<u>Story Wars</u>
By William Missouri Downs

Michael Foley writes in his must-read book *The Age of Absurdity*, "Stories reduce, sweeten, package and gift-wrap experience. They tend to smooth away all that is ragged, tangled, complicated, paradoxical, inconsistent, inconclusive, insignificant and sordid – in other words, everything that is most characteristic of everyday life." All stories are a simplification of life. Stories streamline the randomness of existence down to a level we can understand, which allows us to create tidy structures and thus meaning. A story can draw society together. It can be the seed that grows into social change. Stories can also comfort, reassure and entertain.

Today, unlike any other time in history, we are awash in stories. Newspapers, TV shows, and 24-hour news channels are merely story delivery systems. Politicians are just rival storytellers. The Home Shopping Network and advertisements for magical weight loss pills are both simply stories. Conspiracy theories are stories. Biographies, autobiographies, historical fiction, and history are stories. Religious wars are wars over story. The Kardashians are master storytellers. Story is so important today that MBA (Master of Business Administration) programs add storytelling classes to their degrees, and corporations hire storytelling officers. Look around you; most people today are charging at windmills that they believe to be dragons but are, in fact, only stories.

Into this worldwide storyland comes the art of playwriting. An art that's as old-fashioned as letter writing. If you think about it, it's an art that's rather fanciful in today's

digitally connected world. How could *Romeo and Juliet* take place in the modern world of dating apps? No algorithm would match a Montague with a Capulet. William Inge's play *Bus Stop* wouldn't happen either because the driver would've checked his weather app before setting out, thus avoiding the snowstorm that traps and enlightens the characters. A quick check of 23andMe.com would've saved Oedipus a lot of messy self-realization. All these apps make it so the audience only experience the recycled stories they approve of. The internet's algorithms help us avoid people who don't think like us and stories we disagree with. People are becoming driverless cars with no idea how to deal with uncharted territory. Our apps and search engines do not allow us to stumble upon the unknown, get lost, or go someplace that hasn't been pre-mapped for us. Religion maps our salvation; porn maps our lovemaking; television shows such as *Law and Order* map our ideas about law and order.

In his book, *Solitude*, Michael Harris writes, "…you become trapped inside an algorithmically defined notion of your own tastes. Put in a less wonky way: you won't be exposed to things you don't know, things you haven't loved yet. Personal growth becomes stunted, and the idea of what you 'like' grotesquely caricatured." Yet to write a good play, you must let your audience, like your protagonist, enter uncharted territory; this is not possible if you, as do some writers today, use crowd-sourcing and artificial intelligence to help you read your audience so you can write prepackaged stories that reaffirming their preconceived values. Playwriting is old fashioned because it's *not* an algorithm. It's a uniquely individual voice artistically stating how the world is and/or should be in front of a live audience.

The theatre was wounded but survived the invention of the movies, it limped through the television age, but can it survive

in a world where story is available everywhere at the touch of a button? Can it survive tweets, Instagram, Facebook, the metaverse, and people who substitute emojis for real emotions? Can it survive a world in which people would rather text than talk? A world in which, when the audience is asked to turn off their phones at the beginning of act one, they talk about "disconnection anxiety" at intermission? Can it find a voice in the modern world's story wars?

Today's playwrights must confront challenges that no playwright in the history of the theatre has faced. Not only is our audience distracted and algorithmically limited, but they're also divided because they are fed a constant diet of "us" against "them" stories. There are lots of isms but perhaps the ism that playwrights need to create now is a new humanism that promotes understanding. A theatre where we become them, and they become us - a new theatre that de-otherizes the audience. In short, you are up against a lot, and the stories you tell can connect or divide us; use your power wisely.