ARTSPRAXIS

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Emphasizing critical analysis of the arts in society.

ArtsPraxis Volume 7, Issue 2a looked to engage members of the global Educational Theatre community in dialogue around current research and practice. This call for papers was released in concert with the publication of ArtsPraxis Volume 7, Issue 1 and upon the launch of the new ArtsPraxis homepage. The submission deadline for Volume 7, Issue 2a was July 15, 2020.

Submissions fell under the category of Educational Theatre in the Time of COVID-19.

Educational Theatre in the Time of COVID-19

From the time government agencies and the press reported the emergence of a novel coronavirus in late 2019, there has been a fundamental shift in the way we congregate, communicate, and educate across the world. Artists and educators have been called upon to reinvent their practice seemingly overnight. While we struggle to balance our personal health and wellness, our community contributions remain as vital as ever. In tribute to this reinvention, ArtsPraxis invited contributors to share their scholarship, practice, and praxis. As we've asked before, we welcomed teachers, drama therapists, applied theatre practitioners, theatre-makers, performance artists, and scholars to offer vocabularies, ideas, strategies, practices, measures, and outcomes.

Article submissions addressed one of the following questions:
- How and why do we teach drama and theatre through distance learning?
- How do teaching artists navigate residencies in a virtual space?
- What is the role of drama education during a pandemic?
- How do we prepare future theatre artists and educators when fieldwork is disrupted?
- What are innovative ways of devising original works and/or teaching theatre using various aesthetic forms, media, and/or technology?
- How can integrated-arts curricula facilitate teaching, learning and presenting the craft of theatre in an online environment?

- How do we assess students' aesthetic understanding and awareness online?
- How can drama provide a forum to explore ideas online?
- What are innovative strategies for using drama to stimulate dialogue, interaction and change at this time?
- How is theatre being used to rehabilitate people in prisons, health facilities, and elsewhere when social distancing is mandated and a health crisis is evolving in these spaces?
- What ethical questions should the artist/educator consider in online work?
- How is theatre for young audiences innovating in the digital space?
- Theatre for Young Audiences has always been in the forefront of theatrical innovation. So how can social distancing be achieved while presenting work for young audiences?
- How do we define and measure success in theatre for young audiences in the digital space?

We encouraged article submissions from interdisciplinary artists, educators, and scholars engaged in work associated with these topics. Our goals were to motivate a dialogue among a wide variety of practitioners and researchers that would enrich the development of educational theatre in the coming years.

Call for Papers
Papers were to be no longer than 4,000 words, had to be accompanied by a 200 word abstract and 100 word biographies for the author(s), and conformed to APA style manual. For this issue, articles could include traditional academic scholarship and narratives of practice.

Reviewing Procedures
Each article will be sent to two members of the editorial board. They will provide advice on the following:

- Whether the article should be published with no revisions/with revisions.
- The contribution the article makes to the arts community.
- Specific recommendations to the author about improving the article.
- Other publishing outlets if the article is considered unacceptable.

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Cover image from NYU's Program in Educational Theatre, Dramatic Activities in the Secondary Classroom, 2020.

Educational Theatre in the Time of COVID-19

Editorial: I Can't Breathe

JONATHAN P. JONES

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I can't breathe.

This sentence has haunted me for all of my life.

As a young person, growing up in an idealized setting in Central Islip, a hamlet on Long Island, New York, widely known as the birthplace of post-war suburbia, tranquility and community subsumed my life. Most homes on our street, Myrtle Avenue, were different shades of the same three bedroom, split-level ranch. Next door at number 29 lived the Barbera family: mom (who shared a first name with my maternal grandmother, Doris), dad, elder son, and younger daughter, Lisa Marie. Understand, these are my earliest memories of the neighborhood and my life. The son would drive his Pontiac Firebird (black with light brown and gold namesake firebird appliqué on the hood)—naturally too fast and too loud, but appropriately seductive for the mid-1980s. When she got her license at 16, Lisa would drive her parents' newly purchased Dodge Aries. I'd watch from the window as they would come and go. If my siblings or I were out in the front yard,

Lisa would always give a wave with a warm, welcoming smile. This is what neighbors were to me—a picture-perfect painting of family and community.

Occasionally, I would go out alone in our backyard and climb along the fence that separated our yard from theirs. In summer, Lisa frequently sunbathed in a bikini on a folding lounge chair. Tanning, driving—this is what being a teenager appeared to be. But there was something more inviting—something that undoubtedly marked my life in more ways than I could possibly have imagined in those early years. Lisa had a singing voice like an angel. And so, it was no wonder that she was cast in the lead roles of her high school musicals: Dorothy Gayle in *The Wizard of Oz* in 1982 and Sandy Dumbrowski in *Grease* in 1983. This was 1980s American suburbia—and this was just what you did—what you *aspired* to do.

Figure 1: Lisa Barbera as Dorothy Gayle in the 1982 Central Islip Senior High School Production of *The Wizard of Oz*, directed by Matt Paduano.

Those performances were my first trips to the theatre. The auditorium at Central Islip Senior High School was cavernous—seating nearly a thousand audience members in the aqua blue upholstered chairs. It was a magical place then and it would continue to be later in my own teenage years. But as a child, sitting at the rear of the orchestra on house right, we watched as the girl next door was transported into the magical land of Oz—and I was hooked on theatre from that very moment.

And like the land of Oz, there was a dark underbelly to the idyllic suburban portrait—the human reality that nothing is ever so perfect as it seems. Lisa Barbera was afflicted with asthma. And so, just days after her 18th birthday in March of 1986, she found herself unable to breathe. As I recall, her mom found her—she'd collapsed at home. In the week that followed, she was hospitalized in a coma. I vividly remember my mom telling us that Lisa was improving—she could go to the bathroom on her own. At six years old, I'm not sure how I processed the physical properties of that—but I was told it was an improvement and that was the essential piece of information I needed to satiate my worry. There were a lot of prayers that week—and a lot of hope—but then came the tragic news.

