

The Show Must Go On:
COVID-19 and a Watershed Moment in Professional Theatre

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Honors Thesis
University of Colorado Boulder
Submitted to the Department of Theatre & Dance

April 2, 2021

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The theatre, the theatre, what's happened to the theatre?

~ Danny Kaye, *White Christmas*

Abstract

This project investigates the effects that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the theatre industry. Interviews were conducted with local theatre professionals and their responses are presented alongside research from outside sources to provide context of the wider conversations on this topic. Current changes in theatre making and consumption are discussed as well as the possible future implications of these changes. One of the largest areas of discourse was the continuation and possible expansion of digitally produced theatrical content and the potential impacts this could have for audiences and practitioners alike. Another primary focus was a possible adoption of more active anti-racist policies and structures after the pandemic in response of the George Floyd protests. While ultimately speculative, I conclude that there is likely to be change in one or all of these areas, and that the pandemic will have a long term effect on the theatre industry as a whole.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a massive impact on nearly every aspect of life. Among the industries most affected has been the entertainment industry, including theatre and live performance. With necessarily harsh restrictions on in-person gatherings, theatres and theatre professionals have had to make drastic changes to programming and performance in order to keep the lights on. It is impossible to definitively say whether these changes will be temporary and unique to pandemic theatre or whether some or all will continue to be implemented afterwards. With the changes that have been made to the way we produce and consume art, having adjusted to limited in-person contact, and the ways people have gotten used to spending their time over the

past year, some kind of lasting change seems likely. After a year of disruption and the costs incurred and energy expended in moving a primarily in-person activity to a primarily remote space, it is probable that live performance and entertainment after the COVID-19 pandemic will not look the same as it did before. With the future of the theatre industry so uncertain, and as someone on the precipice of entering this world, I want to understand the ways in which it is changing, both short and long term, as well as better understand what is needed as a professional during and after this unique time. I spoke with current industry professionals to get their perspectives and experiences both about the struggles they have faced during the pandemic and what they believe will evolve as a result of the pandemic going forward.

What became clear through these interviews is that theatre makers do anticipate and even hope for transformation to the industry in the wake of the pandemic; changes in their work schedules, changes in the ways theatre is produced and consumed, changes in the governing structures and strategies of institutions. Ultimately, no one can be certain about exactly what live theatre will look like, and there is no way to know what changes will actually be implemented until live and in-person performances resume with regularity. However, I believe that those who have familiarity with professional live performance and who have experienced other, albeit less extreme, shifts to the industry during their careers are in the best position to speculate. Using their perspectives as a jumping off point, I want to document what feels like a watershed moment in professional theatre and explore the future of my chosen field.

Explanation of Methods

In order to understand the impact of COVID-19 on the theatre in my immediate vicinity, I reached out to a number of people who I had made contact with in various capacities, either through classes or networking efforts. I was fortunate enough to be able to speak with a range of people in different theatrical spheres, however, because the pool I drew from was personal contacts, they do skew toward some specific areas. The best represented groups are those with

expertise in literary and artistic management or costume design, management and construction. This research and these perspectives are particularly helpful for me as these are my interests, but may not be applicable to all disciplines within theatrical work.

I feel it is important to make clear that the experiences and perspectives included in this project are not exhaustive. Though not done purposefully, I also want to note that the majority of the people interviewed for this project were white women, and so the interpretations of this particular demographic (into which I also fall) are the most represented in my research and analysis.

In chronological order, those interviewed were:

- Lynde Rosario, a Dramaturg and Literary Manager for the Denver Center for the Performing Arts (furloughed at the time of the interview) in Denver, Colorado, interviewed October 3rd, 2020.
- Bethany Woods, a Dramaturg working with Athena Project in Denver, Colorado, interviewed October 15th, 2020.
- Nick Chase, the Associate Artistic Director and Marketing Manager for Local Theater Company in Boulder, Colorado, interviewed on October 26th, 2020.
- Dr. Megan Lewis, the Director of Theater and an Associate Professor at Colorado State University in Fort Collins, Colorado, interviewed November 18th, 2020.
- Clare Henkel, a Costume Designer based in Boulder, Colorado, interviewed January 7th, 2021.
- Anne Murphy, a Theatre Educator and former Costume Designer based in Boulder, Colorado, interviewed January 7th, 2021.
- Betty Hart, an Actor and Director based in Denver, Colorado, interviewed January 8th, 2021.

I asked each interviewee the same set of basic open-ended questions to guide the interviews:

- What is it like to be a theatre professional at this time?
- How is your job different than it was before (e.g. new tasks you've taken on, or old tasks that are no longer applicable)?
- What changes have you or your company had to make as a result of the confines of the pandemic?
- Has this pandemic impacted the way you view theatre in any way?
- What has this moment revealed to you about how and/or why theatre works?
- How has the accessibility/inclusivity of theatre been affected by the pandemic?
- Are there any practices you have started (or seen started elsewhere) as a result of the pandemic which you intend to carry forward in your future theatrical work?

Between October 3rd, 2020, and January 8th, 2021, I conducted interviews with the individuals mentioned above. Each interview was recorded digitally and then transcribed by hand. This transcription process allowed me to take a close look at the statements made by each person and begin to pick out recurring concerns, issues, and themes both within and between interviews. Categorizing the interviews and quotes by theme or relevant issue was the first and most important step in beginning to craft my exploratory analysis of possible changes to theatre resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the time of this project's inception, little research had been done on theatre during and after the pandemic. As such, this project was intended to be based on interviews I conducted with local professionals and my interpretations of their views on the topic. However, by the time I had conducted my interviews and began synthesizing arguments, more people had written about this topic. Thus I did some additional supplemental research in order to place the views of those I interviewed as well as my own thoughts and arguments into the context of a wider conversation.

Evaluation

General Experiences of the COVID-19 Crisis

The most common answer to the question of what people's experiences have been like working in theatre during the pandemic was some variation on uncertainty, though more often than not, with an optimistic spin. Nick Chase, the Associate Artistic Director and Marketing Manager for Local Theater Company said of his experience, "There are some great creative opportunities, but there is also just a challenge of the unknown at this point—not knowing when live presentation will return, not knowing when we'll be able to employ those teams that we at one time could employ."¹ This sentiment was underscored by Anne Murphy, a Theatre Educator and former Costume Designer who, in response to the above question, quipped "I think the main answer is mostly unemployed!"² Dr. Megan Lewis, Director of Theater and Associate Professor at Colorado State University said, "It's precarious. I wish I could say different but it is precarious, because we are going through an existential crisis." She went on to explain that for her and people in her field things are doubly unstable, saying "the pandemic has hit two areas very hard, one is higher education and the other is performing arts and we do both."³

Despite unemployment and uncertainty, many people expressed optimism about new opportunities for growth, with most of the interviewees saying that, at the very least, this time was a mix. Actor and Director Betty Hart explained that she felt this year was "Different... different because the year was spent either mourning the loss of theater jobs that I had, and/or creating virtually... So, it was a mixed bag; I didn't get to create the way I used to, but I also got to do some pretty awesome work virtually."⁴ Murphy explained that the practicalities of life necessitate that people problem solve, saying "you have to get creative and figure out how to create and how

¹ Nick Chase in discussion with the author, Oct. 26, 2020.

