



KENT NISHIMURA Los Angeles Times

**LEW TEMPLE** has been able to earn a steady living as an actor and had an indie film and a TV pilot lined up before the virus-driven shutdown upended those plans.

## Working actors face ‘the unknown’

[Actors, from E1] ing commercials and bit parts in independent films that enabled him to join SAG-AFTRA.

In between auditions and jobs, Schell was able to support himself working for a catering company. Since 2015, he also had a semi-regular gig as a paid actor for Kaiser Permanente, doing improvisations with doctors to help them with their communication skills in a number of scenarios. One scenario involved impersonating a patient pretending that they are injured in order to obtain a painkiller prescription.

“It pays pretty well. A half day paid \$350,” Schell said, “and a full day \$600.”

But both his acting and side jobs have collapsed, leaving him apprehensive about the future. “My job this month with Kaiser was canceled,” he said, adding that he was told he’d still get paid for it. His last catering job was March 14 and the company’s manager sent him information on unemployment insurance.

Mulling over applying for unemployment and considering financial help from his parents has been sobering.

“I was really struggling to get by before this happened. Now, being in a position all of a sudden where there is no money coming in has really made me realize how close to the edge I was and am financially.”

The pandemic has left every sector of the economy scrambling for financial help. For actors and others in the entertainment industry, there is short-term support in the form of the federal government’s \$2 trillion relief package, including increased unemployment benefits. There are also a slew of industry emergency-assistance funds like those offered by the SAG-AFTRA Foundation. But given the protracted nature of the shutdown and the volume of need, these stopgap measures are not enough.

Before the virus, the SAG-AFTRA Foundation received six to 10 applications for emergency relief per week but during the first week of the shutdown it had already received 125 requests. “There’s a huge need among the acting community,” said David White, national executive director of SAG-AFTRA. “They’ve been hit on all sides. We coordinated with others in the industry to make sure that the legislators understand our needs when crafting the relief bill and that came down as a positive thing, but it is something that can easily be dropped without a lot of advocacy.”

The current reality has made an already uncertain profession more precarious.

“I feel like I’m in denial about how long and how hard this is going to be,” said



From Kathleen Wise

The virus ‘was the sign I needed. I can be near family, start in August and be done in 16 months.’

— KATHLEEN WISE, an actress who moved back to her hometown of Cincinnati to study nursing

Lucy Walters, 37. Over the past 15 years, the New York-based actress has worked as a series regular on such shows as “Power” and “Get Shorty,” roles on “Law & Order: SVU” and films like “Tesla,” but now finds herself at a loss.

“I was filming a recurring part on a new pilot when they halted production,” she said. “I was talking to my agent. I don’t even know if we’re going to get paid. There are all these force majeure clauses in our contracts,” Walters said, referring to situations where contracts are canceled due to an extraordinary event or circumstance.

“I have a little bit of savings, and I’m watching them dwindle; I do think about what this will mean,” she

added. “I’m a working-class actor. I’m not a household name, but I do make an OK living and that is something I feel proud of. I waitressed, I lived with a mantra of living frugally and I was always waiting until the other shoe dropped. Now it’s dropped.”

Few actors make the kind of money most associate with Hollywood celebrities. In reality, a small percentage of actors actually earn a living solely from acting.

Lew Temple, 50, is one. For the past 23 years he has earned a living with numerous recurring guest starring roles on television (“The Walking Dead” “Walker Texas Ranger”) and films (“The Lone Ranger,” “Waitress”).

“I pack a lunch and go to work every day,” Temple

said. “There are high and low tides and I try to ride them both out.” After roles in “21 Grams” and the Rob Zombie cult hit “The Devil’s Rejects,” Temple says he stopped having to hustle on the side, painting houses and moving furniture. For a time he went home to Texas and did voice-over work for grocery store commercials.

“I’d book 20 spots and a pocketful of money.” But, he says, “I’d be hard pressed going back to that realm to provide for my family.”

Temple, who lives in Silver Lake with his wife and 12-year-old daughter, says the pressure is enormous. He had an independent film and a TV pilot scheduled. If the stay-at-home order goes beyond a couple of months things, he will become financially squeezed.

“We’ve got to go into our savings,” he said. “I’ve got to look at pulling funds of my retirement and pension plans.” He’s also considering talking to his creditors about extensions.

The pandemic however, has made him reflective. “We’re all in the same situation, not just our industry but the nation. I think it’s brought to our attention just how many people live paycheck to paycheck.”

“It’s the unknown of this that is so incomprehensible. You’re saying we may not go back to work until August or September. As performers

we know how do that, never knowing about tomorrow. I have had a good sense of success and I have to be open to taking tomorrow and be available about taking into account the unknown. And man, there’s not anything more unknown than this.”

For Raymond Lee, 36, an L.A.-based actor who learned to live modestly over the last 10 years building his career, this is a waiting game. “I’m pretty frugal,” said Lee, who was in the HBO series “Here and Now” and will be featured in the upcoming film “Top Gun: Maverick.”

“I made the mistake of living outside my means once before and got burned. I once booked three commercials in a week and based on the last one I said I could live for a year. But none of them ran and I ended up on unemployment, borrowing money to make rent. It was the worst year of life. But it taught me a valuable lesson. Now, if I ever make a big lump sum, I put it away. This business is very uncertain.”

