

CULTURE

Shakespeare Wrote His Best Works During a Plague

The qualities for which live theater is celebrated—audiences responding with laughter, tears, gasps, and coughs—accelerate its danger. But the Broadway shutdown could be good for plays.

By Daniel Pollack-Pelzner



Elizabethan theaters were frequently shuttered in London during outbreaks of the bubonic plague, which claimed up to a third of the city's population. (Kathy Willens / AP)

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As with everything that the coronavirus leaves in its wake, the suspension of operations by most major theaters around the country feels surreal—though surely both inevitable and necessary—and follows yesterday's announcement that [Broadway will turn off its lights](#) for at least the next month. Only two days prior, the producer Scott Rudin had offered \$50 discount tickets to his Broadway shows, including *West Side Story* and *The Book of Mormon*. "I can't pretend that great theater is the panacea we've been waiting for, but in the meantime we could all use a few hours away from the evening news," Rudin said in [a press release](#), implying that his shows might, in some form, offer at least emotional inoculation from a pandemic.

Whether theater provides an entertaining diversion from "the evening news" or might be the cause of further suffering, however, is a debate that goes back at least to Shakespeare's day. Elizabethan theaters were frequently shuttered in London during outbreaks of the bubonic plague, which claimed [nearly a third](#) of the city's population. The official rule was that once the death rate exceeded thirty per week, performances would be canceled. (As an infant, Shakespeare himself barely survived an outbreak that killed his older siblings.) Like New York's governor Andrew Cuomo, who has banned gatherings of more than 500 people, [London officials in the 16th century](#) worried that people flocking to town to "see certayne stage plays" would be "close pestered together in small romes," creating the means "whereby great infeccion with the plague, or some other infeccious diseases, may rise and growe, to the great hynderaunce of the common wealth of this city."

In the first decade of King James I's reign, the plague meant that London theaters were likely closed more often than they were open, and Shakespeare's troupe, The King's Men, had to rely on royal gifts and provincial tours to replace their lost box office. (No such luck for Broadway shows on tour; my family's tickets to *Frozen* were canceled—regrettably? mercifully?—this weekend in Oregon, where the governor has banned gatherings of more than 250 people.) In *The Year of Lear*, the scholar James Shapiro notes that nascent epidemiologists weren't the only ones who blamed the spread of disease on tourists breathing the same foul air in enclosed entertainment venues; religious zealots also came after the theater's purported immorality: blasphemy, lewdness, cross-dressing. One Elizabethan preacher [proclaimed](#) that because "the cause of plagues is sin" and "the cause of sin are plays," then "the cause of plagues are plays."

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Conversely, plagues may have caused plays. It's long been thought that Shakespeare turned to poetry when plague closed the theaters in 1593. That's when he published his popular narrative poem, *Venus and Adonis*, in which the goddess begs a kiss from a beautiful boy, "to [drive infection](#) from the dangerous year," for, she claims, "the plague is banish'd by thy breath." Love poetry, it seems, could be spurred by the plague, and—the seductive fantasy runs—even cure it. But Shapiro suggests that another closure of theaters, in 1606, allowed Shakespeare, an actor and shareholder in The King's Men, to get a lot of dramatic writing done, meeting the demand for new plays in a busy holiday season at court. According to Shapiro, he churned out *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Antony and Cleopatra* that year.

Given that the bubonic plague particularly decimated young populations, it may also have wiped out Shakespeare's theatrical rivals—companies of boy actors who dominated the early-17th-century stage, and could often get away with more satiric, politically dicey productions than their older competitors. Shakespeare's company took over the indoor Blackfriars Theatre in 1608 after the leading boy company collapsed, and started doing darker, edgier productions, capitalizing on a market share that was newly available. In addition to business opportunities, the plague provided a powerful stock of dramatic metaphors. As Shapiro points out, references to the plague and its bubbling sores, called "God's tokens," surface in Shakespeare's scripts from the period. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, a Roman soldier fears that his side will fare "like the token'd pestilence / Where death is sure."