² Anne Murphy in discussion with the author, Jan. 7, 2021.

³ Dr. Megan Lewis in discussion with the author, Nov. 18, 2020.

⁴ Betty Hart in discussion with the author, Jan. 8, 2021.

to create a product that people will buy, so that you can stay paying your rent,” a sentiment echoed by Lewis who said “we're all having to show our greatest, most flexible and nimble talents and skills.”

Professional Changes in the Pandemic

It is a given that during a global pandemic no one continues their daily operations unchanged, either personally or professionally, and indeed everyone reported that their experience of their work transformed to varying degrees. Many emphasized the difficulty of doing creative work digitally. Hart said, “I haven't said a monologue in a year. That's different—to have not done a single audition that required a monologue is a huge difference... To not be able to have a scene partner and to have the chemistry of working with another person, definitely different. And as a director, I will say, everything takes longer in the virtual world, everything.”

From an organizational and administrative perspective, Chase, who has been helping to oversee much of Local Theater’s digital offerings during quarantine, had a different stance on the time involved in virtual programming. “The luxury of time isn't the same now...in some sense we're isolated so it feels like things aren't moving, but we are moving faster than we have ever before... Because we're putting [digital presentations] out one a month.” Although practitioners are working far less overall, something everyone spoke about was how much effort—whether physical, mental, or emotional—is required when they do participate in theatre virtually. “I think we initially assumed that digital presentations wouldn't have the same sort of workload,” said Chase, “ but that's not the case.”

From an acting/directing point of view, Hart emphasized the amount of creative output needed to perform digitally. “You don't have the energy exchange,” she said. “In a live sequence, you give out energy and energy comes back to you, but in a virtual sequence, you give out energy, nothing comes back to you, and you have to give out more energy and still nothing comes back to

you, and you continue that process. So after performing or directing, you end in a depleted place, whereas normally you end in a heightened, beautiful place because of that exchange.”

The difficulties of continuing to work with the new adjustments and expectations that accompany making theatre during COVID-19 was also a common thread among interviewees. Lewis expressed the stresses of teaching in a time of such unknown, saying, “we are struggling in terms of educational theater with how do we keep this viable and relevant?” Because much of theatre education is based on the traditions and techniques that have come before, trying to keep up with the quickly changing landscape of theatre, as well as some uncertainty about the future, presents a real dilemma for educators and students alike. Despite this, educational theatre departments press on, finding ways to apply foundational theatre skills to online mediums. In terms of what producing digitally entails for her and her department, Lewis said, “our first production was a Zoom play, which we did beautifully on Zoom, I must say... And we are about to premiere our second production, which honestly is a full scale film.” The adjustments she and her faculty and staff have had to make to accommodate necessary restrictions have certainly changed the way the department looks. “I joke but we’ve gone from being a theater department to a film school overnight,” Lewis said. “We went from teaching stage acting techniques to acting for the camera. We went from designing for the stage to designing for film. We went from what it is like to light live people in a space to lighting for film, and doing video editing and all these new things.” She called what she and her colleagues are doing “a certain kind of pedagogical acrobatics,” saying, “I wish I had money right now to throw hazard pay at all of my faculty, because it’s just asking so much of them.” What must also be considered here are the potential impacts such changes have on students. For university students a year—the length of time we have been in the pandemic in the United States—is a quarter of their college careers. Having such a large chunk of their education be taught online, and focussed on how to produce online content, is bound to impact the way these students will operate when they graduate and become working theatre professionals themselves.

Lewis also emphasized the importance of flexibility and creative problem solving in the face of obstacles, saying “all of our budgets have been cut, like slashed, I’ve got nothing to work with. And I’m like, *Alright, one thing we are as artists is resourceful—let’s see what we can make out of nothing...* And we do! [Because] we are so privileged to make educational theatre. It’s just such a privilege.” She expressed great optimism about the changes she and her department, as well as theatre practitioners more broadly, have had to make, saying “there are no better people to be thrown the challenge of, *Oh my god, adapt your whole entire discipline overnight* than theatre people. ‘Cause, man, we are problem solvers, that’s what we do...the show must go on, that really is our mantra. It’s our can-do spirit. And I just love it. I love seeing it in our students, I love seeing it in my colleagues, I love seeing it in the larger culture.” Lynde Rosario, a furloughed Literary Manager and Dramaturg with the Denver Center for the Performing Arts, exhibited this can-do spirit in the way she has changed the work she does, returning to freelancing after several years of steady salaried work. “I am more prepared than most to handle this shift because of my decades of experience as a freelancer. When the theaters shut down, and everything closed, the [playwrights] were still writing,” she said. “I think for people who didn’t have that sort of background, it was harder for them to shift. People who had always sort of had that artistic home, that place to go, that someone giving you a thing to do, an assignment. As a freelancer, you make that all for yourself anyway. And so having that under my belt really helped me to navigate this pandemic, and all these huge shifts in our industry.”⁵

Translating Theatre into Online Mediums

No matter what their area of theatre production, the biggest workplace shift reported was trying to remain creatively and monetarily afloat while transitioning to online platforms. “It will never take the place of live theater,” Costume Designer Clare Henkel said of working virtually, “but I think it’s important for people to pay attention to their creative instincts. I think performers

⁵ Lynde Rosario in discussion with the author, Oct. 3, 2020.

need to perform, writers need to write, designers need to design.”⁶ The primary goal right now, Chase said, is “to continue to engage artists and continue to engage our audience.” “You don’t want to lose your audience base,” Murphy echoed, “so you’re doing everything you can. And also, if you keep your audience base engaged, you might have a chance of getting them to give you some money.”

The concerns about audience engagement and, perhaps more pressingly, fundraising, are major worries for many people and companies. Of his company Chase said, “we’re still doing work, we’re still trying to generate that audience, and we’re still having to account for all the things that producing work digitally entails.”

Despite these anxieties, there has been some early evidence that suggests the wider reach of digital content might translate into higher attendance and the potential for higher profits. Gordon Cox, writing for *Variety* magazine, spoke with numerous theatre makers about the ways in which theatre is now merging with digital workspaces and artforms. Among those he interviewed were the creators of an experimental comedy called “Circle Jerk,” which was recently presented digitally and which “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.” Michael Breslin, one of the creators and stars of the show said that, ““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.””⁷ Though I came into this project primarily interested in the way the pandemic was affecting theatre from the perspective of industry professionals, what seemed to be of primary concern to these professionals was the effect of the pandemic on their audiences. This makes sense as it is difficult to function in the professional theatre world without substantial audience engagement and the accompanying ticket sales and donations; that is the business of theatre. In order to keep in

⁶ Clare Henkel in discussion with the author, Jan. 7, 2021.

