

20/20 Visions

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This is not the first time that we have been in the midst of preparing an issue of *PAJ* when a momentous event has occurred. Over four decades there have been many, encompassing Poland's Solidarity movement, the Iraq War, the fall of the Berlin Wall, 9/11, Occupy Wall Street. And now, the year 2020 has brought one of the most catastrophic times in the post-war period in the form of the coronavirus. A great cloud of unknowing has descended over the globe. We don't know what will happen, where we are going, who we will become. This extraordinary situation has taken hold everywhere and threatens all aspects of human existence: social, political, economic, biological, cultural.

First came the initial shock and feelings of fear and isolation, then the accompanying attempts to process the weight of it all. For those in our field, the pandemic marked a long-term halt in earning a living, cancelled engagements years in the making, the inability to create new work or to present it, while also encouraging commitments to new ways of making theatre. Many artists and institutions felt compelled to produce content for livestreaming or to develop online communities to maintain a presence. Others admitted to relishing the time at home, the freedom from overbooked calendars and ever-present compulsive productivity. Still, clearing the mental space for writing proved challenging, and watching live performance on a screen unsatisfactory over an extended timeframe. The human voice on the telephone was again valued, after years of texting and avoiding contact. For those fortunate enough to do so, this new slow time became an opportunity for reading and reflecting on life changes in between the pauses for daily necessities.

In continuing under the present conditions, we at *PAJ* prepared for the fall issue. How would we acknowledge the coronavirus? We decided that the Segal Talks series of daily interviews online with artists and cultural thinkers around the globe, curated by Frank Hentschker of the Martin E. Segal Theatre Center at CUNY (NY) between March and July, should be offered to our worldwide readership. This would be our way of making a contribution to the conversation, by

creating a record in print of this exceptional time and place in world history. PAJ's assistant editor, Benjamin Gillespie, with the assistance of Sarah Lucie and Jennifer Joan Thompson, took on the task of editing selected excerpts from thirty artists, representing twenty countries, to be ready for the fall issue. These wide-ranging commentaries demonstrate that while the coronavirus is global, the repercussions are felt locally and on a daily basis in different regions of the world. It is no surprise that representatives of rich and poor countries would have very different perspectives on this existential crisis. Politics and the pandemic are inextricably bound.

Through these recent months, surveying political events as they unfold here and abroad, I sometimes felt like I have been living in a Witkiewicz play, something like *Guybal Wahazar*, with its out-sized and fuming tyrant held in place by a pack of scheming sycophants, a world where time and space and language are distorted on shifting planes of reality. At other times, what comes to mind are those thirties' and forties' film comedies that take place in a fictitious old Europe, such as the Marx Brothers' classic *Duck Soup*, at the center of which are ministers and functionaries scrambling to satisfy the head of state's increasingly crazed whims. The current American political spectacle in this age of social media, namely the Federal response in Oregon, has recently been described by historian Anne Applebaum in the foreboding terms of "performative authoritarianism."

In more hopeful moments, reflecting on the performance of everyday life I find inspiration from the esteemed theatre figure Vaclav Havel, whose legacy he left to the world in his majestic essay "The Power of the Powerless," a manifesto illuminating the path to "living in truth" that any individual could follow. His humanist vision looked beyond what democratic institutions can do for people to what they must do for themselves. It is a "post-democratic" position in the most profoundly empowering, philosophical sense. In these times of coronavirus and illiberal forces spreading across continents, his words have the feeling of grace notes for our saddened melody of existence. He imagined—

a moral reconstitution of society, which means a radical renewal of the relationship of human beings to what I have called the "human order," which no political order can replace. A new experience of being, a renewed rootedness in the universe, a newly grasped sense of higher responsibility, a newfound inner relationship to other people and to the human community—these factors clearly indicate the direction in which we must go.

It is said that Havel used to hide his manuscripts in trees to keep them safe from the authorities. Perhaps in the secret life of trees there are new books of knowledge awaiting our discovery. Meanwhile, we wait, we do our work, we go on.