At the time, I was in first grade at St. John of God School. Sister Eleanor was leading the morning prayers over the loudspeaker, as she did every day. Part of the morning ritual was to read off a list of intentions—folks for whom we should pray. The last on her list was a teenager who had passed away after a brief illness. My teacher, Mrs. Cone, asked if that was my neighbor, and I replied, "No, it can't be. My mom said she's doing better." And so I went through the day with hope and optimism riding high.

But Lisa wasn't better. She had died. My mom took my older sisters to the wake at Maloney's Funeral Home in the days that followed. I was too young to go—my mom was concerned that an open casket might be too traumatizing for me and my brother—the youngest of the five children—so only my three older sisters were allowed to go. After, my sister Tanya told me that the casket was closed. The family decided to donate her organs—she was "cut up," by Tanya's telling.

The next morning was the funeral service. We arrived to the church just as they were about to bring in the casket. As you can imagine, a popular senior in high school attracts a crowd, so my family had to stand through the service due to our late arrival and the short

supply of pews in the small parish church at St. John of God. Joseph, Lisa's dad, had his arm wrapped around Doris as they walked up the center aisle to their seats; she appeared tiny and child-like. Doris' face was so deeply red—a portrait of grief that has never managed to escape from my memory. We sang "On Eagle's Wings" at the close of the service, ever a staple in our church repertoire—forever tied to Lisa's funeral in my memory—long before Joe Biden would quote from the hymn during his victory speech when he was projected the winner of the 2020 United States' presidential election—a comforting tribute to the families of those who had lost a loved one to COVID-19.

> *You who dwell in the shelter of the Lord*
> *Who abide in his shadow for life*
> *Say to the Lord, "My refuge—my rock in whom I trust"*
>
> *And He will raise you up on eagle's wings*
> *Bear you on the breath of dawn*
> *Make you to shine like the sun*
> *And hold you in the palm of His hands.*

On the breath of dawn. We processed from the church down Wheeler Road that morning, passing the high school where those musical performances had embedded such joy into my soul. Along the one mile route to Queen of All Saints Cemetery, Lisa's peers paraded on the sidewalk for the entire journey. There was a final blessing in the small chapel, but it was much too small for the mourners to gather inside—so my family were out in the grass among the stricken classmates on that misty day. We waited in line and made our way inside—and there before her flower-covered silver casket, my mom whispered to us, "Say a prayer and say goodbye."

About two days later, Joseph came by our house to bring us some food. The outpouring of support from friends and neighbors had been overwhelming and there was just too much food for the three of them. My younger brother Jason didn't understand at all what had happened or why. We stood at the railing at the top of the stairs as Joseph relayed to my parents that they were holding it together as best they could. Jason piped in, "But where did Lisa go?" And Joe responded, "Well, she's gone over the rainbow."

Doris was never the same after that week so far as I could tell.

She never smiled. She rarely came by. She was ashen and red-faced, often silent and always sad. What else could she be? She never really recovered, and ten years later, she too died young. She was entombed in the mausoleum at Queen of All Saints where Lisa's body lay—mother and daughter together into eternity. Her daughter couldn't breathe and nothing could ever be the same.

HAUNTED

A few months later, my sister Nikki was hospitalized—she was 11 years old at the time. She shared the middle name 'Marie' with Lisa, and she too had asthma. One day, she told my mom that she couldn't breathe so they went to the doctor and he told them he had to admit her. While Nikki was in the hospital, my mom took us to the hospital parking lot—we were too young to go in as visitors, but she knew we needed to see her, even if only from the window. Because of Lisa. Having an asthma attack and going to the hospital meant only one thing in our young lives: she can't breathe and she's going to die. And so that viewing from the hospital window was for proof of life—to help us process that this time, things could be different. And thankfully, they were—but each day of Nikki's two week stay was no less terrifying for her or any of the rest of us.

My sister Tanya had asthma too, but it wasn't asthma that sent her to the hospital. Seven years after Lisa's untimely passing, Tanya and Nikki had taken a day off from school. My parents had been fighting much of the night, so they didn't want to leave my mom alone with my dad—but as my father passed out from drinking, my sisters decided to go see Nikki's boyfriend in the late morning. Much had changed in those seven years. Sun tanning was still a habitual part of summertime teenage existence, but driving wasn't an automatic privilege—at least not in our house, so they were walking. And as they crossed a busy intersection, Nikki was hit by a car. She was taken by ambulance to the hospital and a neighbor came to get my mom and take her there, leaving my father asleep in the house. He awoke when another neighbor came by to alert him of the accident and take him to the hospital as well. When my mom returned home with Tanya, Nikki, and my dad in the early afternoon, the fighting resumed. And as was the case in those days, my dad would get close to hitting my mom—and so Tanya stepped in between them. He hit her in the chest. She told him,

"Don't you *ever* put your hands on me again," and ran from the house.

A few minutes later, Tanya's friend Melanie came running into the house to tell my mother, "Tanya can't breathe."

And so my mom called 911. Police and an ambulance were there in no time. My brother Jason arrived home from school to this devastating scene. My mom told the police that she couldn't leave my drunken father home with Jason while she went to the hospital with Tanya—so the police told her that they would arrest my father and take him into custody if Tanya approved.

At this moment, my school bus turned the corner onto Myrtle Avenue. I'd been at school all day—I knew nothing of all that had transpired. But as we came up the road, there were the swirling lights of the ambulance and police cars—a sharp contrast to the suburban paradise of my youth. The younger kids on the bus said, "What's going on?" I looked from the window just as we were at number 29 and saw the police leading my father out of the house in handcuffs. My mom was talking with another group of police and trying to calm young Jason. After years of the drinking and abuse, I exclaimed, "Yes! They're finally taking him away."

