and artist bloc, among others. Haymarket Pole Collective’s Portland Stripper Strike is a bloc of sex workers who protest in platform heels, G strings, fishnets, and carrying “No Justice No Booty” signs.<sup>10</sup> The controversial July 2020 Wall of Moms in their yellow shirts and the Dad Pod with their leaf blowers are other examples of identity formations, though without explicit anarchist underpinnings. Portland groups have adopted blocs outside of street protest in service of mutual aid: mending bloc, pet bloc, beauty bloc, herb bloc, techblocpdx, snack bloc, coffee bloc, tamale bloc, book bloc, and more. These blocs offer support not only at rallies, marches, and direct actions, but as a part of daily life for those in need, with a focus on the city’s vast houseless and low-income communities. The blocs are one manifestation of the diversity of tactics approach—one that draws on the work of Malcolm X and Black civil rights leaders of the 1960s, and anarchist practices and Hong Kong Protests techniques.<sup>11</sup> The Portland Protests have relied from the beginning on a mix of strategies and tactics, including direct action, marches, mutual aid, letter writing, fundraising, and jail support. The modes of protest have featured options, such as the PDX Car Caravan car protests, playground marches for children, Zoom actions, grandparent rallies, sunrise meditations, bicycle actions, motorcycle brigades, and even paddleboard protests. Different modes are used to respond to what is needed by the movement in the moment. The idea of both diversity of tactics and the blocs is that there is a possibility for everyone to get involved. This is echoed by a street sign at one of the June marches, “Find Your Role in the Revolution.”

The Portland Protests have also been marked from the beginning by a swell of mutual aid, which Dean Spade defines as a “collective coordination to meet each other’s needs, usually from an awareness that the systems we have in place are not going to meet them.”<sup>12</sup> While other tactics have waxed and waned in popularity among the protestors, mutual aid has been a consistent protest practice as a way to resist capitalist hierarchies and build horizontal structures. The Portland Protests’ mutual aid efforts involve food and gear distribution, clothing shares, grassroots medical care, and fundraising. Much of this work takes place away from the front lines, and is possible for those who want to participate away from large groups or law enforcement clashes. Mutual aid is a vital part of the Portland Protests in the way this work puts into practice aspirations of community care and support.



Portland, Oregon. 24 July, 2020. Photo by Kate Bredeson

The spring 2021 French theatre occupations offer a third example of defiant coming together in the face of the pandemic, and enforce the centrality of theatre to the pandemic protests. On 4 March 2021, a group gathered outside the Odéon Théâtre—a stately Paris theatre with a deep history as a protest site during occupations in May 1968, 1992, and 2016—to protest working conditions for French artists. The group spent the night in the theatre and began what grew by 4 April (Occupons! Occupons!) into one hundred theatre occupations in cities all over France and on Réunion.<sup>13</sup> The occupations are accompanied by daily street actions, marches, performances, and even, on one March day, a mass singing of “Do You Hear the People Sing?” from *Les Misérables* on the Odéon square. Inside the theatres, occupiers set up mutual aid hubs—with areas for hygiene, sustenance, clothes, and literature. Protestors emphasized that the occupations took place over the 150th anniversary of the Paris Commune, during which French people engaged in a two-and-a-half month insurrection and establishment of a people’s revolution; a red banner on the 2021-occupied Odéon declared, “Vive la Commune.”

The French theatre occupations are about labor struggle, with an emphasis on fighting for those in precarious situations. In Caen, one sign took the French national motto and adapted it to “Liberty, Equality, Precarity” (Occupation Caen).<sup>14</sup> The theatres are occupation sites in part because they are symbols of the state and operate on state funding. Under the rallying cry “Culture in Danger,” arts workers are occupying theatres in protest of a set July 2021 expiration

to an unemployment insurance reform, which affects arts workers. They have extended the fight beyond issues of employment. In March, Odéon protestors marched against “the violence of the racist state”; they are fighting for better gender representation, using “Nous, occupant.e.s” (we, occupiers) in their communications, to include men, women, trans, and nonbinary occupiers, despite the fixed, gendered nature of the word (like all nouns in French). In this way, the occupations symbolize a fight for those in precarious situations of employment and existence. Though the occupiers left the Odéon on 23 May 2021 due to conflict with the theatre’s management, they are continuing the work and the fight for “as long as possible” through ongoing action. In late May they moved their center of operations to cultural center 104, which also serves as a COVID-19 vaccination site.<sup>15</sup> Instead of seeing the end of the Odéon occupation as a failure, the occupiers’ shift to a new strategic location highlights how flexibility and diversity of tactics are key parts of what sustains the 2020–1 protest and mutual aid movements.

In my first book, *Occupying the Stage: The Theater of May ’68*, I propose that one of the lessons of May ’68 is the opportunity to redefine what is meant by efficacy and success in terms of protest.<sup>16</sup> Although the Odéon occupation—and the events of May ’68 more broadly—did not result in the fall of the state and the realization of utopia, it did create community and serve as a spectacular way to draw attention to the issues at the heart of the protests. The same is true in the 2020–1 pandemic protests and theatre occupations. Like the case of repurposing theatres for mutual aid in the Twin Cities, New York, and Oregon, the French theatre occupations showcase the potential for theatre spaces to be key in work for social change. And in Minneapolis and Portland, the protests have resulted in some tangible gains, such as reductions in policing budgets in both cities (by \$15 million in Portland, \$19 million in Minneapolis),<sup>17</sup> thirty Portland strip clubs committing to racial sensitivity training,<sup>18</sup> and the end of the ICE contract at the Northern Oregon Regional Corrections Facilities—the “last jail in Oregon to hold immigration detainees.”<sup>19</sup> Mutual aid efforts established during the protests continue to flourish. In the Twin Cities, Portland, and France, the protests and occupations have spurred great and lasting community building.

The examples of the Twin Cities, Portland, and France protests display the power and promise of resistance and the central roles for theatre and theatre people in this striving, even in a pandemic. This work gives hope and purpose. University Rebuild organizer Kawachi encourages “those who want to get involved in their communities to think locally and ask three questions: ‘Look at your own community. Is there movement-work that is already happening that you can support?’ ‘Are there BIPOC businesses you can make purchases from? And are there BIPOC voices that you can amplify?’”<sup>20</sup> Kawachi’s call is to those who make, teach, study, and watch theatre to listen to community needs and to use their particular skills to support local work—especially work by people of color—underway. When we—theatre artists, teachers, activists, students, and spectators—look back to 2020–1, we will remember that we could and did come together in service of trying to make a better, and what Koritha Mitchell has called a “less hostile,” world.<sup>21</sup>

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