

## Heike Roms, 'Notes from Lockdown'

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As I am writing this, the United Kingdom has been in lockdown for exactly twelve weeks. We joined the near-universal European domestic sheltering against COVID-19 on the 23 March. By then, the UK already had a higher level of infection than other European countries when they took that step. For weeks, the Tory government had been pursuing 'herd immunity', asking the British public, in the words of Prime Minister Boris Johnson, to 'take it on the chin' – a phrase that betrays a deeply-seated sense of British exceptionalism. But the estimated number of deaths such a policy would have caused was just too large; and the National Health Service, hollowed out by years of austerity-driven underfunding, was too close to breaking point. And so the country shut down, and we stayed home. Already too late as it turned out: the UK currently has the highest excess death rate globally, and public confidence in the handling of the crisis by a government that likes to cast itself as populist is at an all-time low.

Universities are expected to be among the sectors worst affected by the economic impact of COVID-19. British universities are heavily reliant on fee income from international students, and they are anxiously waiting to see if these students will stay away this year. Many employees in Higher Education are in insecure employment. When COVID-19 hit the UK, university staff were in the midst of a lengthy industrial dispute about pay and pensions, excessive workloads and casualisation; since, hundreds on precarious contracts have lost their job. Theatre and performance studies seem especially vulnerable; whether future teaching will take place online, 'blended' or in-person but socially distanced, our pedagogies will have to be reshaped, and not all institutions will support the labour and resources needed for such a reshaping.

Theatre and performance practice is at even greater risk. Many theatres, festivals and companies have responded imaginatively to the crisis by streaming their archives and reaching new audiences or making new work for digital platforms. But performance spaces remain closed for now; and no-one knows when they might reopen. And when they do, many will not survive the cut to their audience capacity if social distance measures are implemented; like the country's universities, theatres in the UK are far more income-dependent than their European counterparts in receipt of large public subsidy. Freelance performance makers, on the other hand, are falling altogether through the economic safety nets put in place by the government.

As I am writing this, over the past two weeks, the United Kingdom has seen a breaking of the lockdown as people have taken to the streets in protest against racism and for social justice. Theatre and performances scholars and makers too are challenged to confront our involvement in legacies of white privilege and structural injustice. And I am filled with hope that this may turn out to be the more transformative change to have emerged from these most extraordinary few months.

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