⁷ Cox, Gordon. “‘All Arts Organizations Are Media Companies Now’: How the Pandemic Is Transforming Theater.” *Variety*, Nov. 24, 2020. variety.com/2020/legit/news/digital-theater-pandemic-broadway-1234836759/.

business during the pandemic, theatres and theatre artists needed new ways to create entertaining and relevant programming that resonated with their audiences.

Perspectives on Theatre in Online Spaces

With the number of changes happening to the way theatre is produced, consumed, and interacted with, I wanted to know if people had changed their definitions of theatre or if they now had different guidelines for what theatre can be. Though nobody told me that their opinions about theatre had changed as a result of performances moving online, people had definite points of view about what does and does not qualify as theatre in the digital realm, as well as expressing the shortcomings of translating theatre into this new medium. “I think that’s the existential question: what is theater if it’s not live with an audience present?” Murphy asked. “And I think, by definition, theatre is live. So everything else that we’re creating, it’s theatrical, but is it theater? Because you’re not having a collective experience with other audience members, and you’re not having a live exchange with the actors on stage.”

This ineffable quality of liveness, and specifically the importance of a live audience, was something which nearly everyone identified as key to what makes theatre theatre. “There is a difference,” Chase explained, “between watching something virtually even if it is presented live—if it’s streaming live—than going and sitting in a theater with people having that experience.” Chase further emphasized that the importance of an audience isn’t necessarily relegated to theatre, but can be felt in other arenas, including film. “Let’s say we’re watching a big blockbuster, there’s an energy and a vibe, and the audience, congregated, informs how we see the work. That’s the element that we don’t have with digital presentation, the sense of what everyone else in the audience is feeling... you might not always be aware that it’s happening, but you are a participant in this great organism.” Murphy also said that this, for her, is what is missing in online performance. “I can’t feel the energy around me,” she said, “and that’s what’s magical about a live event... it’s different [either] when you’re packed in or with a sparse audience... you’d still get

that energy and that's metaphysical but that's also physical; it's a physical experience being in an audience... with live theater, you actually are experiencing something unique and transient and uncapturable... and as many times as you sit in a theater, it's still exciting... because you're having an experience that's unlike anything else."

Liveness, the experience of getting to see and feel something along with a community, what seems to be the very essence of why theatre is such a powerful medium, can be difficult to reproduce virtually. Rosario says that for her, "the most theatre-esque portion of the digital space...is the chat function." She explained that "what I've missed when I've participated as an audience member in this digital space is that collective unconscious of the other audience members; we all gasp at the same time, we all laugh at the same joke, or don't. Or one line just hits everybody in the exact same way and you just hear it echo." Rosario explains that "I have only experienced that sensation now when the chat function in any artistic offering is activated, and not just activated but kept active. When people can correspond to each other in real time, that is what an audience is." She jokes, "I mean, if we all had tomatoes we'd all be throwing them." Chase says that he and his company have been using the chat function in their productions for precisely this reason. "That's been one of the main ways that we have incorporated interactivity into our presentations...And I think that's a great way [for] audience members to feel like they're being seen." Chase explained how Local Theater promotes engagement by encouraging audience members to contribute both during and after the presentation, asking questions and providing comments. "We directly acknowledge them by name, if they choose to put their name into the chat box...and so the audience member feels like, *Oh, I'm being seen at this moment. I'm a part of a greater group.* And that gives us a sense of community."

This sense of community that an audience fosters, and which can be approximated using live online interactions, is primarily what those interviewed said was the essence of theatre. Rosario explained that "we have an innate human desire to connect with each other [which is] something that is only satisfied with theatre in a way that it is not satisfied with film and

television because you don't technically need to gather, you can experience that 100% by yourself. But theatre is never an isolated experience, it is always shared.” This sentiment was echoed by Bethany Woods, a Dramaturg who works with Athena Project, who said “there’s just something communal in theatre that is hard to study and define.”⁸ This communal aspect of theatre is something which many companies are trying to find ways of fostering online. Another project Cox discusses in his article is one in a series of commissions by New York Theatre Workshop, a “two-part Twitch livestream of “The Seagull”... [using] 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.” This is certainly not traditionally what one might think of as theatre—nor even digital theatre using the new pandemic yardstick for performance. However, the purpose of NYTW’s commissions are not to perfectly replicate the experience of traditional theatre-going, but instead, “tasking artists with imagining the live, communal quality of theater in new ways.”⁹ This expansion of the possibilities of the collective experiences of theatre is building on a long history. Woods, who has also been a Theatre Educator, explained that theatre has often been the natural way to satisfy this need for communal connection. “There was a guy... Smeliansky, he was Russian and he was in charge of the Moscow Arts Theatre during Soviet times. He said that because the Soviets closed the churches, the theatre became what the church used to be... it’s where you would go and sit as a community and think about important ideas, spiritual concepts and metaphysical concepts.” For Woods, this physical communal gathering is inseparable from theatre. She confessed “I am afraid people are watching stuff online and thinking that it’s theatre, and it’s just not; if you’re not in the same space, seeing the same thing, at the same time, and, unfortunately, breathing the same air, then it’s not theatre. And one thing that kind of scares me is that we might be losing that definition.” She said that she sees “all

⁸ Bethany Woods in discussion with the author, Oct. 15, 2020.

⁹ Cox.

of the virtual theatre really [as] a cry from the heart about how much we miss the real thing.”

Woods serves as an example that while some people are willing to embrace virtual theatre as a new facet of the theatrical space, others are not, and are looking forward to the end of the pandemic not as a time to further explore the possibilities of this digital realm but to escape it entirely. Tamilla Woodard, Artistic Director of Working Theatre in New York City and another of Cox’s Variety article interviewees said that this resistance to online content stems from the feeling of loss practitioners and audience members feel for live theatre. ““The challenge for us has been to fight the nostalgia that we all have for theater as we knew it... We have to get folks used to the fact that this [digital spaces] is a storytelling environment that, yes, is different, but it’s also as potent and intimate and engaging as sitting in a theater.”¹⁰ Though these last statements from Woodard are not widely shared opinions—at least among my interviewees—this may change as live theatre becomes available again and digitally hosted content comes to be simply another option rather than the only available one.