When I got off the bus, I went to my mother. "Nikki's been in an accident," she told me. "I'm going to the hospital. Take care of your brother." And she climbed into the ambulance and they took off. And the police left. And when I went inside, there was Nikki, bruised and bandaged, crying on the couch. I was completely confused—wasn't *she* in the ambulance? Melanie sat with me. "It was Tanya in the ambulance," she said. "Your dad hit her in the chest and she couldn't breathe."

DISTRESSED

In September of 2011, I was visiting my family. My sister Danette was pregnant with her second son when she started to feel the familiar disquiet of early labor. As a teenager, I'd had a somewhat similar experience with my sister Nikki when she was pregnant with her first son, Zachary. I sat up with her all night as her contractions grew stronger and more close together. Between the pain, we talked about her hopes for her son and her anxieties about giving birth—up until we decided it was time to alert my mom that she needed to take her to the

hospital. But with Danette, this was a different situation—because it was much too early. At only seven months along, she drank some water and waited to see if the contractions would subside—but they never did. So I took her to the hospital.

There was a flurry of activity in the room over a period of hours—steroids to develop the baby's lungs ("just in case") and injections to stop the contractions—but little Steve came just the same. I have 3 nieces and 9 nephews now, but this was the only time I was in the room when one of them was born. Of the twelve, Steve was eighth in line, so my family had seen a lot of babies over a seventeen year period leading up to that time. And with each pregnancy, there was a steady flow of information—and those steroid shots to help the lungs develop were always spoken about, but never so necessary as they were then.

Danette was also born two months early, so this was not entirely unthinkable, but in the intervening decades between her birth and Steve's, hospital care had changed significantly. As such, it came as quite a shock that Steve would have to stay in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) for a month. So many wires and monitors, learning appropriate handwashing long before the pandemic made it customary, the smallest little cannula to deliver a steady flow of oxygen—these are the images that have stayed with me—and, of course, that he was the tiniest little baby I had ever seen.

His older brother Ian chose the baby's name. "Not Steven?" Danette asked. "No. His name is Steve," Ian replied. I was still there in the hospital later in the day when Ian arrived. Understand, the NICU is a quiet place. If anyone speaks, it is only in hushed tones as no one wants to disturb or distress the tiny newborns. The atmosphere was foreboding and I could sense Ian's apprehension as we approached. I helped him wash his hands and we followed his mother into the small corner of the NICU where Steve's incubator was set up. Ian had seen three of his cousins come home from the hospital—so he had a clear vision of what young Steve was meant to look like. And to his seven year old eyes, his expectations were unmet. He gave a small and quiet wave to his baby brother—a welcoming (Figure 2), of sorts. Ian didn't have a Lisa next door when he was six, so this experience was less alarming to him than it would have been for me at his age. "What are those tubes for," he asked. "Those are there to help him breathe," I told him. "Oh," he said. And I thought, *just keep breathing, little guy. Just*

keep breathing.

Figure 2: Ian waves hello to his little brother, Steve.

SCARRED AND HAUNTED

Over the last twenty years, I've lost four family members and one family friend to chronic obstructed pulmonary disease (COPD). First, it was my grandfather, Edwin L. Cole, in 2007. Just before his 80th birthday in 2002, he found himself unable to breathe. He was hospitalized for a short while and diagnosed. We had a large surprise gathering for the momentous birthday and I remember him coming into the fire-hall dragging an oxygen tank behind him. His hair was thinner than I remembered, as was he—though I'd only just seen him at Christmas a few months before. His voice was raspy, barely audible. He was slow and deliberate, a shadow of the man I had known for all of my life. And while he was grateful to have us there—his five daughters, twelve grandchildren, and the first handful of great-grandchildren—he struggled for every breath.

Just a few years prior, my mother, Donna Cole Jones, found herself in a similar situation. 27 years younger than her father, she too became ill and unable to breathe. She was hospitalized then for a short while and diagnosed. She'd smoked religiously since she was a

teenager, as had her parents before her, and we watched over a twenty-year period as her ability to breathe grew more challenging as each year passed. She continued working and shopping—going about her regular life—yet each time she came into the house, she would be gasping for air. "I have to catch my breath," I heard her say dozens—if not hundreds—of times. She'd never stopped smoking though she'd tried to quit again and again. But, in a large and ever-growing family, there were a lot of difficult patches—and as her stress would rise, her need to smoke followed apace.

For the last two years of her life, she was home-bound. Simply walking from her bedroom to the kitchen winded her. Just last year, I was washing dishes on Christmas eve; she was looking at Facebook on the computer when I heard a loud and distressing gasp come from across the room. She'd just lost consciousness for a few minutes, but I didn't know that at the time. "Call the ambulance," I shouted to my sister, Danette. I knelt there cradling my mom in my arms and looked into her lost eyes and whispered, "Just keep breathing, mom. Just keep breathing." The paramedics arrived shortly thereafter and by that time, she'd regained consciousness and had resumed flipping through pictures on Facebook. They said it was not unusual for someone in late-stage COPD to faint, but they saw no immediate evidence of stroke or heart attack. They recommended she go to the hospital to get checked out, but she refused. It was Christmas and she'd spent too many holidays in the hospital. She was staying home.

We came to her until COVID-19 kept us apart. And in her isolation, she smoked only more, asking at our daily calls, "When will things get back to normal?" I'm not one to sugarcoat difficult truths, so I responded, "I'm not sure they ever will." And as the pandemic raged on, so too did her COPD, until it snuffed away her last breath.

In the intervening years, my cousins' grandmother, Geraldine Cutrie, was also diagnosed. Tethered to her oxygen compressor, we visited her routinely. She did successfully quit smoking—but COPD is a progressive killer. Though her decline was less noticeable—at least to me—she too succumbed to her inability to breathe. Her son, my Uncle Douglas, followed suit, the day after my mom passed away. And just this fall, her granddaughter and his daughter, my cousin Tara's best friend, Jackie Lynn Steele Haas, succumbed to the illness as well. And in each case, the mantra was omnipresent: I can't breathe. I can't breathe. I can't breathe.

