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You’re New Here, Aren’t You? Digital Theater’s Unexpected Upside

Companies and venues that put work online are finding big, new and younger audiences — but little revenue.

Pittsburgh Public Theater has found an audience for streamed shows like “The Gift of the Mad Guys,” an adaptation of O. Henry’s “The Gift of the Magi.” via Pittsburgh Public Theater

By **Michael Paulson**

Feb. 24, 2021

Five days after the coronavirus quieted performing arts venues, the Irish Repertory Theater found its voice.

It was St. Patrick’s Day, after all — not an occasion to go unacknowledged, even during a pandemic. So the humble nonprofit started posting homespun videos of company members performing Irish-themed songs, poems and monologues on social media.

The response was encouraging, and in the 11 months since, the theater has added nine full-length digital productions. A house manager with no video editing experience stitched together the first such effort, a three-person play about a blind woman called “Molly Sweeney,” using video actors shot of themselves on their phones.

By the time the theater was ready to attempt a holiday musical, “Meet Me in St. Louis,” it was considerably more ambitious, shipping green screens, tripods, lighting and sound equipment to actors’ homes.

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Was there an audience for these virtual ventures? Decidedly, yes.

Over the course of this pandemic year, 25,000 households have reserved tickets — they are free, but there is a suggested donation — for at least one of Irish Rep’s digital productions (and many of them watch more than one show). That’s double the 12,500 people who buy tickets to at least one of the company’s productions in an ordinary year, when it’s comparatively safe to see live performances while sitting next to strangers.

Even more striking: 80 percent of those who have watched an Irish Rep production over the last year are newbies who have never been to the company’s 148-seat theater, nestled in Manhattan’s Chelsea neighborhood.

“We’re batting down barriers we’ve been wrestling with for decades,” said Frances Howorth, the theater’s director of marketing and digital strategy. “We’ve reached audiences we couldn’t have imagined reaching.”

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From left, Paul O’Brien, Geraldine Hughes and Ciaran O’Reilly in the Irish Repertory Theater’s virtual production of “Molly Sweeney.” via Irish Rep

The pandemic has, of course, been devastating for theaters, costing lives, jobs and dollars. And many longtime theatergoers find streaming unsatisfying — no substitute for the you-are-there sensory experience.

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But across the country, and beyond its borders, many theaters say new audiences for their streaming offerings has been an unexpected silver lining — one that could have ramifications for the industry even after it is safe to perform live again and presenters try to return patrons to their seats.

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"We've been excited and somewhat surprised at the eagerness and size of the audience that we've uncovered," said Oskar Eustis, the artistic director of the Public Theater, a large New York nonprofit best known for its free Shakespeare in the Park program. The theater, which has streamed both video and audio shows during the pandemic at no charge, has drawn an audience of 700,000 for its digital productions. And while measuring the size of online audiences can be imprecise, the theater has attracted people from every state and 68 countries.

"I got a fan letter from Kazakhstan, which is a first for me," Eustis said.

The pattern, although not universal, is widespread. In California, La Jolla Playhouse has seen its audience grow sixfold, from about 100,000 during a typical in-person season, to 640,000 thus far for its digital programming, which included a three-part radio horror show.

Christopher Ashley, the theater's artistic director, said he imagined digital programming would be a less dominant part of his programming post-pandemic, but that because so many people had been interested in watching it, "we're not going to just shut off that stream."

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There are reasons to be cautious about the metrics. The basic tools used by theaters to measure audience can't determine how many people are watching within a household, and generally don't reflect how many people watch or listen for just a moment and move on.

But many theater executives assert that online theater has brought them a significantly larger audience than they saw in-person, a growth they attribute to price (much of the digital content is free or low-cost); geography (you can check in from anywhere with internet access); and, in many cases, ease (watch at your convenience, with no advance planning).

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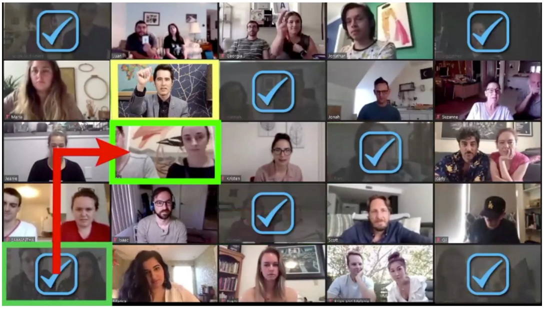
Some of the content is full-length, but much is also bite-size, reflecting online viewing habits. And it comes in many flavors: archival and new, recorded and live, in some cases seeking to capture the feeling of being in Row J, and in others embracing digital theater as a new art form. Rattlestick Playwrights Theater, a nonprofit in New York, has streamed not only plays, concerts and conversations, but also a court transcript reading, a "communal ritual" and, now underway, a 17-part audio series set on the No. 2 train.



David Kwong (framed in yellow) with members of the digital audience gathered for his Geffen Playhouse production “Inside the Box.” via Geffen Playhouse

There is even money to be made. The Geffen Playhouse in Los Angeles has earned $2.5 million selling tickets to a series of live and interactive shows featuring magic, puzzles, cooking and a murder mystery. That theater has been quite aggressive — it has held more than 600 live performances since last May, including several scheduled for the convenience of international audiences — and reports that 88 percent of its audience during the pandemic had never been to a show at the playhouse.

