

Larchmont Chronicle: February Column

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There are times, when writing this column, I have felt more like a war correspondent than a theater critic: covering theater during the pandemic, or the invasion of Ukraine, or the Black Lives Matter protests, the #MeToo movement, last year's rains and floods, or two Presidential campaigns. This month's column is yet another report from the front.

As a result of the recent fires, already struggling theaters have announced closures, or, optimistically, postponements of plays. Artists have lost homes or had to evacuate; rehearsal and performance spaces burnt down; people died. Homeowners who have lost everything will not be responsive to box office workers selling subscriptions. Donors who might be coaxed back to the arts now have more pressing demands for support. The burnout is as much spiritual and psychological as it is physical and topographical.

As a monthly column allows for a bit of perspective, bear with me:

In 1613 Shakespeare's Globe burned down when a cannon shot, used for a special effect in *Henry VIII*, set fire to the theater's thatch roof. The theater was rebuilt a year later, but closed by the Puritans in 1644, and torn down during the interregnum of Oliver Cromwell. Charles II restored the monarchy in 1660, and brought back from his French exile a taste for indoor theaters, proscenium stages, and actresses, none of which were part of the "cruder" theater of Shakespeare's day.

However, in 1665 London was decimated by plague and the theaters were shut down. The same year, England suffered an ex-

treme weather event with a cold wet winter followed by a ten-month drought. Water was scarce. Timber was dry.

On September 2, 1666 a maid left the embers glowing in a baker's oven on Pudding Lane and by 1:00 a.m. a third of London was ablaze. Samuel Pepys, the 17th Century diarist, wrote:

"... all over the Thames... you were almost burned with a shower of firedrops. This is very true; so as houses were burned by these drops and flakes of fire, three or four, nay, five or six houses, one from another... [We] saw the fire grow; and, as it grew darker, appeared more and more, and in corners and upon steeples, and between churches and houses, as far as we could see up the hill of the City, in a most horrid malicious bloody flame, not like the fine flame of an ordinary fire: it made me weep to see it."

Nearly 200,000 Londoners spent the next few months living in tents and open fields. Over 13,000 house were destroyed, along with 87 churches and St. Paul's Cathedral. The city burned for nearly five days. But within a month the King and his special commission had approved architect Christopher Wren's plan for a new city and the rebuilding of St. Paul's.

New London would have wider streets, with houses farther apart, made from brick or stone, not timber, pitch and thatch. There would be spouts and gutters, and something called "insurance" to pay for a fire brigade.

And there would be a revival in the theater. Dryden, Congreve, Wycherly and others would write plays (mostly comedies) for an audience hungry to be entertained. Theaters were expanded. Going out was once again fashionable, expensive, and, most of all, important. Plays came to reflect the wit and resilience of the city and its people.

And London was not alone. After the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, city leaders built a massive new opera house. A month after the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, the French actress Sarah Bernhardt gave a free performance of Racine's *Phédre* for more than 5,000 survivors at the Greek Theater on the University of California campus.

It is a war, and we have lost the battle. But to paraphrase the Revolutionary War hero, John Paul Jones, "we have not yet begun to fight."

We will create. We will perform. We will applaud. And, yes... we will review!

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