Mourning the Absence of Live Theatre

Perhaps some of this reticence toward virtual theatre also comes down to distinction between classifying something as ‘theatre’ and classifying it as ‘performance.’ Whether or not virtual productions qualify as theatre, they are performances, and the blurring of lines between these already closely interrelated categories is something which may become more mainstream as a result of the pandemic. For some people, their definitions of ‘theatre’ and ‘performance’ already overlap heavily with negligible differences. Lewis told me, “I’m a performance studies person... pretty much anything that involves human beings is considered performance in my world.” In terms of differences between theatre and film she said, “I’ve worked in film and theater all my career, and so for me, those two things live so naturally together. There’s not this bizarre dichotomy that some colleagues seem to believe in.” Rosario, too, said that she does not see why

¹⁰ Cox.

theatre and digital performance need to be mutually exclusive, though she does distinguish between varieties of digitally presented performances, once again singling out liveness. “What I’ve been able to do is articulate the types of moments in this digital space that resemble theatre. The liveness... that’s theatre... Things that don’t make it theatre: anything that is predetermined, pre-recorded. Because even in theatre, even if you think you’re doing it the same way you’ve always done... it is not the same. Because you have breathed in different spots, you have looked in different moments, you have felt something about the moment in real time.” Murphy also agreed that liveness is crucial to her definition of theatre, and explained that part of the draw of theatre for her is the singularity of any given showing, “you want to see those mistakes, you want to see those one offs, you want to see *that* particular performance.” But for Rosario and others, that singularity and that liveness can be seen almost anywhere. “I go back to actor-space-audience,” said Rosario, “I go back to this idea that theatre is everywhere because we are all performing all the time and we live in a performative world.”

While many people were willing to accept online theatre as performance and thought that digital performance was a great adjunct to theatre, they all agreed that it was a poor substitute for the live experience. Something cited as lacking from virtual or filmed performances was the element of personal connection that can be so easily felt in an in-person environment. “It’s really hard to maintain connection... through screens, because there’s something mitigating, something in the way of the live encounter,” Lewis said. “You have no way of feeling the breath in the room or knowing when people are reacting... or if the energy is going down or up. Those things that are so vital to live performance, that exchange between the audience and the performers, you can’t see that, you can’t feel it...you’re watching something that isn’t three dimensional. It’s flattened, you know, it’s jumping around in boxes, it’s this geometric thing. That’s not organic, and live and raw and emotional and [it hasn’t] got energy. The zing is missing.” Perhaps it is by virtue of having to suddenly (and largely reluctantly) translate theatre into a new medium that this ‘zing’ is no longer felt. Filmed media of other kinds—i.e. movies and television—manage to retain

emotional weight and even a sense of connection between actor and audience. But the difference seems to be that film and television have been perfecting their emotional beats and virtual connection for decades whereas theatre is entering a space where it has never been before and in which its traditional techniques may not work the same. This, in combination with the aforementioned reluctance of many practitioners, as well as the different expectations associated with theatre versus film and television, would naturally result in a flatter and less thrilling experience, especially at first.

Something else that seems to be missing when theatre is translated into digital mediums is the autonomy of the audience. Chase said, “filming a performance takes a little bit of audience initiative away from the people, you don't quite get to read exactly what you want into a performance.” He explains that, “the way that a screen directs our gaze, and the way the eye tracks is not the same as in theater. If you're sitting in the audience, and you're really attached to a character, and you're very curious about what their story is, you can follow that character specifically, and watch the nuances and subtleties of the performance as it is unfolding in front of you. You can't do that on Zoom, you don't have the same benefit. Film is a director's medium, where the director is guiding the audience members' eye to what they would like them to see and experience, but theater is a larger canvas, the director can direct the audience's eye, but the audience still has a certain liberty to focus on [what interests them].” The feeling that this new way of experiencing theatre saps the vitality and richness out of a performance was also expressed by Lewis, “this media does not allow us to have that true moment of witnessing, of really seeing another person,” she said. On the importance of that true witnessing, she explained that “live theatre has the capacity to change us in that way. We share molecules together, we share stories together, we have our minds changed, we have our imaginations stretched.”

The value of live theatre is something which every interviewee emphasized heavily, everyone saying that they cannot wait for it to return. “If anything, my appreciation for live theater, the ability to have an interaction live with an audience has just become more acute,” Dr.

Lewis said. “And while we are adapting, and rolling with the punches, and being nimble and flexible, and pivoting, and all these freakin’ words that you hear all the time, I don't want this to be the new normal.” The connection that theatre practitioners have with live theatre is naturally going to influence the way that they feel about digital theatre. None of these people got into theatrical work because they wanted to produce digital content. Even though some have embraced it, this transition was forced, rushed, and sudden, and the absence of live theatre is being acutely felt and grieved.

Communal and Cultural Impact of Theatre

For these practitioners, the thing that the pandemic highlighted was just how vital theatre is as a cultural institution. Hart said that, in her opinion, this mourning of the loss of live theatre as a cultural and communal space is not limited to theatre practitioners, but extends to the general public as well, saying, “what people are discovering is that they miss theater, they miss being in the same room and having heartbeats sync up and breathing in at the same time, and feeling that joy and pathos... There's something necessary about that.”

Having this communal cathartic space taken away in large part, as well as the need for theatres to continue to operate, led people to find less traditional and more pandemic friendly ways of creating and interacting with theatre. Speaking about the first half of the pandemic, Hart said “there was still outdoor theater last year... and a lot of experiential things [and] immersive stuff that happened outside,” and she emphasized that “people were willing to pay incredible prices for that outdoor theater because they missed it, and they wanted that connection so deeply.”

As the weather became less conducive to outdoor theatre and things moved almost exclusively online, the loss of theatre as a space for community was keenly felt by the people I spoke with, both as practitioners and as audience members. “Zoom is an approximation of that kind of interaction,” Lewis told me. “And it doesn't mean that we can't do it well, we are doing it well... but I am not willing to let go of the live experience.” Henkel, who also is unwilling to let

go of the unique experience of designing for live performances, said, “I will never get tired of drawing something, handing it to a shop, and then building it and seeing it on stage. I miss that—it’s the most exciting thing for something to come out of my brain and have somebody bring it to life.”

Something that came up again and again in the interviews was this feeling that live theatre was an irreplaceable institution. While I wholeheartedly agree that a live theatre has a certain *je ne sais quoi* which digital performances have not (yet) been able to capture, I think that holding up live performance as the end all be all standard of theatrical offerings is limiting. Other forms can and do fulfill these needs to create and to build community. These are needs which are felt in all aspects and levels of theatrical enterprise. Murphy, who works with students at Fairview High School, told me that they are doing a socially distanced combination of devised theatre and what she calls “guerilla theatre” in order to satisfy them. The students themselves come up with the stories, and many of them have been about the pandemic. This endeavor does not look like live theatre in any traditional sense yet it is serving as a creative community and a space for students to tell their stories. Murphy said that “the main thing that I got out of all of our brainstorming/response sessions was that you people in this age bracket of sixteen to twenty-five, you need this to resolve and you need this to be okay.” She said that this kind of unrestrained creativity was helping them—and her—move past stagnancy. “[Young people] don’t want to stay in this place, collectively, of grief and anger... And I found that to be extremely inspiring; we don’t have to sit there.” Like college students, a year for high school students is a significant piece of their education. Given that they are spending this time practicing such non-traditional methods of theatre making it’s not inconceivable they might carry such creative experimentation forward with them if they chose to continue in areas of theatre or performance.

