

Pandemic Lessons

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ABSTRACT

In the middle of a graduate cohort's spring semester of an Applied Theatre program at CUNY School of Professional Studies, a global pandemic crisis catapulted artist-educators into digital space outside the realms and scope of their field and practice. Previously, the learned techniques students used to devise original, participatory and participant-centered theatre required in-person participation. Most devising techniques invite use of the whole body, touch, and movement, or at least being able to see more than the person's head in a square. In response to the global pandemic, the MA program in applied theatre switched from in-person learning to a virtual platform for distance learning. These unforeseen circumstances created a

situation in which students simultaneously learned about Theatre in Education (TIE) and remote devising for TIE. Course instructors formulated techniques to explore the strengths of virtual space and minimize the challenges of remotely crafting a TIE piece for virtual implementation. The pandemic disrupted in-person fieldwork experience, but the innovative techniques for remote play-building and collaborative devising of original works of theatre allowed one student-company to facilitate a virtual fieldwork experience within a field simulation class for Master's Social Work students whose field placements were also disrupted by the pandemic. Virtual applied theatre in social work education used innovative strategies to stimulate dialogue, interaction and change. Despite the pandemic's upheaval, this paper details how a group of four students successfully adapted applied theatre education, collaborative devising, and remote fieldwork implementation under pandemic conditions.

Graduate students in a Theatre in Education¹ (TIE) class in the Master's in Applied Theatre (MAAT) program at CUNY School of Professional Studies (SPS) had an assignment to develop and implement an original TIE piece. Early in the semester, we had in-person meetings to discuss the required readings. Guest presenters from the CUNY Creative Arts Team (CAT) performed their TIE work to provide a participatory, real world model. One example was a narrated TIE experience for very young children that taught them to respect reading material and resist intentionally damaging books. Another example was a TIE piece for adolescents that explored the question of loyalty and circumstances for possible betrayal, for example, when a person's life is in danger. The third example was a professional development training for adults who worked with homeless youth. The workshop interrogated relationship-building and facilitated skill-building for empathy.

¹ The term TIE generally refers to the use of theatre for explicit educational purposes, closely allied to the school curriculum and mostly taking place in educational contexts--schools, colleges, youth clubs, sometimes in museums and at historic sites. It tends to be a highly portable form of theatre, using minimal sets and lighting (if any), but practiced by specialist professional companies who aim to bring high-quality performance work into the classroom, school hall, or other venue. Above all, it will usually involve some element of interaction with the audience. (Jackson, 2008, p. 133)

Before the pandemic ended in-person class gatherings, we were in the process of forming working groups to devise our TIE pieces and then create a plan for implementing in the field. The class of eighteen students self-selected into the age groups with whom we intended to work. The age group possibilities were: pre-school (ages 3–4), elementary school (grades 1–5), middle school (grades 6–8), high school (grades 9–12), and then college and beyond, including non-traditional adult learning spaces. We were able to progress as far as selecting our groups and creating community agreements for working together; then the pandemic hit like a wrecking ball, demolishing our semester plans and the professors' syllabi. Under pandemic conditions and limited available options, we learned how to remotely:

1. Study applied theatre
2. Collaboratively devise an original work of TIE
3. Implement a TIE piece with a target population

LEARNING VIRTUAL APPLIED THEATRE

Much of the MAAT program's coursework prepared us for devising original theatre; however, the play-building class that ran concurrently with the TIE class was specifically designed to fill our tool belts with techniques and methods for the collaborative devising process. We learned techniques to find a theme, collectively brainstorm around that theme, conduct research, discover inspiration, build content, use theatre conventions, and identify structure and form. In this class, we practiced devising mini-plays, such as an object play (i.e., a play centered around an object, such as keys), place play (i.e., a play that focuses on a place, such as a train station) or theme play (i.e., a play that explores a theme, such as love).