But Lee, who lives with his wife who is working from home and their 1-year-old daughter, says the longest he’s ever gone without work is one or two months.

“My mind knows how to deal with that length,” Lee said. “If there is no hope of auditions down the line, it will start to get grim. I’m prepared but I just don’t know.”

## Raising the curtain on pandemic theater

Topical online plays help shuttered theater industry members to nurture creative spark.

By ASHLEY LEE

“OK, let’s do this,” said Poonam Basu to Clayton Farris. It’s the opening line in “Our First Honest Conversation,” a one-act play in which an estranged couple attempt to reignite a sexual spark using only words.

But this staging of the dramedy was different. Playwright Christine Hamilton-Schmidt had tweaked a few lines of the script — originally set in a single room — to take place on a video call. Because of the coronavirus, the couple in the story were sheltering in place separately and so even more desperate to reconnect.

“It’s still the same two characters with the same relationship problems,” director Victoria Pearlman told The Times. “But the piece was slightly adjusted to speak to the immense change that’s happened in the last month, and the situation we’re all in.”

Skylight Theatre, a Los Angeles company that prioritizes social issues, un-

veiled the newly revised version online last week with the maximum 100 socially distanced viewers streaming the show live on Zoom. It kicked off weekly plays from its writers lab set amid the COVID-19 pandemic, and the series will continue until Skylight can reopen.

The company has since switched to YouTube and Facebook to accommodate an unlimited number of viewers. Each piece is available live and on demand free of charge, and all cast and crew are volunteering.

“This is a really tough time, and we don’t know when it’s going to end,” said Gary Grossman, Skylight’s producing artistic director. “But actors need to act, writers need to write, directors need to direct, and theaters need to keep doing what we do. This is about staying in touch with our community and saying, ‘We’re gonna be together again soon.’”

These quarantine-set scripts aren’t as depressing as the real-life situations that have inspired them.

“Benton Way,” streaming Thursday at 3 p.m., follows two businessmen (played by Adam Ballard and Adam Lebowitz-Lockard) who catch each other’s eye during a company conference call. Since they can’t get to



Skylight Theatre

**ACTORS** Clayton Farris, left, and Poonam Basu star in the web-revised “Our First Honest Conversation.”

know each other in person, they try to do so in isolation.

“It’s almost like falling in love with someone over written letters, the way people did in the 19th century,” said Tony Abatemarco, Skylight’s co-artistic director, who wrote the romantic comedy with Michael Kearns. He found it therapeutic to develop characters who are as concerned about the pandemic and practicing social distancing as he is.

“All of the factual developments, day by day, are already present in every conversation I have,” said Abatemarco. “But there’s a desire to keep normalcy in place, to share a joke or a funny observation of being trapped in the house for

weeks.”

Likewise, playwrights participating in 24 Hour Plays’ “Viral Monologues” series — which uploaded its latest batch of soliloquies to Instagram on Tuesday — are setting their texts amid the spread of the coronavirus, explicitly or otherwise, even though no one was asked to do so. (Methuen Drama will publish these writings as a book, edited by Howard Sherman, who inspired the solo series.)

“The playwrights are never given a specific prompt, but since our work is being seen the same day it’s being created, it usually can’t help but be about whatever is happening in the world because it’s already on every-

body’s mind,” said artistic director Mark Armstrong, referring to previous 24 Hour Plays events with pieces about the Sept. 11 attacks, Hurricane Sandy and the 2016 presidential election.

Pandemic-set plays were bound to happen sooner or later, and it’s so close to home. Numerous members of the theater community have tested positive for the coronavirus, including Tom Hanks, Aaron Tveit, Daniel Dae Kim, Laura Bell Bundy and Brian Stokes Mitchell. The disease took the lives of Terrence McNally and Adam Schlesinger.

“In the few weeks we’ve been doing this, it has moved from an abstraction of numbers to actual people who have it, who are struggling and who have passed away,” he explained. “Some plays are about it directly, or in an oblique way. Others don’t even mention it — the moment we’re in is just an element in the room, and the fact that they’re performed in isolation creates that sense of aloneness that many of us have right now.”

A few playwrights have turned to humor. Mario Correa had Derrick Baskin attempt to bluntly woo back an ex, and Harrison David Rivers, who had Russell G. Jones demonstrate how best

to steal toilet paper rolls.

But the global situation has become a personal one for Will Arbery. The “Heroes of the Fourth Turning” playwright, who has had asthma all his life and inherited the condition from his father, wrote a piece about a parent trying to console a child struggling to breathe in the middle of the night.

“I had been hunkering down for a week in panic and anxiety and despair, about breath and how frail our human bodies actually are,” Arbery said from Brooklyn. “I’ve since pulled myself out of that dark place and am trying to find opportunities for hope. This felt like a way to tap into some of what I was feeling, and hopefully reach people who were feeling the same things and help them feel less alone.”

Michael Shannon performed the intimate seven-minute monologue to his character’s off-screen kin, the camera positioned to shoot upward as if the viewer were sitting with them both.

Though the coronavirus has halted nearly the entire theater industry, it’s also inspiring some of its artists. “We don’t know what next season will look like,” Arbery said. “I can’t help but try to make something beautiful out of what’s going on.”