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Making Art During a Pandemic: Theaters Seek and Share Mini-Plays

Nonprofits around the country plan to commission works of no longer than 10 minutes that can be read or performed by people sheltering in place.

Among the playwrights commissioned to write short plays that can be read or performed by people sheltering in place: Jordan E. Cooper, left, Michael R. Jackson and Aleshea Harris. From left: Ike Edeani for The New York Times; Grace Rivera for The New York Times; Nathan Bajar for The New York Times

By Michael Paulson

April 1, 2020

They took their new jobs less than two years ago: a diverse group of ambitious arts administrators eager to see how their ideas and dreams might influence theaters around the country.

Now they find themselves confronting a situation they never could have imagined: leading their theaters through a global pandemic.

On Wednesday, the new arts administrators from four important American regional theaters, joined by the Public Theater in New

York, said they would commission a set of short plays from writers whose financial lives have been upended by the shutdown of arts organizations as people stay home to contain the coronavirus. The theaters said they had two major goals: to steer a bit of money to struggling artists and to inspire new work at a tough time.

“As soon as the writing was on the wall, and everybody was canceling and going to streaming, it seemed important to not just share our content virtually, but to engage people in the act of making theater and participating in the art form in a different way,” said Stephanie Ybarra, the artistic director of Baltimore Center Stage. Ybarra has a running group text with three other new artistic directors — Jacob G. Padrón at Long Wharf Theater in New Haven, Hana Sharif at the Repertory Theater of St. Louis, and Maria Manuela Goyanes at Woolly Mammoth Theater Company in Washington — and they jumped on the phone.

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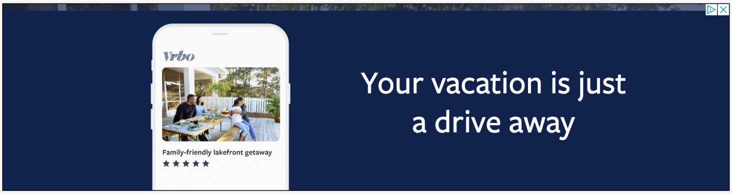

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“We were all in various states of organizational crisis,” Ybarra said. “But we got buy-in on a general, ‘Let’s do something together.’”

The artistic directors Jacob Padrón and Stephanie Ybarra, left, and Hana Sharif and Maria Goyanes, have been talking regularly about their experiences as new artistic directors of regional theaters.
Gabriella Demczuk for The New York Times

The result, which is being called “Play at Home,” is a website (playathome.org) featuring new plays, intended to take no more than 10 minutes to read, that are free so that anyone can read or perform them at home or by video conferencing. The commissioning theaters are providing a $500 stipend to the playwrights they select to write the works.

The four regional theaters and the Public have been joined by Playwrights Realm in New York and the Old Globe in San Diego, and are hoping other theaters will join, too. Each theater is separately choosing playwrights and paying commissions.

New Leaders
Doors Open for Women and People of Color at Top Ranks of American Theater

Among the first group of writers participating are Jaclyn Backhaus, Jordan E. Cooper, Aleshea Harris, Michael R. Jackson and Lauren Yee. Many are less well known, and were chosen because they had productions that were canceled and for whom the money might be meaningful.

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Ybarra noted that, because the plays are not intended to be professionally produced, the writers do not need to worry about the cast size (often a limiting factor at regional theaters with tight budgets) or practicality (no need to figure out how a special effect or magic trick could actually be accomplished onstage). "We've been able to unleash quite a bit of imagination within these considerations," she said.

"We're asking playwrights to consider writing something incredibly joyful, something that can be read intergenerationally, something that could be fun for young people to read with families," Ybarra said. "The subject is decidedly not the pandemic."

Coronavirus and Theater

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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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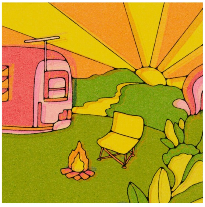

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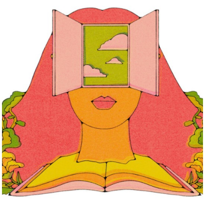

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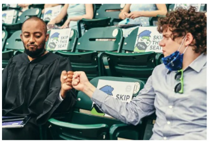

Bryan Derballa for The New York Times

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July 7

Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

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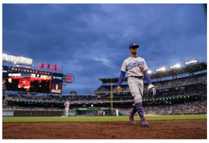

Julio Cortez/Associated Press

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July 10

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