HUNTED

I only had one experience where I couldn't breathe. Around the age of ten or eleven, I walked alone to the 7-eleven convenience store which was around the corner from our house. My mom was volunteering for bingo night at St. John of God, my dad was at work, and my siblings were engaging in their latch-key mischief at home. I collected my coins and made my first adventure away from our house alone to buy a Slurpee and sunflower seeds.

I wasn't supposed to go out alone—no one even knew where I was—but this was a first moment of independence. I had enough money and I was emboldened by my budding-adolescence—and so I walked. While on the walk back—supplies successfully procured—three neighborhood boys approached my path. Mike and Simon Clark lived across the street from us. Simon was just a year older than me. They'd moved onto Myrtle Avenue a few years prior, sometime after Lisa Barbera's death and her family's subsequent moving away (the house bearing too many memories of their beloved Lisa)—though the Clark's too lived in one of the other cookie-cutter split-level ranch style houses. We were fast friends for a few years—but there were other influences in the neighborhood who were less kind. And as time went on, the Clark boys became better friends with Pedro Aragonese who lived on the next street. It was years in the making, but the unraveling of our friendship was complete by the time I'd made that journey.

Pedro and Mike egged on Simon. "Go on. Hit him."

I hadn't been much of a fighter as a kid, but I knew enough to know that running away wasn't an option. So I put my Slurpee and sunflower seeds down on the sidewalk and prepared to fight—whatever that was going to look like. 'Sucker punch' is the best characterization for what followed. One hit, straight to the gut. It wasn't much and didn't leave a mark—but it did its requisite damage. With the wind knocked out of me, I couldn't breathe.

I clutched my chest in horror. Pedro and Mike continued with their side coaching; this time focused on me. "Go on. Hit him back," they cajoled. But I could just barely catch my breath.

And so, this couldn't continue. After what seemed like forever, my wind returned and I burst into tears. I bent down, gathered my loot, and walked back to my house in shame. The boys were calling after me, "That's right. Run home you little cry baby!"

I tuned them out and walked on with less dignity but sure-fire gratitude for the air in my lungs.

TRAUMATIZED

As a living being, there is nothing so vital as the need for breath. Whether the ever-disappearing Amazon rainforest—artfully described as the earth's lungs—or the fish fleeing dead-zones in oxygen-depleted stretches of the ocean, the desperate need for breath is omnipresent in our modern world. And as a living, breathing being, the need for breath is well-known to me, but made all the more vivid by the afflictions and violence that stole the air from the lungs of those that I have loved. While Nikki, Tanya, and Steve overcame those early hospitalizations, so many more have been less lucky. And given these personal experiences, it is not at all surprising to me—though endlessly, hauntingly horrifying—to hear the cries for breath across this country and now around the world.

July 17, 2014—Eric Garner is put in a chokehold by police officers in New York City for selling loose cigarettes on the sidewalk. Unarmed and Black, his last words—his last pleas for mercy—are unsurprising and yet, horrifying. "I can't breathe."

August 24, 2019—Elijah McClain is put in a chokehold by police officers in Aurora, Colorado for wearing a ski mask and dancing in the street. Unarmed and Black, his pleas for mercy—are unsurprising and yet, horrifying. "I can't breathe."

May 25, 2020—in a Minneapolis street, a police officer places his knee on the neck of George Floyd for nine and a half minutes. Three other officers are on the scene and fail to intervene. Unarmed and Black, his pleas for mercy—are unsurprising and yet, horrifying. "I can't breathe."

In June of 2020, *The New York Times* documented 70 cases over the past decade where folks ranging in ages from 19 to 65—more than half Black—died at the hands of police after voicing, "I can't breathe" (Baker, et. al.). Each time I read one of their stories—each time I hear one of their names, that haunted feeling surrounds me. I've seen what asthma and COPD can do—and each time this intentional suffocation

is brought upon someone—often unarmed and Black—I am traumatized. Read their stories. Say their names. Stand against this inhumanity. They are just trying to breathe.

BREATHE

In a cable news appearance in the days following George Floyd's murder, Maya Wiley, University Professor at the Milano School of Policy, Management, and Environment at The New School and now candidate for Mayor of New York City, described the moment in which we find ourselves as "a pandemic within a pandemic." The pandemic of racism, racial injustice, and oppression has been a feature of American life for 400 years. And be it a lynching, a chokehold, or a knee on the neck, suffocation has served as a potent threat to maintain the subjugation of a people who face shorter life expectancy (Bond & Herman, 2016) and "higher prevalences of obesity, diabetes, hypertension, and chronic kidney disease" (Price-Haywood, et. al., 2020). And within this pandemic of racial oppression and disproportionate health afflictions, enter the novel coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, and the viral pneumonia of COVID-19. Predictable but still shocking—"In a large cohort in Louisiana, 76.9% of the patients who were hospitalized with COVID-19 and 70.6% of those who died were black, whereas blacks comprise only 31% of the Ochsner Health population" (Price-Haywood, et. al., 2020).

As of this writing, the United States has surpassed 250,000 deaths from COVID-19 (Murphy and Siemaszko, 2020). Each day, hundreds or even thousands are added to that number. Every one, a name. Every name, a story. Every story, a heartbreak. I. Can't. Breathe.

So what are we to do? At George Floyd's funeral, Rev. Al Sharpton delivered a eulogy that appropriately responded to our predicament: take your knee off our neck.

