Hi friends,

Sam here. Thanks for having me. When Jane asked me to lead a music theater project in the fall, I initially hesitated. What will fall 2020 even look like? Do we need to do theater at all? I have a lot of thoughts about this...with no true answers. In the end, the impossibilities and unknowns felt too exciting to ignore and now here we are.

I am obsessed with death. I don’t know how to talk about it. I am afraid of it. I am surrounded by it. I am surprised by it even when I am expecting it.

And --

We are all absorbing a lot of death these days.

So I’m wondering if we can make something together that pokes at death: as a force, as an idea, as a relentlessly present shadow and source of both terror and power. A project that rolls around in loss and what it means, marking its effects - sometimes heartbreaking, sometimes hilarious, often foggy, incomplete, or awkward. Something that savors being alive as much as it remembers what is gone. We’ll make tiny acts of love + reckoning: to ourselves, to each other, to our communities, to those that came before us.

Also, because this year provides so many uniquenesses, I wonder if we can make something that engages the exact parts of our brains and bodies that would so LOVE to be making live theater together in a room but can’t. Something that isn’t constantly reminding us of what it isn’t but rather what it is. Something that doesn’t fake it. Something that isn’t set up to let us down.

But it doesn’t exist yet and words are cheap. So I’ve tried to think it out a little more to help you know what you’re getting into. Those thoughts are below, and they’re just a start. Please reach out to me directly if you have any questions.

With terror + excitement,

Sam
Untitled Music-Driven-Death-Related-Online-Archive-Project At Princeton That We Are Making Together Just As The World Cracks Open (Let’s call it THR451 for now, because that’s going to look great on a marquee.)

Maybe you’ve been thinking about that one aunt who loved doing the electric slide.

Maybe you just heard about what happened to that kid from camp on the news.

Maybe you really just want to sing “Proud Mary” with your grandma in the driveway.

THR451 is an investigative, performance-driven process that will attempt to joyously uplift + celebrate lives before they ended. Created remotely during an ongoing global pandemic, this living archive of the dead offers spaces for proposals, reflections, indictments, celebrations, and imagined alternatives to a world that has been numbed by an ambush of death. The eventual micro-projects will be viewable in any order, at any time, from anywhere.

We will do this mostly with singing and dancing.

We will take this investigation on with joy and silliness. We will lean into the absurdity of both lived and imagined worlds. If it helps, we will think of this as a work of science fiction.

So it’s like a play on zoom about death? No, this is not zoom theater. I repeat, WE ARE NOT DOING A PLAY ON ZOOM. Think of it as a collection of music videos / performance nuggets that run between one and ten minutes. Some may be solo projects, others group projects. Some may be big dance numbers. Others might be you alone in your closet reciting a poem into your phone. All of it will embrace our fried attention spans and the splintered ways of working that reality now requires.

So where do we start? While no process can be all things to all people, this process will attempt to begin by asking participants what do you want to do? What do you care about? Why the hell are you doing a musical theater project right now? We will think about how to create both a process space and a performance container that allows for a lot of different answers and we will honor the delicious space between those answers. We will use the parts of a “theater process” that are most helpful and we will fill in the rest of the space with terms we define for ourselves, borrowing from other forms when needed and activating all necessary superpowers.

Wait, so are we like writing it? Rather than creating one centralized piece, we will be simultaneously at work on many, many smaller pieces - that are united by a *bit* of broad thematic connective tissue. This means a lot of solo + group work, home assignments, and show and tell. These pieces will be informed and inspired by your interests, and the process at large will be driven by the variety of missions within the group. Yes, it will call on you as a theateemaker, but if you’re feeling worked up about your community, your activism, your family, your grocery list, there’s space in there for those things too. We are devising a complete piece by devising its individual parts, and each piece will have different needs. The director/designer/collaborators will treat each piece like it’s own micro-process.

But I’m not a writer, I really just wanted to be in Annie. Cool! Come on over. Some folks may be worked up about creating and proposing content and others may just want to perform. Some will do both. There’s space for all of it.
Do I need to clear my schedule for tech? No, but we’ll probably get busier as we go along. Even as we work in splintered groups and on micro-projects, we will regularly come together as a full ensemble to share and to check in. There will be some kind of end-of-process reckoning, maybe in the form of a party. We will be honest with ourselves and each other about our collective and constantly evolving relationship to both attention span + fatigue. This will be reflected in both process + product. Nobody needs to sit through a run through on zoom right now. This project knows you have a lot going on and it has a lot going on too.

OK - but is it theater tho? It is something that activates the parts of us that love theatermaking but also allows us to be honest about where we all are. It is people making a thing together that wasn’t there before. It is - hopefully - community coming to life through in-the-moment action. In effect we are pushing against some of the formal restrictions of “theater” while swimming closer to the fiery core of it. The bringing-people-together-ness and the unanswerable-question-ness. Think of this as an investigation of content and also of process itself. What can the uniqueness of this moment offer us that isn’t a giant bummer? How can the limitations be opportunities? What if everything wasn’t so effing horrible? And also, what’s theater anyway? Is musical theater dead? Did we all just accidentally and recklessly become amateur filmmakers? Does any of it matter?

Ugh, some people will be on campus at Princeton but I’ll be in my mom’s basement in Denver! Exciting, right? Each micro-project will ask us to consider not only what it is, but where it is. What opportunities does the space and community you’re in provide you? What good can you do with it? For some pieces, maybe you do have a (safe) physical audience or scene partners you wouldn’t be able to have on campus. Maybe the whole thing takes place in a field with your neighbors and you just tell us about it later. Maybe you and your friend in Sacramento wrote something together and will perform it at the exact same time on courthouse steps thousands of miles apart. Maybe your cat will finally get to do that song from Cats. Maybe you will hate your basement less in the end.

Wow! This sounds so original. It's not! This project takes its inspiration from a long line of online archives, documents, and performance collections centered around loss. Some of the things that came before this include the NYC Times Overlooked Project, the Making Gay History podcast, the document of our moment via gif art known as wellnow Wtf, this list of species that went extinct in 2019, The Unerased Project and the Transgender Day Of Remembrance, the Humanity Archive Podcast, The Civilians’ musical Gone Missing, and this piece about items left behind from folks who died from COVID. Also, we are asking exactly nobody to become an expert on pandemic theatermaking, but this amazing chekhov project that brooklyn college students made on tiktok is only six minutes long.

<<-- THIS IS OSCAR THE DEATH CAT, WHO PREDICTS DEATH AND PROVIDES COMFORT. HE IS CHEERING US ON. HE KNOWS WE’RE ALL GOING TO DIE.