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Disney during COVID-19: The tourist and the actor's nightmare

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Abstract

In this essay, we argue that the experience of being at Disney theme parks in COVID times was a waking version of what is sometimes called “The Actor’s Nightmare.” Due to safety regulations, theme parks either dropped live entertainment that structures the day as a show with a clear beginning and end (e.g. park-opening rope drop performances, and the fireworks), attempted to include references to COVID in live entertainment (like in the *Frozen Ever After* singalong, which added some COVID jokes), or to ignore it (like the *Festival of the Lion King*). In any case, due to these measures the narrative story of a theme park visit crumbles and the often-cited difference between a “theme park” and an “amusement park” disintegrates: the dissolution of structure provokes anxiety and unease in guests, especially those with previous park experience; the silencing of audiences that had previously been scripted to participate similarly creates a form of narrative anxiety, as both park and tourist no longer knew what story they were telling, or how best to tell it. Disney’s dramaturgical choices in COVID times reveal the extent to which the narrative structure of a theme park visit, the participation of the theme park visitors, and the distinction between “theme park” and “amusement park” rely on live entertainment.

Keywords: Disney; Epcot; tourism; performance; *Frozen*; *Festival of the Lion King*

1. Introduction

An actor costumed as the character Stitch cavorted on an otherwise empty stage in the Tomorrowland area of Disney’s Magic Kingdom in Florida. Stitch danced around, made silly gestures, and waggled his bottom irreverently at the crowd. Nearby a park attendant stood, ostensibly to keep tourists from approaching too closely. Instead, the tourists half-heartedly took selfies in front of the distant character, relegating the performer to an Instagram background (Kokai, 2020). The character visit, a usually highly scripted private highlight of Disney park trips, was reduced to a rushed, impersonal photograph obtained by those passing by.

Walt Disney World during COVID offered many of these and similar attempts to provide live performances safely. This led to incongruous moments like princesses from all times and locations rolling by together in a plexiglass divided trolley car, instead of appearing on specifically designed parade floats, or as Victoria Petterson Lantz (2021) observed, the character of Joy from the movie *Inside Out* dancing alone in a fenced field. Characters were removed from any contextual theming or presentation, ripped out of carefully constructed environments that typically help construct interpretation. Similarly, Disney eliminated events that typically structured guests’ days – a performance to celebrate opening “rope drop,” a fireworks show that signalled the conclusion – to minimize crowds gathering closely.

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There is a common nightmare for theatre professionals: “The Actor’s Nightmare.” You find yourself onstage with no preparation. You don’t know your lines, your movement, the plot, anything. Previously, we have argued for the ways themed entertainments construct tourists as actors (Kokai & Robson, 2019). In this essay, we argue that the experience of being at Disney theme parks in COVID stages a waking version of this nightmare. Without live entertainment, both through character meets and through the large performance events, the narrative story of a theme park visit crumbles. This dissolution of structure provokes anxiety and unease in guests. Further, the parks themselves struggled to know what story to tell in a global catastrophe, creating a form of narrative anxiety, as both park and tourist no longer knew what story they were telling, or how best to tell it. With visitors unsure how to participate in the story, or even if they should, the often-cited difference between a “theme park” and an “amusement park” disintegrated.

Numerous scholars have articulated the difference between these two spaces. Citing the prospectus for Euro Disneyland (later Disneyland Paris), which identifies amusement parks as “presenting a random collection of roller coasters, merry-go-rounds and Ferris wheels in a carnival atmosphere,” Alan Bryman (1995) notes that the unifying elements of theme distinguish a Disney Park from these older, less organized models (p.64). Bryman (1995) makes note of how, in its early years, Disneyland avoided attractions like roller coasters, hot dog carts, and beer stands to create an even stronger differentiation between the standard amusement park and a Disney theme park. Scott Lukas (2008) describes the “architecture of persuasion” (p.69) required for an amusement park to achieve theme park status, emphasizing David Lowenthal’s (2002) ideas that theme park patrons “crave imagined locales more than ... actual ones” (p.18). Consistent throughout the literature surrounding the difference between an amusement park and a theme park are a few core ideas: organization, story, and immersion.

2. “Talk about social distancing!”

The intrusion of COVID into the Disney theme park narrative was perhaps most textually evident inside the Hollywood Studios attraction “*For the First Time in Forever: A Frozen Sing-Along Celebration*.” This 30-minute entertainment event features a cast of five performers, with the animated feature’s Anna, Elsa, and Kristoff joined by two new characters, Aria and Eric, described as “The Royal Historians of Arendelle” (Walt Disney World). Aria and Eric summarize the plot of the hit 2013 movie, embellishing their telling of the tale with jokes – many of them improvised – and lead the audience in singing along to the movie’s hit songs.