But digital content, in most instances, generates far less revenue: At the Center Theater Group in Los Angeles, which decided to make most digital programs free to donors and subscribers, streaming has brought in $154,000 during the pandemic, whereas by this time in a normal season, that theater would expect about $23.5 million in box office revenue. Most nonprofit theaters are staying afloat thanks to a combination of philanthropy and layoffs; they say the digital work is not for revenue, but to maintain audience and provide work for artists. Often, theaters must navigate thorny health and labor issues as part of the process.

“We started this for our members as a way to keep them close when we had to shut down our stages, and, quite frankly, so they wouldn’t ask us for ticket refunds,” said Kara Henry, the marketing director for the Steppenwolf Theater Company in Chicago.

Many of the theater’s longtime patrons greeted the initiative with a shrug, but newcomers were more enthusiastic. Now Steppenwolf has 2,500 digital-only members, who pay $75 for a subscription. “Our virtual-only members are a full decade younger than our traditional members, so obviously that thrilled us,” Henry said.

Marya Sea Kaminski, the artistic director of Pittsburgh Public Theater, has been pleased to reach senior citizens by streaming shows to their residential communities. Ross Mantle for The New York Times

Pittsburgh Public Theater not only has seen audience growth, but also has found ways to reach the hard-to-reach: It arranged to stream its productions on the television sets at residential senior communities in western Pennsylvania. “This has been a truly fascinating time to really think about who we are, what is our mission, and to have a lot of important conversations about access and accessibility,” said Marya Sea Kaminski, the theater’s artistic director.

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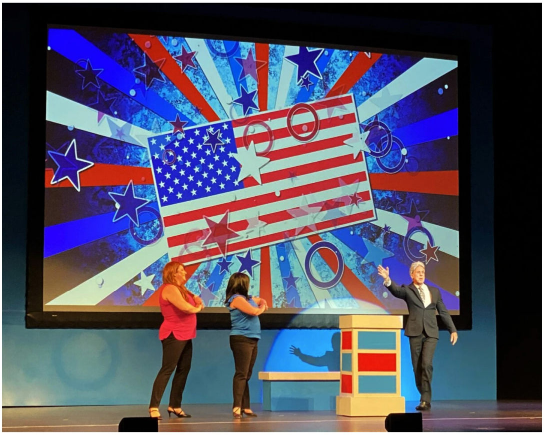
Streaming helped TheatreSquared in Fayetteville, Ark., avoid layoffs and persuade three-quarters of its subscribers to renew during the pandemic. The theater has created 10 streaming productions, five of them filmed onstage using safety protocols, including Jocelyn Bioh’s acclaimed “School Girls; or, the African Mean Girls Play,” which has been extended through March 14. (Another play, about Marie Curie, is watchable through that date as well.)

“Obviously, it’s better to sit down in the theater,” said Martin Miller, the organization’s executive director. “But tell that to a kid in a rural school 100 miles away who might not otherwise have a theater to go to, or to the patron who came for years but can’t leave home anymore home due to mobility issues.”

The virtual pivot is not for everyone. In interviews, several theater-lovers around the country expressed screen fatigue, quality concerns and technology woes. “I tried,” said Jonathan Adler, a 42-year-old psychology professor in Massachusetts. “Much of it is quite entertaining, some of it is quite moving, and a bit of it is dreck, but, quite frankly, none of it is theater.”

But to others, streaming is a gift — even preferable to live performance. Before the pandemic, Rena Tobey, a 62-year-old freelance educator in New York, subscribed to multiple local theaters; now, citing comfort, sightlines and sound quality, “I will be thrilled to give them all up to watch from home.”

Even when theaters resume live productions for live audiences, many are planning to put money behind streaming as part of their offerings. Ma-Yi Theater Company and Dixon Place, both in New York, have invested in studio-quality equipment, hoping for rental income as well as to innovate in their own work.



From left, Carly Sakolove, Amy Hillner Larson and Michael West in “NEWSical the Musical,” the first show produced and streamed by the Lied Center for Performing Arts. via Lied Center for Performing Arts

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That future has already arrived at the Lied Center for Performing Arts in Lincoln, Neb., where socially distanced performances returned in July. The center bought a five-camera system to broadcast work from its theater and has been using it since September. Its spring 2021 season — yes, it has a spring season — will feature Kelli O’Hara, the Silkroad Ensemble and mandolinist Chris Thile, all viewable either in person or online.

And the Oregon Shakespeare Festival recently announced a 2021 season that promises both live and virtual productions, including a “Cymbeline” released in episodes over two years. Nataki Garrett, the festival’s artistic director, said the pandemic had expedited her efforts to reach new audiences.

“We are providing a door,” she said, “for anybody to enter.”

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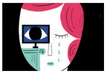

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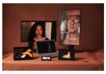

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Michael Paulson is the theater reporter. He previously covered religion, and was part of the Boston Globe team whose coverage of clergy sexual abuse in the Catholic Church won the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service. @MichaelPaulson

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