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Theater & Dance

Theaters may be dark, but theater-makers are still finding ways to dazzle you

Helder Guimarães's "The Present" includes a surprise for ticket holders: a mailed box that they're instructed not to open until their Zoom performance is underway. (Jeff Lorch/Geffen Playhouse)

By Peter Marks

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May 14, 2020 at 4:19 p.m. CDT

Like an uprooted family, theater artists are feeling their way around a new neighborhood. And more and more, they're feathering their Zoom rooms and other dramatic nests with intriguing original furnishings.

Take, for instance, "The Present," a new show by magician Helder Guimarães that's a sold-out online hit for the Geffen Playhouse in Los Angeles and already extended into July. As a cool surprise, ticket holders are mailed a box with surprise contents that they're not to open until their Zoom performance is underway.

Or Play at Home, a collaboration by Long Wharf Theatre in New Haven, Conn., Woolly Mammoth Theatre in Washington, New York's Public Theater, Center Stage in Baltimore and the Repertory Theatre of St. Louis. Dozens of playwrights are being commissioned to write 10-minute plays to be performed by theater lovers in their own living rooms.

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Talene Monahon's "How To Load A Musket" features Ryan Spahn and Adam Chanler-Berat. (Jeremy Wein/Play-PerView)

Or "Play-PerView," a live-streaming series on Zoom for which producers Jeremy Wein and Mirirai Sithole recruit accomplished stage actors to read contemporary plays. The proceeds from ticket sales go to arts groups thrown into financial turmoil by the shutdown.

[New York is one of the world's great cities for the arts — but the damage from the pandemic is proving to be catastrophic]

In the initial panic of the stay-at-home era, theater companies and producers rushed to their filing cabinets for videos of past productions that might be fit for online consumption. Soon, though, the more inspired among them began looking toward this lockdown as its own imaginative horizon. Just last month, the first new play of the shutdown by a major dramatist premiered online: Richard Nelson's riveting "What Do We Need to Talk About?" under the aegis of off-Broadway's Public Theater. And Bethesda's Round House Theatre is in the midst of producing a witty weekly Web series, "Homebound," each episode written by a different Washington-area playwright and featuring actors well known in the region.

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What these efforts signal is that although the theater may be stricken, it evinces a resourceful will to survive. Out of necessity, actors and directors are reworking the dimensions of what visionary stage director Peter Brook termed "the empty space" — a space measured, for now, in pixels rather than in feet.

"It takes us all back to the reasons we got into the theater," says Matt Shakman, artistic director of the Geffen, one of the West Coast's premier companies. "We wanted to make ['The Present'] feel as interactive and intimate as a real theater experience."

[These songs from musicals changed my life. Now they can sustain me.]

The magic show aims to replicate as much as possible the qualities of any other Geffen offering, right down to the eight performances a week (matinees included) and nights for critics. Along with more traditional work from the canon, Geffen has a history in the magic genre, producing pieces with Teller and the late Ricky Jay, as well as with Guimarães, a Portuguese-born sleight-of-hand illusionist. For his last Geffen show, "Invisible Tango," Guimarães was described by the Los Angeles Times's Charles McNulty as "either a magician posing as a philosopher or a philosopher posing as a magician."

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The conceit of Guimarães's "The Present," Shakman says, is to theatrically transcend the two-dimensionality of the laptop screen: "How do you reach out of the computer and into the audience? The idea would be to hold something in your hand and be part of the process. That's how you make Zoom as interesting as a black box theater."

That's where the mailed box comes in. Guimarães approached the Geffen with the notion of a one-on-one virtual show, in which he would send the viewer a package with contents to be revealed as it unfolded.

"We scaled it up to 25 people [per show]," Shakman says, "and so the magic is happening in their hands and on the screen." With tickets at $60 to $75 per household, the interactive show's original one-month run sold out in an hour. It has been extended to July 5.

[Four ways to help you through your days of theater deprivation]

One of the unlikelier opportunities that the covid-19 crisis has offered to theater-makers like the Geffen is the courting of a national audience: The Web doesn't require proximity or parking spaces. Another opportunity is access to talent that otherwise would have been tied up in stage and film projects. Availability proved to be a huge boon to Wein and Sithole as they dreamed up "Play-PerView," one-night-only presentations of new and recent work that in its initial Zoomcasts raised more than $30,000 for arts groups in need. The performers and directors are offered an honorarium.

