
Critical COVID-19 Creative Work: Kindness, Care, and Repair

In June 2021, Peter Sellars was in Paris hoping to direct what would be his first show during the pandemic. Negotiating rehearsal times, time zones between Europe and Asia, as well as internet connectivity, he connected from his hotel room to have a conversation with Michael Earley, who was then Dean of Performing Arts at LASALLE College of the Arts. Sellars delivered the opening keynote address of *Arrhythmia: Performance Pedagogy and Practice*. His global experience, as well as the agility with which he mixes ideas and practice in his work, makes him an ideal voice to inspire the attendants to think critically about performing arts, and the world, particularly in the context of the pandemic.

The following is a curated version of the 90-minute keynote which was structured as an interactive conversation with public. Sellars charts the shifts in approach and development, temporary or lasting, that were brought on by the pandemic in his practice as a theatre maker and academic. Sellars invites us to return to the basic principle of theatre as a place to gather and heal as a community. He reflects on the most fundamental power of assembly. He reminds us to consider the possibility of theatre as a healing practice and to activate our place as performing artists in society.

Michael Earley Tell us what the effects of COVID-19 have wrought?

Peter Sellars I hope COVID-19 arrived to teach us simple and basic things about the truth of life and what it means to be alive. And to stop everything we were doing, which was too much. We had lost sight of what is actually basic. Lost sight of what was actually the most important parts of life itself. I think theatre is about actually coming down to earth again in a really powerful way.

Theatre exists for human beings and the substance of theatre *is* human beings. Every human being carries within them the seeds of such profound regeneration, this is the time, now, where the solutions to climate change and the climate emergency are not just primarily technical. Solutions are not going to come from science labs. They're going to come from human beings living and working together, differently.

Michael Earley From where do you see change coming?

Peter Sellars The change will come from human beings living together differently, sharing different levels of recognition of what is human and non-human. COVID-19 came, in part, to show us what part of your city has been neglected. COVID-19 came, I think, because the Climate Emergency said: 'I've been trying to get these people's attention on earth

and they keep sending these really strong signals.' And COVID-19 said: 'I think I can make them *stop* for a moment.' And, I believe, we're living in that moment of 'stop!'. When in a state of addiction, the only way you can force change is to stop and resolve to change crazy, out-of-control, destructive behaviour.

Michael Earley And to use your analogy to addiction, we're facing the dilemma of recovery following this arrhythmia?

Peter Sellars Yes. And that would be called theatre. That's what theatre is about: recovery and gathering together friends to help you change your life and keeping you on the wagon, on the path every time you are in danger of going off of it. And so here we all are in this extreme place. All of us—addicted and non-addicted—in denial until we all finally hit the wall. I think this past year we all heard the sound of that wall being hit. Now the question is: can we get over our addictions and can we begin to live in a way of more equity, removing issues like structural racism and structural environmental destruction?

Michael Earley Tell us about kindness, care, repair? It sounds like a kind of three-step recovery process or three-act structure?

Peter Sellars For me, those words are quite personal. One of the most intense things for me in this COVID-19 year was my father's death. With restrictions, I couldn't be there with him or anywhere near him while he was dying. He was in the second most COVID-19 hit emergency city in America, Phoenix, Arizona, while I was in the first emergency city, Los Angeles, California. You realise theatre is also about how we care for people who are not with us and how we acknowledge all the beings that we are carrying inside us.

Theatre began, most likely, in Africa and Asia as performances for the dead. As performances for people who you cannot see but who, as spirits, can see you. If you look more deeply, of course, you see them every day of your life. In the case of my father, he was with me more intensely during the week after he died than when he was in the world. That intense presence of the people we are missing, who are not in the room—the disappeared ones—help with the care and repair. The disappeared have to be acknowledged. How do you acknowledge the weight of 5,000 people who disappeared in India, just this morning, let alone your mother, your father, your sister, your daughter?