Ingenuity and creative experimentation is something that Theatre Critic Peter Marks said is key to creating engaging content, especially online. In a piece he wrote for the Washington Post about interactive online programming during the pandemic, Marks says that “performers,

designers and writers are using technology—and more generally, connectivity with people in their homes—with more ingenuity.” He says that in finding ways to adapt theatrical techniques to online mediums, “theater is reclaiming for these trying times its rightful status as the most intimate of art forms.”¹¹

The use of theatre, and art in general, as a means to connect with other people is something which Hart said is a main driving force in her work, “I think all the theater artists who do work that matters, do it because they believe fundamentally that people need human connection and theater provides human connection.” She pointed out that “one of the first things that happened as cities and states went into lockdown last year is the consumption of art.” “People are not leaning out of their balconies to do math with each other,” Murphy pointed out, “you can’t dismiss the arts just because we’re in a pandemic.”

Though admittedly heavily biased as artists themselves, everyone I spoke with agreed that art is especially important in a pandemic. Many expressed hope that this sudden restriction in the ways artists can create and audiences can consume is driving home to the general public just how vital these institutions are. “We aren’t a luxury, we aren’t simply something for the upper class,” Hart said. “We are the best part of society and society changes when it doesn’t have access to us. I think, in large part, last year would have been a very different exchange if theatres had been open during the wake of George Floyd’s murder. If you can imagine the kind of conversations that could have happened after experiencing something theatrically and having people’s minds and hearts opened.” I spoke with Hart two days after the January 6th Capitol riot, and she said “I think we’d be in a very different place this very week in history if theater had been able to do what it does last year... if [people] had had theater to consume throughout the year reminding them of who they were, reminding them of our shared humanity.” She emphasized,

¹¹ Marks, Peter. “With playhouses dark, interactive theater online is lighting things up.” Washington Post, Oct. 29, 2020.
www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/theater_dance/interactive-theater-shows-online/2020/10/28/f56813e8-179c-11eb-befb-8864259bd2d8_story.html.

“we have forgotten some of these basic truths, because of not having theatre.” This was also a sentiment expressed by Lewis who agreed that “theater is a place where we build community... where we really reach across difference, engage with difference, and embrace it.” In a time when we are so isolated and are encouraged to stay away from traditional communal spaces, Lewis says that she is maintaining her attitudes toward community building through theatre, saying “I have refused in all of this to look at other people as contagion. I just will not do that. I refuse to let a pandemic deepen the divides that exist between us already.” Stephanie Ybarra, Artistic Director for Baltimore’s Center Stage, emphasized in an interview with Jeff Lunden for NPR that theatre can be used as a community resource, saying “It has a lot to do with transforming our arts and culture institutions into arts and culture and civic institutions.”¹²

Theatre’s potential role in civic conversations came up for many people. Spurred on by not only the pandemic and the rise of virtual programming, but also the civil uprisings which gained traction and garnered attention during the first phase of lockdowns, discussions about accessibility and inclusivity have been forefront in the minds of many theatre practitioners. Many people spoke about the lowered barrier to entry that online platforms offered, allowing audiences to experience a wider range of theatrical options. “None of us want to give up entirely on live theatre, but [one] silver lining to all of this is... a way to build audiences that are no longer geographically stuck in one place,” Lewis told me. Woods expressed a similar sentiment, saying “I spent the first few months of the pandemic watching shows from the National Theatre in London that I can’t get in rural Missouri, and I was over the moon.” Woods also said she was able to show some of her students these online performances, “we had some fascinating conversations about design and different things that they were seeing. A lot of our students were very low income and there is just no way they could see any of that without it being digital and free.”

¹² Lunden, Jeff. “What Will The Future Of Theater Look Like? ‘Our Artists Are Going To Lead Us’.” NPR: National Public Radio. Sep. 20, 2020. www.npr.org/2020/09/20/914251681/what-will-the-future-of-theater-look-like-our-artists-are-going-to-lead-us.

Lewis brought up another benefit for students: the ability to show their own work more widely. “For example,” she said, “their parents back in Texas, or Arizona, or Maine, or wherever they are, can come in and watch without having to physically be here.”

This ability to participate in theatre happening elsewhere was something which everyone spoke about as a positive, but which was particularly close to home for Lewis who travels to her home country of South Africa every year to go to the National Arts Festival there. “I think this would have been my 22nd festival, I’ve been years and years and years going to see it live,” she said. This year, “the National Arts Festival in South Africa was an entirely virtual festival... and there is no doubt that I want the live thing back... but it made it possible for people in the United States who otherwise wouldn’t be able to travel to see some of that work.” A wider artistic reach as well as a bigger market is something that appeals to many people. Lunden also interviewed Oskar Eustis, Artistic Director at The Public Theatre in New York City, who said that “he’s received emails from people enjoying the Public’s online content in Kazakhstan. ‘I’m not likely to want to give that up when we come back... That’s exciting to be able to reach that many people.’”¹³ Murphy brought up another reason online theatre is an important player in conversations about accessibility, saying “like everything else that’s moved online, it gives you an opportunity to be in the audience when you would not otherwise be able to get tickets. [International theatre] is one example, but what if you’re just infirm? Or what if you’re sick? Or what if you have mobility issues? Or for some reason can’t leave the house, but you still want to participate in theater?” Streaming or other digitally presented performances also bring with them the options of captioning and visual description, things that are not usually offered for live performances.

Others agreed that being able to cater to people in this way, bringing theatre to the audience rather than requiring them to come to it, was important both during the pandemic and after. “Especially for people who live alone, it’s really vital right now,” Henkel said. “And a lot of theater audiences are elderly, and a lot of them are still going to be afraid to go places,” she

¹³ Lunden.

pointed out. “So I think theaters will continue to do some sort of virtual streaming after this, and finding ways of continuing income via streaming things.” As to how continuing streaming content might work, Henkel speculated about “filming the opening night, making it available [as] part of that opening night excitement and allowing people to stream it for a reduced amount after opening.” Nick Chase told me that he and Local Theater “will certainly be using digital platforms, in addition to live presentations moving forward.” As well as streaming and the wider use of online platforms, the production of audio content may be another way for theatres to expand their offerings. In his article Cox points out that “audio entertainment came to the fore early [in the pandemic], benefitting from the podcast boom’s revitalization of the form and its pre-existing distribution network.” Apart from the plethora of platform options, “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.”¹⁴ This too opens up the possibility for blind and vision impaired people to enjoy a wider variety of audio plays, a medium which has been around for years but which has not been widely utilized by local theatre companies or for less well known plays and playwrights.

