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Theater

Performing Original Works in a Pandemic, Artists Turn to New Tools

Here's a look at some of the pieces of theater, improvisation, and radio drama being created in a world under quarantine.

By Joe Dziemianowicz
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Clockwise from top left: Sanders, Plunkett, Murphy, Robins, and Kunken in the livestreamed world premiere of the latest drama in the Apple Family Plays, "What Do We Need To Talk About?"

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Under Covid-19 lockdown, art still imitates life.

Writer-director Richard Nelson recently presented *What Do We Need to Talk About?*, his fifth work in a series of dramas premiered by the Public Theater in New York City. In it, audiences eavesdrop on members of a family in Rhinebeck, N.Y., as they discuss what's going on in their lives.

The first four of the *Apple Family Plays*, as the series is called, ran from 2010 to 2013 at the Public. Each took place during an election or on the anniversary of an important event. The latest installment, set in April 2020, is the first to be presented digitally. The novel coronavirus looms large.

The four Apple siblings—played by Maryann Plunkett, Jay O. Sanders, Laila Robins, and Sally Murphy—shelter in their homes and chew the fat via a video conference instead of across a dining room table.

Tracking COVID-19

322,437
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3,979,558
Total deaths reported worldwide >

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Change in MSCI World Index of global stocks since Jan. 23, 2020

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Since Covid-19 turned the tables on theater in mid-March, various companies and artists have looked beyond the stage to create theatrical experiences using the technology at hand.

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“I wrote this play specifically for Zoom,” Nelson says. “This play can't be done onstage. I knew it would be a whole different thing.”

More than 5,000 viewers tuned in for the April 29 livestream premiere of Nelson's timely and touching digital drama, according to a Public Theater press representative. An additional 41,000 tuned in for the recorded run on YouTube that wrapped on May 3. Future showings are possible.

The attendance numbers are healthy, adding heft to the notion that if you Zoom it they will come–and not just to star-studded benefits like the recent one honoring Stephen Sondheim, which boasted a Meryl Streep with bed hair boozily belting bits of *The Ladies Who Lunch*.

Bending to the Times

"Buyer & Cellar" starring Michael Urie (Broadwa...
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Still, whether virtual content is live or recorded, it can't replace the communal experience of being in a theater with others and watching a show unfold. But it's something. And creators are up for it–and all that it throws at them. “As a director, I had to give up control,” Nelson says. “I had no control of the technology. The form is very challenging, very scary, and very fascinating.”

Urie performs in *Buyer and Cellar* from his apartment. *Courtesy of Broadway.com*

There's no shortage of streaming content–live and recorded–in the wake of sheltering orders and shuttered stages. One noteworthy example is Michael Urie's shining revisit from his apartment of Jonathan Tolins's sly, Barbra Streisand-inspired comedy, *Buyer and Cellar*.

There've already been seven streaming editions of *The 24 Hour Plays: Viral Monologue*s, miniature plays and musicals by such authors as David Lindsay-Abaire and Craig Lucas, with a cast including Minnie Driver and Rita Wilson.

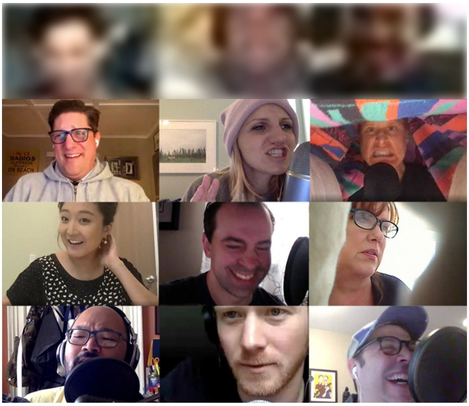
Performing for Good

The recently announced *Spotlight on Play*s series to benefit the Actors Fund will offer starry, one-time-only presentations of Broadway works on Thursday nights. First up, on May 7, is David Mamet's *November* featuring John Malkovich and Patti LuPone. Waiting in the wings are Joshua Harmon's *Significant Other* and A.R. Gurney's *Love Letters* with Sally Field and Bryan Cranston. Shows will air on the Actors Fund YouTube channel and Broadway Best Shows YouTube and Facebook channels.