To prepare us for remote applied theatre fieldwork, our professors in the MAAT program had to tap into their creative instructional methods. One main pitfall to avoid was how to do applied theatre and not applied visual media (e.g., TV, Film). Learning theatre while on camera was particularly challenging. The key seemed to be finding ways to capitalize on the areas that make theatre different from film and other forms of visual media. If you think of theatre and TV/Film as a Venn diagram (Figure 1), there are components of film that are just

film, components that are just theatre, and components that overlap.

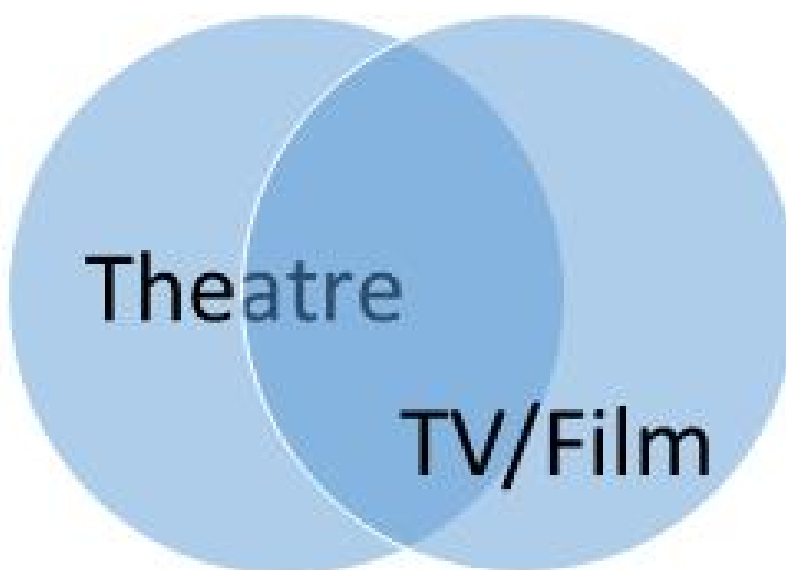


Figure 1. Theatre and TV/film Venn diagram representing the unique aspects and overlap.

Overlapping components are such things as the telling of a story and character revelations. Film has special effects to deliver larger than life visuals; and editing, to remove errors when, for example, actors trip over a prop or forget their lines. Theatre has exaggerated movements that allow actors to be seen at a distance; and, can incorporate the audience (e.g., energy or participation) into the performance.

Probably, one of the major and most important differences, especially for applied theatre, is that theatre is live and has a live audience **viewing the full production in real time** (even if that live audience does not share the same physical space as the theatre). Unlike film with identical performances, each performance of the same piece of theatre is unique and different. Live theatre plays to the audience that exists; whereas acting captured on film is the same for every audience. In theatre, the actors can respond to the audience and make immediate adjustments. Because of the real time experience, theatre has the potential to generate a special relationship with the audience. Relating to applied theatre, there is the possibility of interacting with the audience, creating a more intimate exchange, by enrolling audience members in a role in the drama. The unpre-

dictable—“anything can happen”—nature of theatre makes it more closely resemble life and the human condition. Theatre, without having to mimic, can reflect how people remain flexible and roll with imperfection; whereas with film, actors have as many chances needed to achieve perfection. Thus, by doing the majority of work in the area that is theatre (e.g., the use of silence and space) and then working in the area that they share (e.g., costumes and props), and trying to mostly avoid the area that is TV/Film (e.g., a focus on two people talking), the Theatre can exist through a screen.

Keeping in mind these similarities and differences between TV/Film and Theatre, we learned how to avoid being “talking heads” and worked to bring our whole selves into games, activities, improvisations, and scenes. One technique that was very helpful in the learning process was the use of challenges. The professor would challenge the students in small groups to figure out how each person could make a different entrance or exit or how to virtually pass a prop from one person to another. We adapted theatre games and improvisation exercises to be conducted remotely. We played with the different use of backgrounds, angles, lighting, and methods to add to the drama. We also learned the mechanics of various technology, such as the Zoom platform, a video meeting software, that we used to conduct class remotely. For example, we learned how to spotlight² a person when they were in the scene and how to turn off non-video participants.³ What became immediately apparent is that there is a difference between watching a play that has been filmed and watching a movie. The pandemic taught our professors how to teach us to do virtual theatre. The professors modeled how to navigate virtual space for theatre education. They provided effective, current examples of how we could use virtual theatre to our advantage and, simultaneously, how to mitigate the disadvantages of not being in-person. In that way, we relied on the assets of the technology and our own skill-sets.