> But God took an ordinary brother from the third ward, from the housing projects, that nobody thought much about but those that knew him and loved him. He took the rejected stone, the stone that the builder rejected. They rejected him for jobs. They rejected him for positions. They rejected him to play on certain teams. God

took the rejected stone and made him the cornerstone of a movement that's going to change the whole wide world. I'm glad he wasn't one of these polished, bourgeois brothers, because we'd have still thought we was of no value. But George was just George. And now you have to understand if you bother any one of us, it's a value to all of us. Oh, if you would have had any idea that all of us would react, you'd have took your knee off his neck. If you had any idea that everybody from those in the third ward to those in Hollywood would show up in Houston and Minneapolis, and in Fayetteville, North Carolina, you'd have took your knee off his neck. If you had any idea that preachers, white and Black, was going to line up in a pandemic, when we're told to stay inside and we come out and march in the streets at the risk of our health, you'd have took your knee off his neck, because you thought his neck didn't mean nothing. But God made his neck to connect his head to his body. And you have no right to put your knee on that neck. (Sharpton, 2020)

This is not uniquely an American story. As Martin Luther King, Jr. told us, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" (1963), so we all have work to do in service of removing the knee from the neck of the oppressed everywhere. For some, asthma is genetic; for others, it can be caused by air pollution. For environmental justice, we will fight. For many, COPD is caused by a history of smoking. For education and awareness, we will fight. For victims of domestic violence, we will fight. For victims of preventable disease, we will fight. And in the face of systemic racism, the cycle of poverty, implicit and explicit bias, we will fight.

Just last year, I quoted from Emma Lazarus' *The New Colossus*, speaking then for the dignity and justice for refugees and immigrants. If we ever needed evidence, let it be clear—there is only one narrative—

Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door! (Lazarus, 1883)

Yearning to breathe free. On eagle's wings. Lisa Barbera. Edwin L.

Cole. Donna Cole Jones. Geraldine Cutrie. Douglas Cutrie. Jackie Lynn Steele Haas. Eric Garner. Elijah McClain. George Floyd. And too many more.

Take a deep breath. Lift your lamp. Welcome them in. And let's get to work.

PREVIEW OF ISSUES 7a AND 7b

Faced with lockdowns and the requisite turn to distance learning, educators everywhere took to action. My colleague, friend, and member of our editorial board, Daphnie Sicre, immediately put out an international call for suggestions and advice on how to teach theatre online, crowd-sourcing a life-raft of suggestions for all manner of activities and content, [Teaching Theatre Online: A Shift in Pedagogy Amidst Coronavirus Outbreak](). A month later, I realized that in light of new approaches being spearheaded across the field—whether for teaching theatre, directing and producing theatre, or using theatre to process trauma, isolation, and depression—the need to document this experience was vital, and so I put out a call for papers for Volume 7, Issue 2a—an issue that would be open to narratives of practice in order to draw in a cross section of practitioners from across the field, rather than prioritizing academic research to which we might normally adhere.

And then George Floyd was murdered. And my mom died two days later. And my uncle the day after that. And protests erupted across the United States and, indeed, around the world. And in spite of my grief, I saw very clearly the work ahead: "A pandemic within a pandemic," Maya Wiley said. In many fields, a total reassessment was needed: where have we failed and what can we do? In educational theatre, we were not immune—we needed that reassessment too. But as reading lists were furiously posted on social media; as well-meaning but perhaps ill-advised statements of solidarity were added to email signatures; as an outpouring of unheard voices in the theatre community flooded our consciousness, I realized—*I know some folks who have been in this fight for a long time—and while a reassessment is necessary, there is good work out there that we need to center—to promote—to raise up.* And so I put out another call, this time for

Volume 7, Issue 2b. We are only scratching the surface in these companion publications, but I am grateful to our contributors who have elected to share their work with us in order to push the field forward.

Issue 2a

In Issue 2a, the articles focus on educational theatre in the time of COVID-19 and cover the scope of classroom-based educational theatre practice in urban and rural K-12 settings, colleges and universities, and on implementing research-based theatre online. **Roxane E. Reynolds** describes her experience transitioning to remote instruction in a secondary school in Dallas, Texas. **Jessica Harris** illuminates the ways in which the digital divide (lack of access to high speed internet to rural areas and/or folks from low-socioeconomic backgrounds) in rural Fluvanna County, Virginia challenges theatre educators to re-think their approach to distanced learning.

On the college front, **Alexis Jemal, Brennan O'Rourke, Tabatha R. Lopez, and Jenny Hipscher** were tasked with devising a theatre in education (TIE) program for a course at CUNY School of Professional Studies in New York. Their liberation-based social work practice required a new approach as they transitioned online. **Cletus Moyo and Nkululeko Sibanda** document transitioning practical theatre courses to distance learning at Lupane State University in Zimbabwe, echoing the challenges related to equity and access that Harris experienced. **Chris Cook, Tetsuro Shigematsu, and George Belliveau** at the University of British Columbia in Canada query: What teaching practices endure in the online research-based theatre classroom, and what new ways practices were fostered through their emerging partnership with technology?

For the final article in this issue, **Saharra L. Dixon, Anna Gundersen, and Mary Holiman** take us out of the classroom and into the field with their reflection on creating and presenting *The #StayHome Project*, a devised ethnodrama. Their article explores theatre's ability to help communities process collective trauma, build resiliency, and facilitate dialogue around politics and what it means to return to a "new normal".

Issue 2b

In Issue 2b, the articles focus on social justice practices for educational

theatre. First are a series by theatre artists and practitioners who espouse theoretical frameworks for engaging in social justice theatre education and theatre making. **Durell Cooper** explores the connections between hip hop pedagogy and culturally responsive arts education in a 21st century arts education framework. **Rebecca Brown Adelman, Trent Norman, and Saira Yasmin Hamidi** propose ethical questions that artists and educators should consider when navigating social justice and anti-racist topics. **Lucy Jeffery** shares her conversation with award-winning playwright Natasha Gordon about her experience as a Caribbean-British actor and playwright whose debut play *Nine Night* (2018) made her the first black British female playwright to have a play staged in London's West End. The conversation evaluates the importance of Gordon's work and visibility on the National Theatre and West End stages. Finally, **Aylwyn Walsh, Alexandra Sutherland, Ashley Visagie, and Paul Routledge** present a glossary of arts education practice that they developed after analyzing the key social justice concerns faced by young people in Cape Flats, South Africa, setting them against the learning from their arts-based project, *ImaginingOtherwise*.