So for me one of the important projects of this year, and the coming years, is ceremonies for the people who couldn't say goodbye. What will it take to repair and reweave a structure of what makes us whole as a people, as individuals, as a society? So part of the COVID-19 year for me has been thinking about those kinds of ceremonies.

The other part of the year relates to my mother, a brilliant individual who taught English literature all over the world for decades but who now cannot read, can't write or remember. She's now living in a place that is committed to very advanced processes of memory care. These incredible new technologies are simply called 'affirmation' therapy and love. The therapy dwells not on recovering her past but affirming what she is thinking about in the present, at that very moment, and affirm it. And she has never been happier or more alive, more showered with love, with kindness.

Michael Earley

And what message do you find COVID-19 is sending to the arts?

Peter Sellars

For me, another powerful message coming out of COVID-19, but linked with the climate emergency, is we all should be living with much less. The minute you're living with less, and I mean also in theatre and the arts by practising with much less, then you realise we should not be wasting essential resources. We're living in a society of excess with waste running in every direction and we've got ourselves stuck in a place of such deep negativity.

Through theatre, we have to give reasons why we are still alive and reasons to still be alive, and with *care* to stay alive. And also simply to recognise the presence of miracles that are surrounding us every day and not just to recognise the evil, corrupt and violent elements that seem to outweigh the good of everything else.

Every morning in the Congo literally millions of mothers find a way to feed their kids even though there is no income. It is the miracle, every single day, of people fighting and living in impossible conditions. The story of theatre is the recognition of our capacities – our real capacities. Capacities that, frankly, the education system doesn't get. That a system of simply training for employment doesn't get.

We are constantly in a nightmare of an education system that trains through standardisation. And standardisation is the opposite of being human, creating inequality and racial imbalance because none of us is carrying with us the same stories, the same gifts, the same skills, the same histories or the same futures. So, to ask for us all to be the same is actually about inequality because we are not the same.

Michael Earley

Do you think that this period of intense arrhythmia we are going through, this real emergency, will reshape the way we teach the arts?

Peter Sellars

I think the arts are about how to live independently of money, how to live independently of self-importance and hierarchy, and how to address conditions of an endangered world.

Michael Earley

We have the first question from Professor Steve Dixon, President of LASALLE. He asks: 'How exactly do you think the story of theatre will change in the wake of COVID-19 and how profound and long-lasting will that change be?'

Peter Sellars

Well, you know we are facing a whole generation of practitioners without jobs and income. One of the most beautiful things to say to this current generation is do not confuse who you are with your job. They are not related. Your job is just a job. Meanwhile, who you are is a miracle. And theatre is about the miracle, it's not about the job.

One of my favourite quotes is from an old man who over several generations trained some of the best dancers in Bali. He said 'There's a difference between a good dancer, an excellent dancer and a great dancer. A good dancer knows the music, knows the moves, can execute everything perfectly. An excellent dancer knows the music, knows the moves, can execute everything perfectly *and* understands the inner meaning. But a *great* dancer knows the moves, knows the music, can execute everything perfectly, knows the inner meaning *and is a farmer*.

We are all part of society. Artists need to be part of society and not just artists. The real future of theatre is actually for it to be seen as part of the health system, the criminal justice system, the education systems, as part of all the things that are *not* exclusively about the arts. The arts should be about making everything else work.

For me, we are all in a society that is on steroids, and on stimulants and drugs because we can't face any of the predicaments that are actually tearing us apart as a society. So for me theatre is about creating that space of recognition, that space of being able to finally look at each other and stop pretending. And, little by little approach something that could be the power of a shared truth. That is to say not my truth, not your truth, but a truth that we are all able to find together and agree upon. So, I would just emphasise that for me theatre is a way to put more justice in the justice system, to put more interaction and levels of productivity into the economic system. To put in really profound levels of health in the health system.