This possibility of balancing both live and online performances, however, brought with it the anxiety of the unknown for many people, with the delicate balance between returning to in-person theatre while keeping digital content available and remaining profitable being something of a concern. After audiences got so used to free online content, some were doubtful they would be willing to pay for that same content after the pandemic. “The industry thrives on ticket sales and butts in seats,” Murphy said, “so, I don’t know how you can give so much free content and survive. And, on the other hand, I don’t know how you can charge for your content and keep your audience.” Murphy spoke about the high cost of theatre as a long-time barrier to entry for many people, including herself, admitting “if I don’t get comps I don’t go.” Speaking about the possibility of streaming, she said “theatre is expensive, so I’m wondering if this will

¹⁴ Cox.

help change that, where it's not just for the cultural elite, and maybe theater becomes more accessible.” Reducing the cost of going to the theatre may be a necessity in a post-COVID economy. A study done in May of 2020 by Shugoll Research, surveyed theatregoers in the 35 largest U.S. metropolitan areas and found that “economic factors have [a] significant impact on the likelihood of [patrons] returning to theaters.” The report details that 45% of respondents feared a recession, 45% indicated a decline in their disposable income, and 37% took a salary cut or lost their job.¹⁵ For those who have been hit hard financially because of the pandemic, paying pre-pandemic ticket prices may not be something they are willing to do, at least not right away. This is yet another reason it seems more than likely that online presentations and performances will become a part of mainstream theatre production going forward.

While what people will and won't do, and what they will and won't be willing to pay for, still remains to be seen, most of my interviewees were interested in this expansion of theatrical consumption. “It's exciting to think about using streaming to reach more people so that they can still experience great theater,” Hart said. “We all know now that theatre in our homes can be powerful and meaningful... There is a recognition that theater can come to the masses. Period. It can, and it can be good and it can be a positive experience.”

Innovative ways of bringing theatre to the masses do not end digitally, however. In an interview with Jake Nevins for the New York Times, architect Steve Tompkins outlined the ways in which he anticipates theatres themselves might change in response to the pandemic. “I think there will be other forms: immersive theater with less dense audiences, going back to the medieval model of theater on the move, where actors and audiences are mobile rather than static. Outdoor festivals and open-air theaters and semi-covered spaces will find a resurgence.”¹⁶ The idea of outdoor theatre and specifically bringing outdoor theatre to the audiences rather than vice

¹⁵ “Coronavirus Theater Survey: National Sample Of Theatergoers.” Shugoll Research. May 11, 2020. unbouncepages.com/shugollresearch/.

¹⁶ Nevins, Jake. “Looking to Past Pandemics to Determine the Future of Theater.” New York Times, Sep. 16, 2020. www.nytimes.com/2020/09/16/t-magazine/theater-coronavirus-covid-pandem.html.

versa was also something brought up by Eustis in his interview with Lunden. The Public has long had a ‘Mobile Unit’ “which brought Shakespeare, with small casts and simple sets, to neighborhood parks, shelters and prisons” and is a model Eustis intends to build on when live theatre returns. “I think one of the first things we’re going to need to do is not ask people to come to our home, but for us to go out to them... To go to where the people live as a way of saying, we’re not insisting you come to us and get into these small, crowded spaces. We’re going to go to you and give you a chance to celebrate and enjoy and feel the solidarity of being in an audience again.”¹⁷

Apart from the benefits that more innovative ways of presenting theatre can have for audience members, Chase brought up the benefits he is seeing for theatre makers, specifically with online theatre. “We’re doing these collaborations with theatre companies around the country and people around the country have access to our work, and we have access to their work as well. At this point in time, we’re learning a lot about other companies and what they’re doing.”

Expanding the horizons of theatre companies and theatre artists is something which everyone said they see as a priority, particularly in terms of expanding inclusivity in mainstream American theatre. Woods said that she thinks having creative people in charge makes a difference when trying to implement changes, saying that, early in the pandemic “places that had corporate background people as their leaders, I think that their initial reaction is *Close down, we can’t do anything*, whereas places that have creatives [on] their board—actors and directors and people like that—they’re coming up with really creative ways to keep producing content and audience experiences.” Marks expressed a similar thought regarding the ways in which interactive online theatre is coming to prominence during the pandemic. Marks writes that “the pioneers in this pursuit are, perhaps unsurprisingly, the smaller, scrappier outlets, which are proving better equipped to usher the conceits of interactivity to market. Commercial producers of more lavish

¹⁷ Lunden.

entertainments have yet to improvise online in substantive ways.”¹⁸ This tendency may have repercussions outside of creative offerings. Now, many theatres are called upon to make other changes, Woods specified “rethinking structures in relation to institutional racism and how they can [include] more diversity on their boards.” She says she sees smaller, more creatively-led institutions being able to actually implement these changes, saying “it’s highlighted how difficult it is for larger organizations to change.”

Despite the difficulty many institutions are having actually making changes, in the wake of the George Floyd protests, changes must be made. “There has to be a paradigm shift,” Murphy told me, “and I think it’s a good time to have that reckoning; Why is our audience middle aged and older? Why are they primarily white? Why are they primarily middle class and up?” Chase agreed, saying “the civil uprising that happened mid-May, and continues, has prompted a lot of theater companies to really see themselves through that lens, and interrogate their own practices and how they can be better in those practices, how they can support the full spectrum of voices that comprise this nation.” Henkel too expressed this sentiment, stressing the importance of “being more inclusive in every part of [a] theatre company, not just actors but in administration and artistic directorships, all those kinds of development positions.” She said, “I know for a fact that people are more aware they need to do that.” Although cautious, people were generally quite optimistic about the prospects of widespread efforts to increase the accessibility and especially the inclusivity of theatre going forward. “I do think that there is some sincere conversation and changes that have already happened certainly with artistic directorships around the country,” Hart told me. “Certainly there’s quite a few theaters here in Colorado that have been genuine in asking the questions and beginning to do the work on how they can dismantle racism in their organizations. And for theatres led by white people, predominantly produced for white people, to even ask the question and do the work is a game changer in my opinion. And I think we’re really only at the beginning of the discoveries of how things are going to change as we move forward.”

¹⁸ Marks.

Ybarra told Lunden something similar, though slightly less enthusiastically: ““We are not at a place where we can wrap our heads around what it looks like to be a collectively liberated field... We understand the word anti-racism now, but we are not yet at a place where we could imagine an arts sector or a theater field that was wholly and completely racially just. And it's a failure of imagination that keeps us from that future. Nothing else.”¹⁹

Positive Changes Going Forward

Responses to what people wanted to carry forward in theatre after the pandemic were unanimously in two interrelated categories; slowing down and doing less, and actively working to dismantle white supremacy in mainstream American theatre. Reflecting on some of the benefits, both personal and professional that the pandemic has brought with it, Murphy said “I think the practice of not over scheduling is a big deal... lowering the saturation point for what is okay. That's something to hold on to.” This was an attitude shared by every person I interviewed. “The gift of the pandemic has been to slow us down,” Lewis said. “We live in a capitalist machine, and in a production cycle that is untenable, unsustainable, it burns everyone out, [and] everyone knows that. It's part of the lore of theater work [and it's] such a bloody unhealthy thing, there's nothing healthy about that.” She said the pandemic has “given me this absolute clarity that we just don't need to do all this stuff to show that we're working all the time.” Speaking about the American obsession with overworking, Lewis said, “this is my adopted culture, so I've adapted to it...But African culture functions differently. There are plenty of other cultures that function and are productive, and still do everything they need to do, but they don't do it at this insane burnout rate.” Henkel also expressed this realization that the American theatrical work culture is something that is unnecessary and even detrimental. She said, “[the pandemic] has helped put things in perspective,” even saying that “I don't know that I need to be doing theater to be happy in my life.” This is a major revelation for someone who has been working in theatre for decades,

¹⁹ Lunden.

and one that may not have happened had Henkel not been able to step back from her work and take a critical look at her career from an outsider perspective. Henkel stressed that what she really wants to do is “take care of myself... it’s so important, going forward, emotionally, physically and spiritually, that one takes care of oneself, and has some time to pause and think, and just pay attention.”

