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You and your family are feeling the pandemic. I am feeling the pandemic. The whole world is feeling the pandemic. Whether through the suffering that comes with the sickness, the fear of contracting the virus, the loneliness of isolation, the anxiety of the dire economic consequences of this pandemic, or the separation from family and loved ones, the pandemic has gnawed away at any sense of community.

Here in El Progreso, that means that we've seen conditions that must resemble WWII conditions in Europe. We've seen a strict curfew and stay-at-home orders evolve into a near state of siege. We've experienced shortages—water cut-offs, closed shops, closed banks, closed pharmacies, closed post office, closed hardware stores. We've seen food riots in Choloma, San Pedro and Tegucigalpa. We have gone through periods with no gasoline, no buses, no airport activity, no taxis (no legal taxis, at least—the black market in taxis seems to be quite active).

For a while, El Progreso was an eerily silent city. And the teatro was also silent, with no public performances.

But I've looked back at some of my theater history, and that history offers me hope.

Shakespeare, for example, was born into the plague. He came into the world during the outbreak of 1564-65, and lived his entire life through recurring outbreaks of plague. He lost three siblings and one child to plague. During his most active theater years, London experienced at least five severe outbreaks of the plague. Between 1603 and 1610, London theater was shuttered on order of health authorities much, much more frequently than it was operating.

Shakespeare wrote the plague into one of the key plot points in Western literature. In *Romeo and Juliet*, a Franciscan friar is carrying a crucial message to Romeo. The message explains that Juliet's death is a ruse, the result of a sleeping drug that will wear off. But local authorities quarantine the friar because he has been "in a house/Where the infectious pestilence did reign." The friar can't get the message to Romeo, who finds Juliet's seemingly lifeless body and despairs. Romeo kills himself, and when Juliet awakens, she finds Romeo dead. And she kills herself.

But for the plague, the message reaches Romeo. Romeo and Juliet live happily ever after, and their Brit TV sitcom, *Renaissance Family*, is currently in syndication on Netflix.

Beyond the theater, I found another interesting nugget of plague trivia. You may remember this statement about the breakdown of social order, which is one of the most famous passages in English letters:

In such condition, there is...no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.

Thomas Hobbes, the author of those bleak words, was about 25 years younger than Shakespeare and lived to see the “Great” Plague of London in 1669. By the time he had written these words in 1651, he had lived through numerous major outbreaks of the plague.

Yes, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short might describe the current social order in Honduras. But the good news implicit in both these stories is that the plague passes, and that artists keep doing their art even in times of plague.

So Teatro la Fragua is now doing theater in times of plague.

Since live performances are outlawed, we have begun to produce stories that fit into the new ordinary. We have streamed some video of our previous work, but our most intriguing project has been to develop radio plays. We’ve had to learn. We’ve adapted to the distinct requirements of radio—especially audio control. This took some intention: the teatro building was never designed to be soundproof, and ambient sound has always served as rhythmic continuo behind teatro rehearsals and performances: rain, frogs, birds, cicadas, falling almonds crashing onto our tin roof, the high-pitched metallic screech of the power tools at the machine shop of the Jesuit technical school next door.

But we endured. We decided to produce three radio plays for children: The Lorax from the Dr. Seuss book, The Wolf’s Reasons, a version of an old Italian tale about St. Francis of Assisi and the Wolf of Gubbio, and The Rose-Colored Slippers. These works will become a children’s radio theatre festival, broadcast over Radio Progreso, the Jesuit radio station here. Our first broadcast is slated for September 10—the International Day of the Child—so by the time you read this, the teatro should already have taken this next step.

A radio play won’t rid us of the pestilence. It won’t cure a single person of Covid-19. But it may ease the loneliness of a child’s quarantine. It will demonstrate that despair is not the only response to desperate times. It will bring some joy to the world. It may inspire hope in a people whose faith and love have survived the plagues of hunger, and violence, and corruption for many years.

Please join us. Your gift will help ease some of the anxiety and become part of that hope. And you will accompany us as we get one step closer to the end of this plague.

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