² ‘Spotlighting’ is a technique used in Zoom wherein the host can make one person the primary active speaker and appear as the largest box on all participants’ screens.

³ ‘Turning off non-video participants’ means that when a person does not have their camera on, other participants can hide that person’s visual box—a representation that they are in the meeting—from view on the Zoom platform.

COLLABORATIVE DEVISING

Not only did the crisis push us into the experience of learning about TIE/play-building and how to facilitate TIE in an online format, which was extremely challenging, we also had to collaborate and devise our TIE piece remotely. Up until this point, all of our training in collaboratively devising original work had been in-person. We were able to create images and see the person's whole body and not merely their head through the small scope of a computer (or phone) screen. We could try out ideas and experiment with different forms of theatre. We could play together. We could interact in ways that demanded human touch (e.g., a handshake, a hug).

Unable to change the context of the pandemic, we had to move forward with our education under the given circumstances. As a group of four, we began with a collaborative brainstorming and mind mapping session for content. Using the white board feature on our virtual-platform, we brainstormed content important to us and connected the ideas to create a mind map, a concept developed by Tony Buzan; that is, a visual depiction of the related ideas (White, 2020). What did we want our TIE piece to be about? We identified overlap among the group members' ideas. We then conducted research to help us identify potential benefits of applied theatre in social work education and the field overall. We discussed how, when and where applied theatre could be useful. One helpful factor with the research was that one member of the student company is a social worker, and thus, has insider knowledge of and experience with social work education as a past student and current social work professor. Moreover, other team members had experience working with social workers as clients or colleagues; or, had a more familiar relationship with a social worker who had been a close and influential family friend. Because of these familiar relationships to social work, the team was able to pull from their own personal experiences and stories. Using a joint cloud file, we shared our work and ideas with each other. We created shared folders (e.g., inspiration, research) to organize our materials. We had several meetings within a three-week period to remotely and collaboratively devise our TIE assignment. Moreover, we noticed some aspects of remote collaborative devising operated similarly to in-person devising. One such aspect was to put the theatre in action and try ideas to make new discoveries that may be overlooked if the production remained a thought experiment. Once we could see and feel our work, we had

more sensory information from which to continue the creative process. For example, we recorded two group members improvising the scene while another group member took notes. This work became the basis of the scene's script. We continued to revise and refine each time we rehearsed. By simply starting somewhere, we were able to move forward. The progress was energizing and motivated us to find other moments of theatricality that could enhance the experience of our TIE program.

The pandemic changed the dynamic of the relationship between collaborators. We had to update our community agreements to take into consideration the context of the global pandemic and the ways it affected our group members. Innovative practices commit to care in a world whose institutions do not create the structures for care that we, as humans, need. We had to take better care of each other as human beings and that meant understanding that we could not collaborate or move forward with business as usual. We had to reconsider and redefine our access needs, or ways we needed to care for ourselves to be mentally and emotionally present in service of the work. With most in-person events moving to an online format, we had to give space for needing time away from the computer screen. We set boundaries around email responsiveness. Every session started with a check-in that usually lasted thirty minutes. We allowed ourselves the space and time to connect, and that connection informed the work and how we worked together. We listened to each other and tried to find ways to make each other's ideas successful. This process of finding ways to say "yes" to each other's ideas usually culminated in a combination of ideas that produced the best option for devising innovative applied theatre, which had greater potential to resonate with our target population.

