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Performance Review of The Coronavirus Time Capsule

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Performance Review of *The Coronavirus Time Capsule*

Streamed at companythree.co.uk

Initiated by Company Three

215 groups.

18 countries.

3,225 teenagers.

1,735 videos.

One amazing record of lockdown.

This is *The Coronavirus Time Capsule*. A unique insight into teenagers' perspectives on life in lockdown. As the founder and Co-Artistic Director of London-based theater company Waterloo Community Theatre (WCT) I am intrigued by this piece of performance art, not simply because a few of WCT's members took part in the project, but because of what it is: compelling story-telling on a global scale. Yet as the viewer I feel like I am being let into the secret world of teenagers and that they are talking directly to *me*.

As theater-makers co-creating with young people, we are used to performing in front of live audiences in our community. However, these are not usual times. The pandemic has not only stopped the performance industry in its tracks but has also made creating work with young people and sharing it with audiences impossible. We are used to meeting in a physical space and exploring, questioning, investigating, conversing, and playing games together, finding creative ways of sharing the stories that matter to young people with members of our community. Alas, this has not been possible for many months. But that does not mean that the need to create the work has ceased; in fact, I would argue, it has become ever more urgent. We know from research that the arts can have a positive effect on mental health. We also know that concerns for young people's mental health are on the rise, yet we do not see or hear much from young people themselves. Young people's voices are simply not represented in the daily COVID-19 discourse. The notion of not being seen or heard is echoed by a young person's view on the Coronavirus pandemic as reported in an article about how COVID-19 has affected youth theaters during the Coronavirus pandemic: "My friends and I talk about the coronavirus all the time. But our views are not on the news... we are invisible."¹

This changed dramatically with *Coronavirus Time Capsule*, which is aimed at giving "teenagers space to express themselves, to feel they are being heard and to express what life under lockdown looks like."² And this is why this piece of online performance is so important. It is not theater in the traditional sense. It is story-telling about the here and now, about real lives in real time, in a virtual space accessible from anywhere in the world. It is story-telling through rap, song, poetry, spoken word—there are no rules, and the young people own the space.

Coronavirus Time Capsule, a project initiated by London-based young people's theater company Company Three has brought the voices of young people from across the globe to the fore. It is a collaboration on an extraordinary scale as evidenced from the vast number of organisations taking part from all corners of the world—from Croatia, Spain and the Netherlands to the United States (to name but a few), alongside numerous British companies. And the result is gripping.

The Time Capsule is entered through a portal on the Company Three website, and you are welcomed with a "Best Bits" compilation video: a selection of funny, heart-warming, creative, political, silly and sad moments in teenagers' lives during lockdown. It gives us a glimpse into the struggles as seen through the eyes of teenagers: the anxiety, the isolation, the monotony. But it also highlights the achievements and the joy: delivering hand-written messages, Zoom-parties, discovering new ways of keeping fit or making healthy foods. It is about how these young people are experiencing the world right here and right now, celebrating their creativity and resilience in a time of extreme adversity. Facing the universal challenges and difficulties of the last year through the voices and lived experiences of teenagers from across the globe fills the viewer with a great sense of hope for the future. This is our generation of policy makers and politicians, of teachers and doctors, of parents to the next generation. They are clued up and switched on and it is about time adults start listening to them.

All partaking theater companies and youth groups have interpreted the weekly brief set by Company Three in their own way, but what is palpable throughout watching them all is the young people's determination to keep connected and staying positive, even in the darkest, most challenging times. In *Week 5: Social Distancing*, Tron Theatre in Scotland, to the tones of Iggy Pop's *Lust for Life*, gives us their version of the famous introductory scene in *Trainspotting*: "Choose life, choose your family, choose video-calling your friends to get some form of social interaction, choose sitting in front of the TV all day because there is nothing better to do, choose

life.” If that is not a positive perspective, I do not know what is! The production is DIY, presumably filmed on the young people’s phones, but unsteady camera-work or glitches in sound are irrelevant; it adds to the authenticity of the narratives.

Company Three are no strangers to working closely with researchers and academics; when making their acclaimed piece *Brainstorm*, they consulted cognitive neuroscientist Professor Sarah-Jayne Blakemore. This time around they are collaborating with the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama to track and evaluate the wider impact of the *Coronavirus Time Capsule* project and will publish findings of the research in due course. However, a member of Waterloo Community Theatre who took part in the project testifies that it was “a great form of escapism at a time of madness” and that it provided them with creativity at a time when they were “not involved in any theater-making”. This suggests a positive impact on a personal level, and while this is a successful outcome by any measurement, it is equally important to consider the greater and wider impact this collection of voices has potential to have in this virtual space.

A time capsule is, according to the Cambridge online dictionary, a “container that is filled with objects considered to be typical of the present period in history and then buried, so it can be dug up and studied much later.” *Coronavirus Time Capsule*’s container is a virtual space filled not with objects, but with testimonies of how these times are experienced by those not represented elsewhere. “We are gonna film ourselves so we remember what it was like” they proclaim in *Week 1: The Beginning*, and this virtual time capsule does just that; it captures young people’s experiences of these unusual times for the young people themselves to be able to look back upon and remember. However, what it also has potential to do through a virtual space is speak to a wider audience and increase understanding of young people’s lives, and thus begin to change the ingrained and tiresome narrative of young people as “lazy.”³ As an example, while 68 percent of young people have participated in forms of social action, only five percent of adults hold the belief that young people today are likely to do any form of social action,⁴ suggesting an enormous discrepancy in how adults perceive young people to how young people actually act and behave. The *Coronavirus Time Capsule*, a library of young people’s experiences and thoughts during a time when their voices are not represented in the Coronavirus discourse, is an excellent example how theater can be a truly effective tool for social change.

This global collaboration “represents a beginning of a network of youth drama groups united by their beliefs that youth theatre is, more than ever, a vital place for community and expression

where young people can be listened to and supported.”⁵ (Company Three 2020)^s. But above all, it serves as a reminder for all theater-makers to take risks and to be creative with how we share our work in the absence of physical spaces, and the impact our work can have in this new virtual world.

While Company Three are already working on their next global collaboration, *Coronavirus Time Capsule* has inspired Waterloo Community Theatre to think outside the box about how we can share our work in different and unusual ways. Ways in which we are not used to but that are exciting and have potential to reach farther and wider than we ever would have thought was possible.

¹ Miriam Gillinson, “‘Our views are not on the news’: young people speak up on Covid-19”. *The Guardian* (2020). Accessed February 4, 2021.

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2020/jun/29/our-views-are-not-on-the-news-the-children-and-teens-covid-19-theatre>

² Lucy Cotter. “Coronavirus: Teenagers create video time capsule to fight lockdown angst”. *Sky News* (2020). Accessed Feb 4, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2020/jun/29/our-views-are-not-on-the-news-the-children-and-teens-covid-19-theatre>

³ Shackleton, Olivia. “The Lazy Generation”. *Medium* (2020). Accessed February 4, 2021. <https://medium.com/change-your-mind/the-lazy-generation-76f8a7e85d39>

⁴ Laura Partridge, Julian Astle, Sam Grinsted, and Fran Landreth Stron. “Teenagency: How young people can create a better world” (2018). RSA Action and Research Centre. Accessed February 4, 2021. <https://www.thersa.org/globalassets/pdfs/reports/teenagency.pdf>

⁵ “Company Three” (2020). Accessed February 4, 2021. <https://www.coronavirustimecapsule.com/about>