A mid-May 2021 performance of “For the First Time in Forever” included multiple COVID jokes delivered by the Royal Historians. Comparing observed experience in the theatre with YouTube videos of other performances since the onset of the pandemic, it becomes apparent that the show has been structured in specific places to reference COVID. The most prominent, and jarring, comes around four minutes into the show. As Historian Eric excitedly races further in his synopsis of the story than Historian Aria wants, she tells him to “back it up,” meaning that he should stop rushing ahead. Eric physicalizes this backing up by moving closer to her before she calls out some version of “Stop! Six feet!” (Blog Mickey, 2020). Some version of this joke appears in nearly every recorded version of *For the First Time in Forever* from the pandemic era (AUNTYVAL, 2021; Taming the ‘Explorer,’ 2021; ThePresidentialTourist, 2021; Tokki, 2021). Reminding guests in a nearly at capacity theatre, some of whom are surely deeply nervous about being in a room full of people singing, one of the single most dangerous aerosolizing activities, this use of social distancing as punchline undermined the themed experience (Tsioulcas, 2020).

The COVID references continued throughout the performance, with regular instructions to “wear your face coverings,” and “just don’t let go of your face coverings.” A common joke is “talk about social distancing” in reference to Elsa running off to isolation in her ice palace. Near the show’s conclusion, immediately after praising the “Citizens of the Kingdom of Hollywoodland” for how well they sang the Arendelle “anthems,” Eric regularly adds a line about how “amazing” the audience looks in their face coverings.

3. Or maybe don’t talk about it?

If the overriding principle of a theme park is its insistence on maintaining a coherent fantasy world, having characters from the fictional land of Arendelle turn the ongoing and frightening global medical catastrophe into entertainment text disrupted that unity. As Florian Freitag argues elsewhere in this issue, “the pandemic cannot simply be ‘excluded’ from the parks ... and remains constantly visually present, thus seriously undermining the

parks' efforts to keep their grounds rigidly separated from the rest of the world." Lukas (2008) applies the Wagnerian notion of *Gesamtkunstwerk* to the early Coney Island venue Luna Park but incorporating COVID into *Frozen* unspooled the Wagnerian unification of art and replaced it with a near-Brechtian sense of *Verfremdungseffekt*, or estrangement from the fictional world being presented (see Kelly, 2020).

Changes to Animal Kingdom's show "The Festival of the Lion King," on the other hand, avoided this estrangement textually but introduced it through omission and elision. The highly regarded show (Coffey, 2021) is intentionally immersive in its design and dramaturgy, performed in the round with audience on four sides, and typically includes four performers singing music from the movie with a variety of interludes – acrobats known as "Tumble Monkeys," ballet dancers doing an aerial act, and a fire eater. Each of the four sections of the audience was originally aligned with an animal – giraffe, elephant, lion, and warthog – and one of the four main performers. The sections were encouraged to see themselves as "teams," with their section leader exhorting them to loudly make the noise of their assigned animal in competition with the other sections for who could produce the most volume. At the end of the performance, the entire audience was invited to sing along in designated ways to the song "The Lion Sleeps Tonight."

The show closed due to the pandemic on March 12, 2020, and remained so until May 15, 2021, when it reopened as "A Celebration of the Festival of the Lion King." This abridged version removed the Tumble Monkeys and omitted the aerial portion of the ballet, as well as almost all the audience participation elements. Instead of making animal noises or singing together, the only moment of audience participation was the half-hearted instruction to "wave your arms" during the final song. A blogger from *The DIS* also noted the absence of a parade of small children: "the performers would take kids from the audience – who wanted to participate – to the stage area for a little parade around the theater. The kids were given different types of instruments to shake as they paraded around. Unfortunately, that part did not happen at all..." (Gailey, 2021). Out of necessity – limiting projected speech from the audience – the performance has been reconfigured from including the audience to distancing the audience. Even the show title itself makes the new performance aims clear; it is not "The Festival of the Lion King." Falassi (1987) tells us that festivals are typically a community created participatory event with few hierarchical distinctions upheld. It is "A Celebration of the Festival of the Lion King" – a show celebrating an absent show, and ultimately it serves largely as a reminder of the pre-COVID theme park experience. Performers are distant and grounded where they used to soar; audiences are quiet and masked where they used to roar. The immersive, participatory nature that guided this show's conception vanishes, replaced by a much more conventional – and ultimately much less satisfying – theatre-going experience.

4. Conclusion

To be clear, we are not arguing that the pre-COVID Disney was a utopic example of Rancière's (2007) notion of emancipated spectatorship, where the audience is a liberated, active equal participant in their experience. The use of audience participation was no doubt a way to center the consumer and guest in their own individual visit experience, to make them feel more valuable and necessary in the exchange. However, live performances using trained entertainers, whether large or small, were a space where the tourist was able to accept, reject, or negotiate improvisatory relationships with Disney performers in role rather than passively observing them. Performances all began with thematic invitations: let's remember the movie *Frozen* together, let's celebrate the importance of dreams and the dream come true day we had through this fireworks performance.

With these invitations gone, the tourist is no longer being offered a relationship, a relationship with a costumed character it is their prized turn to meet, within the dramaturgy of the shows themselves, or with the narrated structured day of a theme park visit. The lack of invitation means that tourists spend most of their time not sure how to interpret their visit. Is it escapist, but if so why is Arendelle dealing with COVID? Is it immersive, but if so why must we be carefully silent and contained? If a day long experience is worth the high ticket price, where are events that bookend it for us? Is it acceptable, essentially, to be visiting a theme park during a global pandemic? Much as Disney's budgetary needs say yes, Disney's dramaturgical choices say probably not.

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