An additional challenge was that we had to devise a TIE piece that could be implemented remotely. To find what worked as a remote presentation, we often switched back and forth between content and form. For example, we would think of a theatre convention that would come across well in a virtual space (e.g., hot seating⁴ or a scene), and then add the content. Sometimes we needed specific content to be included, and then determined the convention that would best highlight

⁴ 'Hot Seating' refers to a theatrical convention where participants, in role or out of role, have the opportunity to ask an actor, in role, questions in relation to solving a problem or better understanding the context of the action of the drama (Vine, 2019).

that content. For example, we wanted to emphasize the main character's reasoning for taking problematic action to give the character dimension. To accomplish our goal we developed a convention called 'Role-in-a-File' that is an adaptation of 'Role-in-a-Room'⁵ (Vine, 2019). In this file,⁶ along with other content, we added a case presentation and audio file of the character reading the case presentation. As accessibility and diversity in learning styles remain critical components in a remote setting, participants could elect to listen to this case presentation while exploring the contents of the file.

IMPLEMENTING REMOTELY

Prior to the pandemic, our fieldwork implementation would have taken place in-person in a classroom at a School of Social Work. Fortunately, our play-building course had also become virtual learning, so we were able to learn and practice techniques for remote TIE implementation. In short, the pandemic, and specifically, moving to an online format, greatly affected our education, disrupted our fieldwork experience, and significantly transformed the educational experience that we were able to receive, and thus, provide our target population.

Our target age group was college and beyond, specifically Social Work Master's level students (MSWs). At first, our student-company elected to work with clinical social work professors as a means of professional development. We defined clinical social worker professors as those who practice clinical social work and are professors of social work, or professors who do not practice clinical social work but are professors of clinical social work, as opposed to professors of research, community organizing or non-profit management. Clinical professors from this school had discussed wanting in-service training

⁵ 'Role-in-a-Room' is a practice that uses objects found in a fictional character's room for participants to reflect on what those objects might reveal about that person and interrogate subsequent assumptions. In our adapted 'Role-in-a-file', participants were invited to explore the contents of Grey Marling's student file. Through questions and conversation, they investigated the details of what happened in the scene and learned more about the character and their context.

⁶ We created this file using Word and exported the document into a PDF format. We linked sections of the file to Google Drive documents, so that when we clicked on the link requested by participants, the documents would immediately open in a web browser. We shared our screen over Zoom. Participants could see the list of content contained in the file and were able to decide which documents they wanted to investigate and in what order.

in liberation-based practice methods, which are practice methods from an anti-oppressive framework. We designed our TIE piece to focus on what liberation-based social work practice could be. We planned to implement the program with our target population during a faculty meeting. However, because of the pandemic, most faculty meetings were cancelled. In the blink of an eye, our target population and fieldwork experience evaporated.

The group decided that we did not want our hard work of designing a TIE program to be wasted, so we, fortunately, found a related target population in social work students. In order to graduate with an MSW, social work students have a required number of fieldwork hours to complete. When the pandemic began, many field placements (i.e., agencies wherein graduate students were interning in the field) closed. With field placements closed, MSW students were shut out, literally, and could not work with clients to obtain their requisite field hours. The school of social work went into crisis mode and received permission to allow students to complete hours in a newly designed field simulation course. Under ordinary circumstances, fieldwork simulations could not replace fieldwork. But here, the pandemic presented institutions of higher learning with unprecedented experiences. Their challenge opened the door for a second opportunity for the student company to implement the TIE piece. Perhaps a bit of theatre could bring their remote field education experience back to life. With a slightly different population (students instead of professors), the student company made some necessary revisions to the content.

