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Democracy Dies in Darkness

How imperiled is our democracy? 'The Race' wants you to weigh in.

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“What’s keeping me sane is not winning debates,” Michael Rohd says. “It’s imagining futures.”

Which is why “The Race” is back. The brainchild of Phoenix-based Rohd and his Sojourn Theatre, this exercise in civic theater made its debut at Georgetown University a dozen years ago, on the eve of another catch-your-breath election. On Tuesday at 5 p.m. Eastern time, it opens its virtual doors for free through the auspices of Georgetown’s Laboratory for Global Performance and Politics for 90 minutes of scripted and spontaneous commentary with an online audience. Not to replicate what’s on cable news, but to help to define, through theater, what democracy means today.

“In 2008, the conversation of ‘The Race’ was about what a leader looks like,” says Derek Goldman, the lab’s co-director and chairman of performing arts at Georgetown. “Almost by definition this time, this moment is about the system, and who it serves.”

More than a decade ago, “The Race” was in the vanguard of an effort by theater makers to engage audiences collaboratively in discourse on issues of the day. The practice has become far more prevalent: Witness the Broadway success of “What the Constitution Means to Me,” in which Heidi Schreck invites the audience to vote nightly on the results of a debate on the document between her and a teenage student. (It’s now on Amazon Prime, in a filmed version directed splendidly by Marielle Heller.)

“The Race” in 2008 — and in some iterations around the country in subsequent election cycles — gathered spectators in theaters to explore their views of participatory democracy, partly through improvisatory skits: One feature was “Presidential Speech Karaoke,” in which audience members volunteered to stand and read portions aloud of actual candidate speeches off teleprompters. Initially, the plan was to revive the in-person format for the new Georgetown version, but covid-19 scuttled that proposal, as it has hundreds of other live theater events.

The fallback is this online version, in which five actors from the original production, who were Georgetown undergraduates in 2008, plus eight current students, lead viewers through some dramatized playlets. It’s all in service of prompting civil dialogue. “This is an adaptive vision to sort of say, ‘What can we do that is meaningful in this moment to rekindle what made ‘The Race 2008’ exciting?’” Goldman says. Rohd adds: “The goal of the show is for people to be open to having a conversation about things they may disagree on publicly.”

Another element will incorporate remote contributions from six of the lab’s international theater fellows — from Vietnam, South Africa, Mexico and other places — to generate talk about a subject Americans rarely consider: how the rest of the world sees the race for the presidency. “I got to spend three hours talking with them,” Rohd says of the fellows, who will lead groups of the audience in virtual breakout-room discussions. “I asked: ‘As folks not living in the U.S., what do you wish we were thinking about in this country?’”

The experience of collectively contemplating the impact of an election can be moving, and agonizing, Rohd says. Four years ago, he staged an eight-hour election-night version of “The Race” at Arizona State University, where he teaches civic practice and theater. Bulletins from CNN appeared on a jumbotron, and the participants watched as the early indications of a victory by Hillary Clinton shifted to ever-clearer signs of Donald Trump’s win. For Clinton partisans,