For me, theatre is the place where you test those things that are unthinkable and then you think about them twice and you realise, why have we never thought that before? At what point does the unthinkable become thinkable? Theatre is about putting in front of people situations and alternatives that they themselves could never imagine. Theatre is about putting in front of you a vision of alternatives that have to be acted-on now because our period of reflection has come to an end. COVID-19 and, moreover, climate emergency is that great.

I just want to say, to this forum, that the level of destruction we are facing actually means you in Singapore and we in Los Angeles (and everywhere) have five years to figure this out and act without further discussion. Theatre is called action. It is actually about what it means to act—and act not alone, but together. So for me, the theatre itself is actually both the engine and the laboratory for the immediate change and movement that is required in a society that has become so profoundly institutionalised to the extent that now we have institutions, not theatres, institutions not justice, institutions not schools.

The problem with the way we have to do theatre now and do this conference via Zoom is that we are not all in the same room. The project of the 21st century is how we share: space, water, air, and resources. We need to abandon Westernised ways of thinking where we do not share, where it's about you yourself amassing everything you can for yourself.

Michael Earley

Do you think post-COVID-19 there will be a changed relationship between spectator and performer?

Peter Sellars

The short answer is yes. I believe that the society of spectatorship is over. It is now too late to create uninvolved spectatorship and come to the theatre as a mute audience who sit there with their arms folded and say, 'oh, that was very well spoken.'

We now have to be in a relationship where everyone in the room has something to do, something to say. We all have a part to play. We all actually need to come together to make something happen. And so the theatre is that place of coming together and a place of mutual and collective responsibility and sharing. That's a very dynamic model of

theatre. And I'm very happy that COVID-19 made standard theatres inoperative. Theatre actually gives us the opportunity to imagine, construct and demonstrate structures of equality in prototypical forms.

Michael Earley Given we are a conference of educators, what are the steps needed to evolve performing arts education and establish new rhythms? How can we value and nurture the individual, in spite of incessant demands for standardisation and assessment?

Peter Sellars I'm working on it in my own classes at UCLA. Every student gets an A because I just say: I am not interested in evaluating you and there's only one person who is going to evaluate you and that's you. That is to say, if you live an excellent life or if you spend your whole life trying to fake out people around you that's not an issue for me, it is your issue. And my standard of excellence doesn't matter because your standard of excellence is what this is about. And you must have a standard of excellence for yourself.

I do not read the papers or final essays. I say that the only person who can read your paper is you, ten years from now, twenty years from now. This essay is a message from your 21-year-old self to your 31-year-old self, to your 41-year-old self: who are you, what do you stand for, what do you care about and what are you going to commit your life to? Nobody can *make* you an artist, you have *to be* an artist.

I want students to be equipped to take the system apart. To understand not just the political and moral problems that artists face but the wider cultural problems that underlie all politics. For me, education is not me giving somebody the answer to something or them coming up with an answer that I agree with. It's about life telling you that you have to find your own answers.

And you have to look deep inside yourself to find those answers. And that's who you are and that's what we're really hoping to do in education. To just say, please look as deeply as possible into who you are and then look up and see everyone else differently, because they are not who you think they are. What we're talking about is not a job. We're talking about your life work. Why are you on earth?

Every single action is a global action. Theatre is about recognising the consequence, the immense consequence and resonance, of every human action. That is what the Ancient Greek and Chinese plays are about, that's what Shakespeare is about. Every human gesture resonates through an entire kingdom, through an entire ecosystem. And so theatre is just creating that awareness of the power of every gesture to do either more damage or to heal. And right now we need healing.

Michael Earley An interesting comment comes from our Provost [and Editor of ISSUE], Venka Purushothaman who in the Zoom chat of this session says that clearly there is a need for social and creative correction at this point. That the gap between society and the arts has widened, formalised into an arena of transactional joy. COVID-19 has shown no sympathy for this at all. He says: "I'm reminded that in many Asian traditions death is intertwined with rebirth; letting go is as important as being together." So, he asks, to rebirth the arts following all this arrhythmia, what might constitute the possible?