For social work, one of the field's barriers to socially-just practice—which social workers are professionally and ethically mandated to perform (NASW, 2017)—is that clinical social work interventions often focus on individual-level factors and behavioral change without understanding or addressing the ways in which macro structures of oppression affect and inform clients' behaviors. This limited scope of focus and intervention may perpetuate oppression through a false narrative of choice, which does not acknowledge how anti-Blackness, racism, transphobia, sexism, ableism, xenophobia and other forms of oppression at the systemic and institutional levels remove agency in decision making. The train of thinking is, "if they just made a better choice, then..." But what if they don't have a choice, or one is not available to them, because they are 'making a choice' within a system that significantly limits the options? Is it really a choice if one

does not have the agency to decide what options they want? The pandemic, like an x-ray, revealed the brokenness of the choice myth. The choices one has are not usually of their own choosing. Think, for example, about the choices a great number of people had to make in the face of the pandemic. People who had no available or affordable options for childcare had to choose between leaving young children at home while they went to work or staying home and losing their job/income. Those who were showing symptoms of COVID-19 had to choose between caring for their health (or for a sick person in their household) or going to work and infecting others because their job does not provide paid sick leave. When a person's choices leave no other options but to be harmed, then we have a clear measure of a society's humanity. Thus, enter the social workers.

In June 2020, we remotely implemented our TIE project titled, *The File* (Hipscher et al., 2020), with two sections of the field simulation course brought together to participate. *The File* incorporates many innovative strategies for using drama to stimulate dialogue, interaction and change during these pandemic times and beyond. Through the use of various conventions like Role-in-a-File, we reinforced the idea that the participants are invited to participate. We adapted to the technology that was available through Zoom (e.g. white board, sharing screens, sound, and documents) to reduce passive observing and create an experience that developed from active engagement. Throughout the experience, we invited participants to feel what they are feeling and notice how it affected their bodies. In these virtual spaces, people have the potential to become disembodied. Theatre supports the process of re-engaging and remembering the body in moments where we, as humans and artists, might not pay attention to what is happening in our body. Justice must happen in the body, because it is the site in which we experience oppression (Taylor, 2018). To ignore how oppression lives in our bodies does not serve the project of liberation. Theatre has the potential to support this understanding through an anti-oppressive,⁷ embodied experience.

The File began with reflective questions that participants answered

⁷ Anti-oppressive practice challenges oppression—i.e., systemic and structural processes that produce inequitable outcomes for marginalized populations—in its multiple, intersecting forms and analyzes how power operates to marginalize people, as well as how collective power can liberate people from disempowering social contexts (Adams, Dominelli & Payne, 2009; Baines 2011; Capous-Desyllas & Morgaine, 2018; Mullaly 2002).

and were invited to add to a whiteboard on Zoom. The student company facilitated the discussion finding converging and diverging themes in relation to the field of social work. After this discussion, the student company invited participants to watch a scene between a social work professor and student. Using the capabilities on Zoom, participants could turn their videos off and hide all non-video participants, so they only see the actors' screens. This simulates an experience similar to the stage. Using this scene, participants unpacked what went "wrong" (that is, furthered some aspect of white supremacy or oppression) and what information they would need to make an informed decision about how to address the harms identified in the scene by such entities as the MSW student, field placement supervisor, and the social work school as an institution. Upon completing this conversation, one of the actors of the student company made a surprise entrance as a dean. The dean put the participants into role as social work professors on a committee designed to address problems that MSW students face in field placements. Having participants in roles encourages them to try on new or different perspectives, which ultimately might inform the way they think about their work and how they practice outside of the theatrical experience. The theatricality of role play utilizes aesthetic distance that allows participants to enter the space between conscious reality and an imaginative world. This gap permits participants to recognize themselves in situations and contexts while providing the fictional space needed for critical reflection and experimentation (Adams, 2013).

While still in role, participants investigated the liberation health model and the ways in which this affected the decisions of the characters. The liberation health model encourages participants to look at individual, institutional, and cultural factors that create the context of the current situation. This innovative strategy not only encourages participants to address micro level interactions, but to also understand how macro level processes may affect micro level events. Social workers require an understanding of how oppression influences and often forces micro level interactions (Jemal, 2017), directly relating to the false narrative of choice discussed earlier in the paper. Combining theatrical techniques with social work theory led to an effective, interdisciplinary synergy, stimulating dialogue and interaction about what resources and skills were needed and what attitudes and

practices needed to be changed.