The ghost of a 17th-century plague victim haunts Tony Kushner's *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches*, probably the best known work in recent decades to respond to a plague—the AIDS epidemic that ripped through Broadway in the 1980s. Kushner's HIV-positive hero, Prior Walter, is visited by his ancestors, prior Priors, who tell him of the "spotty monster" they faced in earlier eras, and prepare him for a revelation to come. The angel that crashes through Prior's ceiling at the end of the play heralds an era of painful renewal—both for AIDS survivors, and for the theatrical community that rallied around Kushner's work. The red-ribboned organization [Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS](#) now follows many a Broadway performance with a fundraising appeal. If a plague could cause a play, perhaps a play could help to stop a plague.

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The fear that remains, however, is that the very qualities for which live theater is celebrated—communities coming together to witness human stories, responding in bodily synchronicity with laughter, tears, gasps, and coughs—could accelerate its danger. In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, written just after the end of the 1593 outbreak, the friar who's supposed to tell Romeo that Juliet is only pretending to be dead gets prevented from delivering his message because he's quarantined with a fellow priest who's been helping the sick: "The searchers of the town, / Suspecting that we both were in a house / Where the infectious pestilence did reign, / Sealed up the doors and would not let us forth." Romeo never gets the message, of course, and he kills himself before Juliet revives.

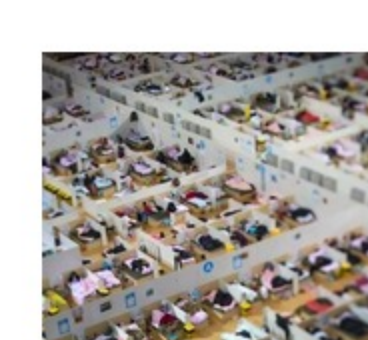
Adapting Shakespeare's play for the musical *West Side Story*, the playwright Arthur Laurents thought that a plague was too implausible a contrivance to bring about tragedy. In [Laurent's version](#), he rewrote the ending so that Maria's messenger—her cousin Anita—is rebuffed by Tony's racist pals, who assault her. You could see that assault staged in graphic detail, projected on a giant video screen in Scott Rudin's Broadway production. But as the coronavirus spreads, the quarantine plot twist that Laurents disparaged may come to seem all too plausible. And a screen may soon be the only way to see the tragedy Shakespeare understood centuries ago.


Of course, it's not only communal narratives that are being lost, but also the livelihoods of thousands of theater workers across the country. Shakespeare's model provides little solace: Write while you wait out the closure; lean on wealthy patrons for bailouts; exploit your rivals' demise. But maybe his plays themselves offer a remedy. I'd been planning to take my students at Linfield College, where I'm a Shakespeare professor, to a new adaptation of *Measure for Measure* at [Bag&Baggage Theater](#) in Oregon this weekend. Instead, we're following [the theater's lead](#): "We're continuing to wash our hands (à la *Lady Macbeth*) as frequently as we can."

The most heartening lesson from Shakespeare's era is that the playhouses will likely survive and reopen, again and again. What plays to perform when they do? There's naturally been a lot of attention to Naomi Wallace's 1997 play about the bubonic plague, *One Flea Spare*, a bitter diagnosis of gender and class divisions that rupture like one of God's tokens when strangers are quarantined together in 17th-century London. But I'd nominate a play about communities of care that form in crisis: *Water by the Spoonful*, [Quiara Alegria Hudes's](#) 2012 Pulitzer Prize winner. Hudes grew up in Philadelphia as AIDS and crack devastated her neighborhood, and the twin pincers of the Iraq War and the so-called War on Drugs rendered brown people disposable. Instead of despair, however, she offers a vision of recovery. The play is set in an online chat room for crack addicts, and then spills into the messy, physical world as virtual acquaintances learn to support one another's bodies in need. It ends with an extraordinary scene of hand-washing—not as guilty expiation or necessary precaution, but as a ritual of healing.

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