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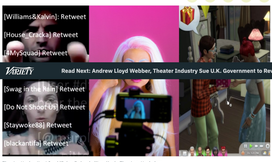
'All Arts Organizations Are Media Companies Now': How the Pandemic Is Transforming Theater

By Gordon Cox



Theatreworks Hartford/Fake Friends/New York Theatre Workshop

A series of immersive audioplays performed and mixed live, using tech developed by theatrical sound designers and engineers. A summer festival's entire season of new plays and classics released on Audible. A wild satire of gay identity politics, beamed to your computer in a high-gloss, multicamera broadcast from a theater space in Brooklyn. A playwright's recreation of "The Seagull" in "The Sims 4," livestreamed on Twitch.

This is theater in 2020, as the pandemic has prodded an ancient art form — and an often hidebound industry — to explore the digital potential it's eyed so warily in the past. As the theater's biggest commercial motor, Broadway, has languished, resourceful artists and producers are making work that incorporates video, gaming and interactivity into hybridized digital-theater forms that, rather than serving as mere stopgaps, stand poised to endure even after the return of theater as we knew it.

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"There are so many tools now that allow artists to imagine new ways to engage with the idea of live-ness and community through a digital landscape," said Jeremy O. Harris, the Tony nominee ("Slave Play") who has produced two digital-theater offerings during the pandemic, including the experimental comedy "Circle Jerk." "What's exciting is that maybe a theater like New York Theatre Workshop or the Public will see the necessity of putting work like this in their season right next to more traditional live productions."

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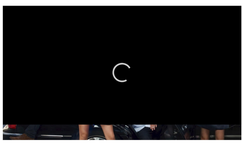

It's the digital medium's potential to expand accessibility on multiple fronts that elicits the most consistent excitement from creators, producers and arts leaders. Greater pricing flexibility can reduce economic hurdles via lower price points and sliding payment scales. Audiences with disabilities can be better accommodated with captioning and audio description, and remote attendance broadens reach to those who are physically unable to attend shows in a traditional theater setting. And the global reach of digital means artists and theaters can cultivate audiences well beyond the typically local scope of a single production or organization.

A recent study from JCA Arts Marketing found that 43% of the digital audiences in the survey had never attended an in-person performance at the company that presented the show they saw online.

"I see it shifting already in the way people are thinking," said Shanta Thake, the associate artistic director at the Public, which has seen its COVID-era programming evolve into digitally-distributed audio dramas ("Richard II," "Shipwreck"), new plays written for Zoom ("What Do We Need to Talk About?") and livestreamed performances from Joe's Pub, among other initiatives. "When we come back, how will we not forget this digital community that has become so important to us? How are we going to find our most full expression by creating a slate of digital work alongside what we've traditionally done?"

For many stage companies and theatermakers, the pandemic pivot to digital has required the ongoing work of building a new knowledge base for media and platforms largely unfamiliar to them.

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"All arts organizations are going to have to become media companies now," said Steve Wargo, the co-founder of Resounding, a production company that's developed proprietary tech for immersive, 3D audio entertainment performed and mixed live. (Resounding's upcoming audio play, "Treasure Island: Live," stars Rob McClure, whose Broadway gig headlining "Mrs. Doubtfire" was interrupted when theaters shut down.)

For now, the theater industry remains in the early, exploratory stages of discovery in its new relationship with digital. After a fatiguing rush of starry, slapdash Zoom readings in the spring, artists and audiences alike have begun to seek out theater that finds digital life in more varied, satisfying and often innovative ways.

Audio entertainment came to the fore early, benefitting from the podcast boom's revitalization of the form and its pre-existing distribution network. Creatively, too, the shift from stage to audio could be relatively smooth, thanks to theater's heightened focus on language and the rigorous vocal training of its performers.

Playwrights Horizons was one of the first to launch a podcast series, Soundstage, an anthology of short plays and musicals by theater writers. "It's a new way we can center the importance of the American playwright's voice in the culture," said the organization's artistic director, Adam Greenfield.

Williamstown Theater Festival also turned to audio early, when it became clear the pandemic would prevent the live performances of all seven of the annual summer festival's 2020 shows. In the spring, the festival announced a trailblazing deal with Audible to adapt and record its productions for Amazon's audio entertainment platform. The first of these offerings, "A Streetcar Named Desire" with Audra McDonald, will be released next week, and WTF artistic director Mandy Greenfield envisions further cross-platform collaborations long after theater starts up again.

"We've also opened conversations with other new media companies," she said. "I do think there will be further and future projects that either build upon a foundation of something that is born theatrically, or that originate as theatrical-audio collaborations."

Williamstown is just one of the theater companies forging new partnerships during lockdown, establishing relationships and experimenting with production models that look likely to endure. New York's Working Theater, for instance, teamed with six other companies around the country to produce and stream its live interactive theater event, "American Dreams," a project that began life onstage. Next month, New York's PlayCo and DC's Woolly Mammoth will, with a handful of other troupes, produce "This Is Who I Am," a new play written to be performed over Zoom by two actors cooking in real time.

While many theater companies have taken to releasing archival videos of their back catalog of shows, a few have stepped up to produce new offerings, filmed on their stages following COVID guidelines, for virtual audiences to watch on demand. San Francisco Playhouse was first out of the gate with its union-approved recorded staging of "Art," while more than one new capture of regional stalwart "A Christmas Carol" will be released in time for the holidays. In a heartturning move, producers of the new Broadway musical "Diana" partnered with Netflix to film the show onstage for distribution on the streaming giant, with the aim of keeping brand awareness high while the live production is paused.

Many creatives, however, get most excited by projects that bring theater to the digital space in unprecedented ways.

New York Theatre Workshop's two-part Twitch livestream of "The Seagull," for instance, used the framework of the life simulation game "The Sims 4" for what became a freeform but trenchant X-ray of the work's dramaturgy, as well as an extended act of AI improv guided by code hacks and by playwright Celine Song's deep familiarity with the play. It was one of several projects that NYTW has commissioned tasking artists with imagining the live, communal quality of theater in new ways.

"Our hope is that we're not just making things that could be made as well by any media production company," said Aaron Malkin, the literary director and dramaturg at NYTW. "We're really trying to figure out how to make community, how to make live-ness, and how to work an act of collective imagination that is asking the same thing from an audience and from an artist as a work of theater."

For many theatermakers, preserving a palpable sense of live-ness was paramount in adapting a theatrical project for a digital medium. It's why the creators and producers of the well-received play "Russian Troll Farm" — described as a "live, site-specific play for the internet" — committed to filming and editing performances in real time and on the fly.

"Our expertise in theater is giving up our sense of control the moment the lights come up," said Jared Mezzocchi, the co-director and multimedia designer of the production. "Live-ness equals risk, and we committed to that."

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Artists are also seeing early indicators of the potential for profit. According to the creators of "Circle Jerk," their show was streamed by an online audience of more than 8,000 viewers — far more than could have seen the production in its originally scheduled stage run in Ars Nova's intimate venue.

"The response suggests that there's the potential to have a commercial life with 'Circle Jerk' — and that means something totally different on the internet than it does in a traditional theater," said Michael Breslin, the co-star and co-creator of the show.

Right now, though, the growth of these new forms may be most limited by the audience's longing for a traditional theatrical experience that the pandemic has, for the moment, taken away.

"The challenge for us has been to fight the nostalgia that we all have for theater as we knew it," said Tamilla Woodard, the artistic director of Working Theater and the director of "American Dreams." "We have to get folks used to the fact that this is a storytelling environment that, yes, is different, but it's also as potent and intimate and engaging as sitting in a theater."

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