This pausing and paying attention was a common thread among interviewees; everyone attributed the widespread recent notice being paid to calls for systemic change to the pause in activity that the pandemic mandated. “I think something begins to happen when you're not putting anything inside you, and you're just alone with your thoughts,” Hart said. “You can't help but begin to reflect on the world around us, you can't help but say, *I watched a man murdered on my screen. What does that say about the world around me?*” Due to the slowing down of activity during the pandemic and the fact that people no longer had access to their usual means of distraction and escape, the George Floyd protests gained traction with white Americans in a way that previous similar uprisings were unable to do. “George Floyd is one man in a line of Black men who've been brutalized by the police and murdered by the state,” Lewis pointed out. “But the moment of his death was when everyone was focused on their screens, and not busy running around and working... to see that, I think it's focused our attention... it's become really inescapably visible.” Hart, too, said that “having a national pandemic that precluded us from doing the things that we do as the norm” was a key difference between previous protests and calls to action, (which more often than not fell on deaf ears in all sectors of society), and the George Floyd protests. “And for theatre practitioners,” she said, “busy is the norm.”

Most people I spoke with agreed that the biggest changes in the ways in which theatre makers are thinking now was due to the break in the intense work cycle. “We all had too much time,” said Hart, “and I think whether we like to admit it or not, theater people are thoughtful... and I don't believe,” she said, admitting that she was perhaps being optimistic, “that we will be able to go back to what theater was like before those beautiful artists released *We See You White*

American Theater.” “What a gift,” Rosario said of We See You White American Theatre, a statement and testimonial letter put out by a group of BIPOC theatre makers of all stripes in the wake of George Floyd’s murder.²⁰ “It was such a beautiful gift at a time when everything else had been taken away, [that] this has been given to us as a roadmap to the future.” Rosario spoke about the difficulties she has had trying to get people to engage with these demands, saying “I’ve had many very challenging conversations with the people who are still at my predominantly white institution, about the impact of those demands, because not everyone sees it. Not everyone sees their place in this movement, not everyone sees their place in the past, how they have existed. It is very clear to me how many people were blind to so much.” However, she was also optimistic about the pandemic being an opportunity for growth, telling me “we should take this moment to reflect and to really put out a thoughtful plan for the future. And I’m hopeful because I see a lot of people doing that.” Chase also emphasized the importance of reflection, saying, “every organization has to interrogate their practices at this point, and really see how they are contributing to white supremacy in the theatre.” Demands to this effect are not new and have been made for decades. However, the majority of theatre makers and goers are upper and middle class white people—a group not known for taking the plights of marginalized people seriously or for welcoming diversity. Given these demographic constructions, and with there having been no significant long-term backlash for non-action in the past, there has also been no monetary incentives to address these problems from an administrative standpoint. The most that has been done amounts to lip service and the occasional hiring of actors of color because the implementation of large scale change doesn’t add to the bottom line. Systemic advancements sometimes only occur when there are revolutionary upsets in the status quo. This might require layoffs and the mass cessation of work neither of which would be voluntarily embraced in the normal course of business, however, both of which came as a result of the pandemic.

²⁰ “Dear White American Theater.” We See You, White American Theater. Accessed Mar. 13, 2021. www.weseeyouwat.com/statement.

Woods pointed out that, with the unfortunate but necessary layoffs and furloughs that came with the pandemic, “theatres are using this time to address systemic issues and rethinking their governing structures right now,” something which many people identified as crucial. Chase said, “it’s companies addressing the composition of their executive teams... addressing the composition of their board—it’s every single aspect of the theater... I think casting is the outward facing component that a lot of audience members see, but that is just one of the myriad elements [that must be addressed].”

Chase also spoke about theatre being a tool for wider cultural and social changes, saying “the reason that I’m a theatre maker is because I recognize that storytelling is a great way to learn... watching a play is a narrative, it’s a story, and we learn from story... it’s how we learn about ourselves, about other people, about the similarities between ourselves and other people.” He said that the more theatres can correctly implement the necessary changes, and “the more we invest in the full spectrum of stories, the more we’re going to understand the commonalities between people, and also we’re going to recognize where divisions lie, and where we, as human beings can begin to bridge those divisions.” Chase said that seeing a wider spectrum of stories “transform[s] you in a conscious way and subconscious way... it’s important for people to be exposed to stories that are not of themselves... it doesn’t change the differences, but you realize the differences are not as vast as you might want to think... there’s a gift in being among people who are not like you. That’s what theater can really do. And the more that we are able to promote stories of and by and for people that are not necessarily white theatre makers, the more we will understand that.” Multiple people I spoke with acknowledged that theatre has the capacity to be a catalyst for social change. In recent months there has been a dwindling of popular interest and public action to further the anti-racist principles many people were so enthusiastic about last summer. Considering this, it is not inconceivable that there is a moral imperative for theatre to play its role in keeping this conversation alive. I’m not suggesting theatre is a paragon of virtue or racial equality, far from it. Mainstream theatre may heed demands from BIPOC theatre makers

and help normalize systemic changes or it may remain largely unaltered. However, whether or not it is used as an implement of protest, theatre is an important social tool and will have a cultural impact.