The second series includes articles that look at the possibilities for social justice in drama pedagogy. **Joshua Rashon Streeter** considers process drama as a liberatory practice to reposition theatre educators as critical pedagogues. **Catalina Villanueva and Carmel O'Sullivan** analyze the critical pedagogical potential of drama in education (DIE) for the practices of Chilean teachers. **Alexis Jemal, Tabatha R. Lopez, Jenny Hipscher, and Brennan O'Rourke** provide a critical reflection on their work and experience providing a forum for social work students to explore social and racial justice and innovative strategies for using drama to stimulate dialogue, interaction, and change. Lastly, **Amanda Brown** leaves us with a provocation for race and inclusion in theatre programs: For whom are we creating a welcoming space?

LOOKING AHEAD

Our next issue () will focus on articles under our general headings (drama in education, applied theatre, and theatre for young audiences/youth theatre) looking to engage members of the

educational theatre community in our ongoing discussions about theory and practice. In light of the breadth of contributions we received for these current issues, we will again include a call for narratives of practice in addition to traditional academic research. That issue will publish in mid-2021. Thereafter, look to the Program in Educational Theatre at NYU for information on the Verbatim Performance Lab and Volume 8, Issue 2 of *ArtsPraxis* which will again have a focus relating to current trends in the field—more specifics will be available when Volume 8, Issue 1 is launched. Until then, read, rest, recharge, and get to work.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Jonathan P. Jones, PhD is a graduate from the Program in Educational Theatre at New York University, where he earned both an M.A. and a Ph.D. He conducted his doctoral field research in fall 2013 and in spring of 2014 he completed his dissertation, *Drama Integration: Training Teachers to Use Process Drama in English Language Arts, Social Studies, and World Languages*. He received an additional M.A. in English at National University and his B.A. in Liberal Arts from the NYU's Gallatin School of Individualized Study. Jonathan is certified to teach English 6-12 in the state of California, where he taught Theatre and English for five years at North Hollywood High School and was honored with The Inspirational Educator Award by Universal Studios in 2006. Currently, Jonathan is an administrator, faculty member, coordinator of doctoral studies, and student-teaching supervisor at NYU Steinhardt.

Jonathan has conducted drama workshops in and around New York City, London, and Los Angeles in schools and prisons. As a performer, he has appeared at Carnegie Hall, the Metropolitan Opera, Town Hall, The Green Space, St. Patrick's Cathedral, The Cathedral of St. John the Divine, The Southbank Centre in London UK, and the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. He co-produced a staged-reading of a new musical, The Throwbacks, at the New York Musical Theatre Festival in 2013.

Jonathan's directing credits include *Hamlet, Twelfth Night, Julius Caesar, Elsewhere in Elsinore, Dorothy Rides the Rainbow, A Midsummer Night's Dream, Bye Bye Birdie, The Laramie Project, Grease, Little Shop of Horrors*, and *West Side Story*. Assistant directing includes *Woyzeck* and *The Crucible*. As a performer, he has appeared at Carnegie Hall, the Metropolitan Opera, Town Hall, The Green Space, St. Patrick's Cathedral, The Cathedral of St. John the Divine, The Southbank Centre in London UK, Bord Gáis Energy Theatre in Dublin, and the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. Production credits include co-producing a staged-reading of a new musical, *The Throwbacks*, at the New York Musical Theatre Festival and serving as

assistant production manager and occasionally as stage director for the New York City Gay Men's Chorus since 2014, most recently directing *Quiet No More: A Celebration of Stonewall* at Carnegie Hall for World Pride, 2019.

At NYU, his courses have included Acting: Scene Study, American Musical Theatre: Background and Analysis, Assessment of Student Work in Drama, Development of Theatre and Drama I, Devising Educational Drama Programs and Curricula, Directing Youth Theatre, Drama across the Curriculum and Beyond, Drama in Education I, Drama in Education II, Dramatic Activities in the Secondary Drama Classroom, Methods of Conducting Creative Drama, Theory of Creative Drama, Seminar and Field Experience in Teaching Elementary Drama, Seminar and Field Experience in Teaching Secondary Drama, Shakespeare's Theatre, and World Drama. Early in his placement at NYU, Jonathan served as teaching assistant for American Musical Theatre: Background and Analysis, Seminar in Elementary Student Teaching, Theatre of Brecht and Beckett, and Theatre of Eugene O'Neill and worked as a course tutor and administrator for the study abroad program in London for three summers. He has supervised over 50 students in their student teaching placements in elementary and secondary schools in the New York City Area. Prior to becoming a teacher, Jonathan was an applicant services representative at NYU in the Graduate School of Arts and Science Enrollment Services Office for five years.

Recent publications include *Paradigms and Possibilities: A Festschrift in Honor of Philip Taylor* (2019) and Education at Roundabout: It's about Turning Classrooms into Theatres and the Theatre into a Classroom (with Jennifer DiBella and Mitch Matteson) in *Education and Theatres: Beyond the Four Walls* (edited by Michael Finneran and Michael Anderson; 2019).

In addition to his responsibilities at NYU, Jonathan teaches Fundamentals of Public Speaking, History of Theatre, and Introduction to Theatre at CUNY: Borough of Manhattan Community College.

Theatre through a Computer: A Critical Reflection of Online Teaching during the COVID-19 Pandemic

ROXANE E. REYNOLDS

IRVING INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

ABSTRACT

The following paper chronicles my experiences as a high school theatre teacher during the school closures and state shutdowns caused by the COVID-19 Pandemic in the spring of 2020. The critical reflection identifies struggles and success in the areas of communication, participation and overall emotional and mental health of students and teachers, due to the environmental shift from in person to online learning. My school community (Dallas, TX) and personal pedagogical lens are described to help further contextualize the inquiries and conclusions of this reflection. It is important to note that this paper acknowledges the ongoing nature of the COVID-19 Pandemic and does not seek to provide permanent answers or solutions to an ever-evolving crisis. The aim of this paper is to reflect on my unique struggles and success as an online educator and to explore the impact of theatre on child development, specifically during times of traumatic crisis.