Stars in the House, a daily livestreamed series to support the Actors Fund, regularly schedules plays. Memorable digital presentations include *The Heidi Chronicles*, *The Little Dog Laughed*, and the Gingold Theatrical Group's take on George Barnard Shaw's *Arms and the Man*.

Elsewhere, readings presented by theater companies showcase what makes them tick. The English Jacobean drama *The Witch of Edmonton* is on tap on May 4 from Red Bull Theatre, which made its name via adventurous takes on classics.

Audio Productions



John Stamos, Laura Benanti, Annaleigh Ashford and more will star in the new radio play *Dracula, A Comedy of Terrors*. *Source: Broadway Podcast Network*

Video conferencing isn't the only game in town. Some theatrical new arrivals amid Covid-19 are for your ears only. That includes the old-timey radio play *Dracula, A Comedy of Terrors* on the Broadway Podcast Network.

The network "from Day 1 was to be a digital destination for all things theater," says Dori Berinstein, a Broadway producer who launched the network seven months ago with podcast pro Alan Seales. "We're excited to be a platform for the many voices in the theater community," she says, pointing out that the podcast actors are paid. "Actors have lost their jobs," she says. "We're not sure when things will reboot."

Christopher Sieber, who sinks his teeth into the role of Dracula, was happy to participate in the podcast while the gender-bending revival of *Company* that he's in is on hold. (The cast of the Stephen Sondheim show share one another's company via Zoom meetups every Thursday, he says.) Sieber says that nailing a Transylvanian accent took time. "At first I sounded like Ricardo Montalbán … then it just came to me."

Artists thinking out of the box—and beyond stages—are active outside of New York City. Through May 9, the Cherry Artists' Collective, an experimental group in Ithaca, N.Y., is livestreaming its latest play, *Felt Sad, Posted a Frog*, which features six writers from five countries and 13 actors (all in upstate New York). "Innovative forms of theater are our mandate," says the group's artistic director, Samuel Buggeln.

New Works

Seyfried will star in *Some Combination of Good and Oprah and You.* *Photographer: Rodin Eckenroth/Getty Images North America*

Seizing inspiration from Covid-19, the star-studded *Homebound Project* is a three-part digital anthology series benefiting the organization No Kid Hungry. The first batch of 10 mostly solo short works, created around the theme of home, streams from May 6-10.

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"Our goal was to create work that people at home can connect with at home and that would be for a cause," says co-founder and playwright Catya McMullen. Her playlet, *Some Combination of Good and Oprah and You*, glances on self-realization and stars Amanda Seyfried. The *Mamma Mia!* actress says she recorded her performance in three shots, with a bit of help from actor Thomas Sadoski, her husband. He's also in the cast, along with Jessica Hecht, Utkarsh Ambudkar, and William Jackson Harper.

"Being a homebody by nature, I've found this process [of sheltering] easier to embrace than others, I'm sure," Seyfried says, noting though that it's hard to create theatrical magic when everyone is far apart. "It is absolutely more useful and preferable to be 'in the room' and 'on your feet' with everyone. That atmosphere naturally pulls you out of yourself."

But, Seyfried adds: "That said—being able to connect and create and explore on my couch with my computer is a luxury I never considered possible. I love how casual it feels. And it's all we have right now."

A Return to the Stage?

The Barrington Stage. *Source: Barrington Stage Company*

At least until Aug. 5. That's when Barrington Stage Company, in Pittsfield, Mass., is scheduled to begin its summer season, which has been delayed and curated in light of the coronavirus. Shows include the one-man drama *Harry Clarke* and Arthur Miller's *The Price,* plus concerts and a play reading. Seating capacity is reduced by two-thirds. Masks will be worn by staff and patrons.

"We think there is a strong need to do an alternate season that honors live theater, allows us to assemble safely, and reminds us we are not alone in this self-isolated world we find ourselves in," Julianne Boyd, Barrington Stage's founder and artistic director, said in a statement accompanying an April 28 announcement.

Will it be 100% safe? Will it be a test case for other theater companies? Will anyone even go? Answers, in order, are: Nothing is. Of course. And yes, judging by the box office. The company sold $16,000 worth of tickets last week, a spokesman says.

(Updates with new ticket volume in the last paragraph.)

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