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"We position our events as readings-plus," says Wein, a New York producer of comedy and podcast festivals. The response to tweeting out invitations to participate in "Play-PerView" surprised him: Playwright Kate Hamill ("Sense and Sensibility") and such highly regarded actors as Marin Ireland and Maria Dizzia immediately expressed interest. Dizzia participated in a reading of Lucas Hnath's "A Doll's House, Part 2," the first of the 13 plays the Web initiative live-streamed, on March 26. New ones being added are Caridad Svich's "The Way of Water," on May 15; Robert Askins's "Permission" on May 18; and Jonathan Spector's "Eureka Day" on May 22. Such Broadway-tested actors as Steven Boyer, Kristen Sieh, Erin Wilhelmi, Thomas Keegan, Tina Benko and Thomas Jay Ryan are in the casts.

For "Four Woke Baes," a comedy by Jonathan Caren about a male-bonding camping trip, Wein and Sithole arranged for Susanna Fogel to direct a top-drawer cast that featured Danny Pudi, Malcolm Barrett and Nate Corddry. The five actors — also including Evan Cabnet and Gayle Rankin — were in separate locations. But by using the same landscape photo as a common background and working out the logistics of seeming to pass objects among them virtually, they winningly heightened the theatricality.

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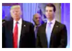

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A rehearsal of a scene from Jonathan Caren's 'Four Woke Baes'

Performers Nate Corddry and Gayle Rankin practice passing a jar of olives in a rehearsal of a scene from Jonathan Caren's "Four Woke Baes." (Jeremy Wein/Play-PerView)

“We didn’t want it to be just squares of people talking to each other,” Wein says. “We’re working with this idea that it’s film, but it’s not theater, either — it’s theater in a vacuum, in a way.”

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The varied ways the theater world is trying to fill the vacuum extend to sharing the tools of drama with people from all walks of life. That’s the premise of Play at Home, the project conceived by Center Stage and produced as a multi-company initiative. One goal, says Maria Goyanes, Woolly Mammoth’s artistic director, was to provide a modest source of income to dozens of dramatists, but the larger purpose was to give people stuck at home a group — or even Zoom — activity. So far, there are 74 new playlets archived on the Play at Home website — all to be downloaded free, and with parts suggested for anywhere from “one human” to 100. Participants enact the plays in any way they want.

To Jacob G. Padrón, Long Wharf’s artistic director, the program is a prime opportunity to bring new audiences into the fold: “There is a way online programming can be fundamentally more democratic, and we can reach more people, too,” he says. Which was a good enough mission for Lloyd Suh, whose full-length play “The Chinese Lady” at Long Wharf was scuttled by the shutdown. “It seemed like a fun exercise,” he says of his contribution, “Why We Can’t Have Nice Things.”

On a recent Sunday, the Crawford family — Melissa, Ray and their 5-year-old daughter, Logan — took Play at Home to heart and into their D.C. home. Ray and vivacious Logan selected Mike Lew’s “Performance Review,” described, irresistibly, as a “5-minute play with a water fight.”

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The Crawfords allowed a reporter to peer digitally over the family's shoulders and watch as Logan spoke her lines, displaying a prodigious memory. (They made do without the wet interlude.) When they finished, Logan's three-word review — "It was fun" — was rewarding reaction enough.

['To Kill a Mockingbird' is postponed at the Kennedy Center. It's okay to grieve.]

With the length of theater's exile from its traditional spaces still unknown, there is perhaps, more than anything, comfort in the knowledge that theatrical minds are actively in search of substitute nourishment. Do these brainstorms have staying power? Will they last once the physical doors swing open again? Forward-thinking organizations such as Woolly Mammoth and the Geffen want to know that, too. But for now, they'll settle for a sense of continuity.

"We wanted to give our audience and staff that sense of returning to the old normal," Shakman says. "To be able to offer something that looks and sounds and feels familiar is deeply reassuring."

Correction: An earlier version of this story misstated the origin of the Play at Home program. It was conceived by Center Stage in Baltimore, not by Long Wharf Theatre in New Haven, Conn. The story has been updated.

Updated February 12, 2021

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6 Comments

By Peter Marks

Peter Marks joined The Washington Post as its chief theater critic in 2002. Previously, he worked for nine years at the New York Times, on the culture, metropolitan and national desks, and spent about four years as its off-Broadway drama critic.

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