To be able to effectively and appropriately bring about positive cultural change, however, much internal work must be done. “[We need to] come to a place as an industry, not just in the United States, but globally as an industry, to really unpack and address all of the harmful practices, all the things that kept people excluded, all of the things that that kept people out of this industry,” Rosario told me. “Because of these harmful practices, people [felt] like there wasn't a place for them, because that's the way we've always done it. I hope we can take this moment to identify what has not ever served us, what is not serving us now.” And she said that she was indeed hopeful, “I do see large swathes of artists, individuals, even small companies... taking time, building spaces—virtual spaces—to come together to talk about what has happened, to talk about what we can do better.” Speaking to her own experience, Rosario said, “we take time now, at least in the rooms I've been privileged enough to be invited into, to identify ourselves and tell the room, *This is who I am as a human being. Not just my role, not just how I serve you or this project, but who am I? Where are my traditional lands? What are my pronouns? How will you address me? How do I want you to respond to me when something comes up?*”

Most people I spoke with said they had seen some—though not enough—changes being implemented in this same vein. A few of the people mentioned that they had been doing this sort of anti-racist work, both in and out theatre spaces, for years. Hart, for example, said “a lot of the work that I've seen other people starting to do now is work that I've been doing all along,” wryly adding, “So yay for them catching up.” But even among those who have been doing this work, this particular moment felt like a watershed. “I've been working in critical race studies for 25 years,” Lewis said, “and I have to tell you, it's the first time in my whole career that suddenly everyone is talking and thinking about whiteness, and white privilege and fragility, and Black Lives Matter, and institutionalized racism, and all the things that scholars have been thinking

about for a long time and many of us have been working on for a long time. But now that's become common parlance.” Again, she attributed this to COVID, saying, “the pandemic revealed those lines of inequity in such stark contrast that there was no way to not notice it anymore.” She, as well as others expressed a fervent hope that “there is real change underfoot, and not just lip service change, not just ticking off some diversity box.” But Lewis said that she believed the change to be genuine, saying “there's this movement towards it. And not everyone is doing it willingly, sometimes it's being mandated and they're kicking and screaming. But it's happening... finally there is this momentum. To use a fabulous British phrase,” she said, “I feel like for a large part of my career, I've been farting against thunder.” Though she acknowledged that real systemic change still needs to happen on a massive scale, Lewis said “but I feel like it's a moment of incredible opportunity...So I have hope, darling. I live in hope, every single day I wake up and I look for the hope. Because otherwise, what's the point?”

This feeling of hope was something felt by everyone I spoke with. “I hope if nothing else,” Rosario said, “we as an industry can instill in our culture that we must always grow. And we must always learn from the things we've done before, and not feel like we are fixed in one place for eternity.”

Conclusion

Trying to embark on a career in the arts is an unpredictable move at the best of times. The primary reason I began this project was because I wanted to know what the potential hurdles were of not only trying to find work in a limited field, but of trying to find work in a limited field in an especially limited time. I wanted to know what the theatre industry currently looked like, what it's future might look like, and how I and other young theatre makers might begin to forge paths for ourselves given new restrictions and unprecedented creative and economic obstacles.

A number of people, both in my interviews and in my contextual research, landed on interactivity as integral to audience engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic. While this is

not new in theatre or performance in general, because we are so used to interactivity as a staple of online spaces, it makes sense that online theatre has naturally skewed in that direction and that online audiences have resonated with it. This expansion of interactive theatre may also be the first indication of a larger shift, perhaps one that goes hand in hand with the possible expansion of regular online programming.

This translation of mainstream theatre into different mediums was the biggest change brought by the pandemic and one that seems likely to remain in some shape after it has subsided. This could be an area, perhaps *the* area, in which a new generation of theatre artists make their mark on the industry. Speaking with theatre educators really drove home the fact that there are large cohorts of students for whom a significant piece of their theatre education and training has occurred online. As a theatre student myself, the impact the pandemic has had on students, especially arts students, has at times felt like a problem, even a tragedy, at least to me, and I think in some sense this is justified; a year of interrupted training, cancelled opportunities, and frantic scrambling to find work-arounds has certainly taken its toll, and that must be acknowledged. However, there is a unique opportunity for these same students to take the successes and failures of their online curriculums and bring that knowledge, as well as some new technical expertise, to the field. Multiple people expressed a belief and a hope that online performances and programming will continue even after live in-person productions start back up. This has never been a staple of mainstream theatre outside of the occasional filming of a stage production for archival purposes. As a result of the pandemic, theatres of all sizes may very well end up extending their offerings to include online and digital programming. This could open up an entirely new division of theatrical production, expanding local audience bases, and making room for new conceptions of performance. Though it is not and should not be their only niche, young theatre makers whose education and early career have intersected with this pandemic may be in a unique position to spearhead these new industry shifts.

In an increasingly digital age and especially during a pandemic which has revealed the myriad ways digital platforms can be used to expand existing ways of doing things, it makes sense to allow room for expanding notions of theatre and performance. The aspects which most people cited as necessary for theatre to occur were either an audience or the element of ‘liveness,’ frequently some combination of the two. These are aspects which, in the above sections, have been established as having the potential to be recreated and, in certain ways, improved in virtual spaces. Streaming preserves the feeling of liveness while allowing audiences to be larger and geographically varied; interactivity is easier online and direct engagement from audience members is more normalized; digital spaces are in many ways an equalizer and make theatre more accessible to low-income people and those with vision or hearing impairments, as well as health or mobility issues.

The pause in, or at least the slowing down of, theatre making during the pandemic was one of the reasons given by interviewees for this feeling that there will be post-pandemic changes to the industry. The main reason is that practitioners are getting the opportunity to stop what they are doing and, sometimes for the first time, really consider it. Something which was unanimous among the people I spoke with was criticism for the burnout pace of a lot of theatre work. Not only did people feel that the speed with which they were used to working was unhealthy, it prevented them from being able to identify and fix what isn't working in their professional lives. The pandemic has offered both respite from overbooked schedules and has allowed time to find creative and effective solutions for the problems people are seeing in theatre.

I think that the pandemic is a unique opportunity for large scale change. This kind of change often requires a cessation of operation. No theatre company that wants to remain profitable is going to willingly shut down their businesses to make changes that are not immediately remunerative, but may take advantage of the halt in activity brought by the pandemic to implement necessary adjustments. One of these changes that I and the people I spoke with are cautiously optimistic about is addressing systemic white supremacy and racism in mainstream

theatre. A sustained focus on anti-racism in combination with the possibility of repositioning all levels of theatrical work—administrative and creative alike—provides an opening to rebuild the institution of American theatre in ways that further these anti-racist ideologies.

Though nothing has necessarily changed for the long term at this point, there was something funereal in many of the interviews I conducted. I think what was being eulogized was not the theatre itself, as no long-term alterations (however likely) have actually been made, but an easy and unearned confidence in the future that has been stripped away by the arrival of the pandemic. Even though people are not letting go of this orientation voluntarily, they do, nevertheless, seem to be willing to let it go. With this letting go I also saw a kind of paradoxical confidence in the resilience of artists, particularly theatre artists, to creatively address whatever comes next.

Though perhaps clichéd, I think that my biggest takeaway from this project has been that *the show must go on* is not just an overused theatre maxim but the living reality for people in the theatre. Indeed, the show not only must go on but is going on, and those who have been able to muster the energy to keep pace with it may be on the brink of a new kind of theatrical age, with all the pitfalls and possibilities that come with it. This project sprang out of my own anxieties about the pandemic and about the future, and while I did encounter some of these same anxieties in the people I spoke with, they also expressed a sanguinity I hadn't been anticipating. As this project concludes, I did not expect to be quite as buoyed as I find myself by the optimism I encountered. Though many were—and still are—daunted and overwhelmed by their current circumstances, people and companies have found ways to continue their commitment to their work and are finding joy in doing so.

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