- Peter Sellars That's so beautifully put. What constitutes the possible is the impossible. What we do in theatre and where we start from is impossible. I always hear: 'Oh, we cannot do this. We cannot do it, no, that would be impossible.' You know, the minute anybody says to me that it would be impossible, I say, 'How do we do it, then?'
- Michael Earley Another question from the audience: How is the political question separate from a cultural question, especially when the politics of culture is intertwined with the politics of education? Particularly in post-colonial contexts where there is still a prevalence of white and Western culture being prioritised and valorised?
- Peter Sellars Thank you for saying that. That is literally the problem. Step one: in all cultural spaces, we have to prioritise *other* voices. So for me, one of the things about the standard white view of everything is that it's very good at articulating itself, and so it actually ignores the greater part of the world that doesn't speak English. And not just the world of human beings but the natural world of trees, plants, water and air. There is a beautiful line in a Buddhist Sutra that says holy liberation is in the equality of all things: water, air, animals, people. How do we live in balance with each other, with the environment? We're looking for the equilibrium that represents the equation that is equality.
- Michael Earley Someone asks what is an impossible, unthinkable thing that you are trying to work through now, in your own work or in the way you're talking to students or how you're interacting with others?
- Peter Sellars It's hard to get too specific. In theatre one of the reasons that I do not let people come into rehearsals is because every space that we inhabit is so damned public. Most people need a private space to work things out. So, for me, one of the most important things theatre offers is the process of making protected zones. Most people need a protected zone to work out issues. Most people are not ready for prime time. Most of us actually need the space to make our mistakes, to not be judged and to simply express something that we feel very uncomfortable expressing. So a lot of my work is working with performers or participants in a project who have very, very, difficult things to work through. I have to first create this private space where they work through their own most painful issues to become incredible. Every night you're watching a human being facing something that they have feared their whole life and you see them master it right in front of you. And every night that person relives the moment that finally arrived in the fourth week of rehearsal, where they could face something and they could discover something that again I could never have told them.
- Michael Earley We've got a final group of questions about institutional listening. And about how to manage the patriarchy and the colonial systems that this region of the world, for instance, has inherited.
- Peter Sellars This last summer, in response to the George Floyd and Breonna Taylor murders, my summer class at UCLA, which had 300 students, created together a new curriculum and course called 'Daily Abolitionists Practice'. It was in response to the curriculum we felt was out of date. I said to the class, you know as of this summer, every single curriculum in this university is badly out of date. And it all needs totally rewriting. So step one is we have to recognise that a university is like a movement.



Peter Sellars
Photo: Ruth Watz

We are not just at adjoining desks. This is a movement when you're on the streets together. In a community organising movement, you are not just responsible for yourself but you are also responsible for three people next to you. And you're not learning from the person in the front of the room you're learning from each other. So why not invite the students to start teaching, really creating that sense that the learning is not from me to them, but from them to each other. For me, educational reform is about activating students as activists and teachers. Every act you do in this classroom is taking responsibility for the state of the world. Suddenly the stakes are higher than getting a good grade.

So, for me, this shifting the way energies move and the way responsibility moves is really what education is all about and putting students into real positions of responsibility, because they are responsible.

Michael Earley

Peter let us end on that final thought. To come over the next two days are seminars and panels, which are going to feature students talking about their experiences of arrhythmia and, I think, your powerful opening words will prompt our further talks and discussions. Thank you so much for opening *Arrhythmia* and it's been wonderful having you join us from Paris. Thank you, too, for taking time away from your rehearsals to speak with us.

Peter Sellars

Thank you. And maybe I can leave you all with a final thought related to the state we find ourselves in: as human beings—and this is what Greek tragedy is about—crisis is our friend. Crisis is actually the time we have to get honest and so, wow, let's get honest!