On March 13th, 2020 I sat in front of a classroom of very excited and restless high school students in Dallas, Texas. My students were counting down the minutes until the official start of Spring Break and feigned interest as I explained our emergency, "At Home Learning Plan." This plan provided students with the platforms, Google Classroom and Remind101, where they could find assignments and contact me in the event that schools were shut down due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The week leading up to Spring Break was filled with students shuffling through the library to retrieve laptops and teachers cleaning off all surfaces in their rooms for the mandatory sanitizing. During my last period Musical Theatre class, I happily cleared my desk and windowsills of all the stuffed animals, pictures of performances and supplies that had accumulated and felt grateful I would return to a clean space in April. As we said our goodbyes, I naively assured students that we would be together again soon and reminded them to wash their hands. I was gloriously ignorant to the dystopian months ahead.

In the coming months, I watched in horror as my former home of New York City was ravaged by disease with the ominous knowledge that Dallas, Texas could be next. I also experienced growing pains as a first time online teacher. I consistently felt frustrated, defeated and frankly, ineffective as an educator. In this article I will reflect on the experience of virtual teaching during the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic, and draw on the expertise of multiple practitioners and theorists to further analyze how this abrupt environmental change impacted communication, participation and the overall well-being of my school community.

As I reflect on my unique experiences it is important to identify the community and culture of my school, along with my personal pedagogical lens. The 2019-2020 school year was my first year teaching in Texas after returning from eight years on the East Coast and multiple years working as a teaching artist in Manhattan. After receiving my MA in Educational Theatre from NYU, I was hired to fill a high school theatre teaching position for 9th-12th grade students in Dallas, Texas. My position was occupied by a myriad of substitutes the prior year and had originally been vacated by a seasoned educator who was escorted off campus in handcuffs, due to an inappropriate

relationship with a student. Safe to say, there was a clear feeling of mistrust amongst the student population, in regards to the theatre department. Of our nearly 2,500 students, over 80% identify as Hispanic and over 60% are identified as economically disadvantaged and at risk for dropping out. While our Title I campus offers multiple AP/IB courses and has an advanced Collegiate Academy, our overall state accountability rating remains low at an unimpressive C (*Public Schools Explorer*, 2019).

Beyond the statistics and ratings, I experienced my students to be remarkable and longing for love, consistency and genuine kindness. In Barbara Strauch's (2003) text, *The Primal Teen*, Chairman for the American Psychiatric Association in Vermont, David Fassler, identifies that, "kids without nurturing childhoods enter the potentially turbulent territory of adolescence with—a kind of 'pseudo maturity,' leaving them more 'malleable and susceptible' to the tempting tugs and pulls of adolescence" (p. 214). Fassler's description encapsulates what I saw in my students and their "pseudo maturity" often manifested as a mistrust and disdain for authority, communicated through a dark hoodie and refusal to participate. In some cases the dark hoodie was not the chosen mirage of maturity, and students seemed wise beyond their years due to adult realities like parole officers, a household full of dependent siblings or the understanding that they were truly on their own with no familial support. However, even this wisdom reeked of "pseudo maturity," as these students were well behaved and driven, but terrified to show glimpses of their true selves and refused to ask for what they needed. And I also had a handful of students who were well-supported and passionate thespians, but their malleable minds still adapted to an environment filled with children feigning adulthood for survival.

While I was a nervous newcomer in August, by March the ice had melted, and my classroom was a space of love, laughter and risk. Even during difficult class periods, of which there were many, I felt connected to and proud of my students. In January I was joyful and relieved when a district mentor observing my class stated, "you teach with so much love and your students feel it." Love is the foundation of my process driven pedagogy, where I value the development of the child over the product or resulting performance. Due to my process-focused approach, I was very resistant to the competition centric climate in Texas. However, throughout the year I found that process

and competition could coexist in a meaningful way. Students responded remarkably well to the goal-oriented structure of competition and the road to the results allowed for exploratory, experimental and fun work. Through competition I saw students laughing, yelling and becoming fully invested with no fear of looking foolish. I adapted my pedagogy, as I realized that competition awakened the children in my classroom and shattered the pseudo maturity armor they had walked in the door wearing.

I was hopeful that the rapport and relationships I had built with my students and colleagues would survive the strains of online learning, but communication was the first fatality of the environment transition. In her text, *All About Love*, professor and activist Bell Hooks (2001) states that, "it's not what you do, but how you do it" (p. 116). Hooks' explanation concisely captures the importance of clear, and loving communication. In the first weeks of online learning our "how" was often frenzied and frantic. As teachers we were receiving policy changes hourly by email and were being threatened through curt correspondence about the penalties for not "clocking in" through the online form by a certain time each day. Furthermore, many of our students had no Wi-Fi connection or access to laptops and we were diligently attempting to make contact with every student by phone. This endeavor presented the obstacles of language barriers with many parents, along with out of service and out of date phone numbers in school records. It became clear that every flaw in our system and weakness in our communication strategy would be magnified and exacerbated by online learning.

Throughout the year I faced many failures in the classroom, but one of the standout successes was the high level of communication and connection I experienced with my students. Modeled after the work of practitioner Viola Spolin (1986) I attempted to create a theatre classroom where students felt ready to, "connect, to communicate, to experience, and to experiment and discover" (p. 2). We spent the first month of school co-creating a communicative environment where I could turn over a floundering lesson or rough day to students and ask, "How can we make this better?" I knew we had succeeded in creating an inviting space when even students who chronically skipped class and were labeled hallway "wanderers," were in the room participating in warm ups. Online learning meant that we no longer operated within the safe confines of our co-created classroom, and students were not

only lacking materials, but many began working full time to help support their families. I was shocked when I had students joining Zoom video classes from their cars on break from a construction site or the break room of the nursing home they worked in. I felt my online assignments must be tediously trivial to students facing such adult realities. While I was grateful and endlessly impressed with students' dedication to "attending" class, I also saw the reemergence of the "pseudo maturity" armor I had worked so hard to help them shed.