After discussing the liberation health model, participants, still in role, began a process of developing a protocol to address the multi-level causal factors (i.e., individual, institutional and cultural) of the identified issues. For example, if the identified issue (e.g., angry outbursts at a client) is caused by an intrapersonal factor at the individual level (e.g., unresolved grief), then a potential solution in the protocol might be to suggest or encourage MSW students to consider counseling. A proposal to address an institutional factor could be to provide additional student-intern supervision, or for the school of social work to create a counseling center that provides services to the student community. In developing a protocol, we invited participants to rely on their imagination and dream up solutions to these large problems pertaining to processes and practices. Theatricality and being in role supports this process of radical imagination.⁸ Chris Cooper writes, "Theatre...is the most efficient sign system because it can be used to create drama in which the ontological cohabits with the existential – the kitchen table and the universe" (Cooper, 2013, p. 54). Theatre facilitates connections between our lived experiences (the kitchen table) and macro level processes (the universe), and how those interact. Theatrical strategies invite us to dream new possibilities and futures with an analysis of our current moment. As David Pammenter writes, "Our TIE praxis should 'disturb' our audiences. It should help them make and remake meaning from out of that disturbance. It should help them reassess the way they perceive the world and their role within it" (Pammenter, 2013, p. 84). In combining reflection with theatrical strategies, we, as applied theatre practitioners, encourage participants to make meanings from these experiences and apply it to their lives. That is the power of theatre—including virtual applied theatre in social work education—to stimulate dialogue, interaction and change during these times and the times to come.

⁸ Radical imagination taps into the unknown to focus attention on imagining solutions to address the oppressive roots of society's problems (Khasnabish, 2019).

SUGGESTED CITATION

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Alexis Jemal, LCSW, LCADC, JD, PhD, assistant professor at Silberman School of Social Work-Hunter College, is a scholar, writer, activist, educator, social entrepreneur and critical social worker whose mission is to recognize and respond to oppressive policies and practices to prevent and eliminate domination, exploitation and discrimination that pose barriers to life, wellness, liberty and justice. Dr. Jemal's research integrates participatory action research methods, critical theory and the creative arts to develop and test multi-level and multi-systemic socio-health practices that incorporate restorative justice frameworks, radical healing and liberation health models to address structural, community and interpersonal violence.

Tabatha R. Lopez (she/her/hers; they/them/theirs) holds a B.A. in ethnic studies and philosophy of the arts, and is a Queer, brown, Latinx, final year M.A. in Applied Theatre student. Tabatha's mission is to collaborate on artistic educational projects that aim to bridge and mend gaps between communities and generations through culturally responsive practices, critically engaged methods, and art-forms that facilitate community-based solutions through the power of story-telling, theatre, and community centeredness and participation. Of particular interest to Tabatha are the roots of systems, and community agency

through empowerment and cultivation of decolonized knowledge.

Jenny Hipscher (she/her; they/them) is a Brooklyn-based theatre artist and massage therapist, pursuing a Master's in Applied Theater at CUNY. With a BA in American Studies from Wesleyan University, she has trained with [Double Edge Theater](#), [Pig Iron Theatre Company](#), and [Bont's Independent Republic of Failure](#) in Spain. She's been a member of [Readymade Dance Theater](#) in Albuquerque and [GreenHouse Theatre Project](#) in Columbia, MO, and is currently with Agile Rascal Bicycle Theatre. Integrating theatre, education, and the healing arts, Jenny continues to deepen her understanding of trauma-informed care and the ways systemic oppression is held and healed in individual and collective bodies.

Brennan O'Rourke (they/them; ze/zir) is a white, queer, trans-femme theatre practitioner, sexuality health educator, teaching artist and poet dedicated to queer inclusivity and anti-oppressive practices. Brennan holds a BA in Dramatizing Justice from NYU's Gallatin School of Individualized Study, which explored theatre and its relationship to communities' histories, identities and memories in efforts to create and imagine justice. As a director and facilitator, Brennan commits themselves to stories that challenge and expand definitions of performance in ways that uplift the project of liberation. Brennan is currently pursuing an MA in Applied Theatre at CUNY School of Professional Studies.