Furthermore, as a faculty we struggled to agree upon what we actually expected of our students during this time. I have often followed the tenet laid out in Dr. Grant Wiggins' (2005) *Understanding by Design* that, "only by having specified the desired results can we focus on the content, methods and activities most likely to achieve those results" (p. 15). Our administration was urging us to not overwhelm students with work and to create assignments that met standards, but were less work intensive. However, every time I asked my students how classes were going they often said that they felt extremely "overwhelmed" and that teachers were sending them multiple lengthy assignments a day. Throughout the year I had often sensed animosity from veteran teachers towards our administration and this tension was exacerbated by the tenuous task of distanced learning. Teachers were all working tirelessly to do what we believed was best for our students, and for some this meant ignoring the administration's instructions. As an arts teacher I understood the impulse to rebel against uniformity, but I also felt that the various formats for attendance and assignments from teachers were needlessly confusing. This is a rare instance where I think we needed to surrender some of our autonomy as educators, to the greater good of presenting an accessible united front.

Alleviating some of the stress from our communication struggles, were a few gratifying successes. Bell Hooks (2001) tells us that, "when we choose to love we choose to move against fear-against alienation and separation," and our school community made this choice to love as we honored and celebrated our seniors (p. 93). Our school leaders designed a "Senior SWAP Day," during which seniors drove through the school parking lot to return books and uniforms and "swap" them for their caps and gowns. Students then took professional pictures in a safe and socially distanced manner and were cheered on by mask wearing faculty members.

Similarly, we had personalized gifts made for our thirteen theatre

department seniors that I delivered to their homes. Seeing where students lived was heartbreaking at times, but also inspiring. Some of my brightest and kindest students were living in small one-bedroom apartments with a family of five or six, something they had never mentioned or complained about. Many of these students had said they were grateful to have a roof over their head, and in these moments I recognized authentic, not pseudo, maturity and wisdom. I knocked on doors and wore a huge grin under my mask, as I saw my students for the first time in months. I felt I was communicating better with my students in these very short interactions, than I had in all of the Zoom calls or messages on Google classroom. As an artist and drama teacher, I suppose it should be no surprise to me that communication goes far beyond words; sharing space with someone is energizing and loving in ways that we can never fully replicate through online interaction.

Many of the obstacles that blocked communication, also contributed to a severe drop in participation among students. I often watched the news and felt frustrated as I saw images of virtual classrooms with over fifteen students attentively interacting with their teacher. I wondered shamefully if these images were photo shopped somehow, because I felt grateful if even four students attended a virtual meeting. One factor that contributed to this lack of participation was sleep patterns. During the first weeks of online learning students would begin checking in and turning in assignments as early as eight in the morning, but as weeks turned into months, this changed drastically. Reporter and editor Barbara Strauch's (2004) text, *The Primal Teen*, explains that teenagers, "naturally start staying up later and sleeping later in part because melatonin flows into their brains later—and also linger(s) later in the morning" (p. 159). This late influx of melatonin could account for why some of my students would message me apologizing for "sleeping through the Zoom meeting," even if the meeting was at one in the afternoon. Beyond the biological inclination for later and longer periods of sleep, students were often alone in their rooms while their parents worked. This lack of interaction and stagnant environment, predictably, led to lethargic behavior.

Accompanying their irregular sleep cycles was a severe lack of motivation that worsened as the pandemic persisted. Theorist and educator, Gloria Ladson-Billings (2009), tells us that it is vital to, "provide instructional 'scaffolding' [so] students can move from what

they know to what they need to know" (p. 124). I believe strongly in scaffolding and have witnessed how clear structures and classroom rituals empower students to take ownership over their learning process. During in person classes I was determined to inspire this level of ownership in my students and was a relentless cheerleader using humor, singing, dancing and even candy to encourage a proactive spirit. Students were even annoyed into accountability, as I stood over them or chased them down the hallway to remind them about an assignment or redirect their "wandering" back to my classroom. These methods were effective motivators on campus, but useless during distanced learning. I'm also aware that our fractured approach as a faculty caused a coma of confusion for some of our students; they did nothing because everything seemed unclear. And lastly, there was the district policy to refrain from "punitive grading" and that the grades during online learning would not be factored into student GPA. While I appreciated the compassion of this policy, I do think it removed a potential motivator for students to participate and complete assignments. I saw the emergence of toxic "pseudo-maturity," as students took it upon themselves to decide that learning garnered no benefits, if it did not impact their GPA.

In an effort to encourage participation and motivate students through small successes, I created assignments that could be completed in multiple small steps. In my research for online teaching guidelines, I found professor and researcher Brené Brown's (2020) tip to deliver information in, "small chunks—no more than 30 minutes online." In accordance with this rule I posted a concise list of assignments for the week. This list included two assignments for students to complete and then broke them down into steps that provided necessary knowledge and scaffolding. I utilized podcasts, short performance videos and recorded my voice over interactive PowerPoint presentations to engage students. I moved all of my classes into playwriting, as this seemed to be the most accessible way to provide an imagination enriched escape from reality. In the beginning stages of the unit I asked students to read or watch one 10-minute play as the week's first assignment and then complete a critical reflection worksheet. In this reflection they were asked to identify specifics about plot structure, character development and overall message, drawing on previous knowledge we had learned earlier in the semester. The final goal of the unit was for students to write their

own 10-minute play, so I also asked them to identify what they would like to "steal" or emulate in their own writing.

As the unit progressed, and students began writing, the assignments were focused on creative thinking and finding inspiration. For example, during the image inspiration assignment, students were provided with a myriad of images and asked to give a title to each one. The images included: cartoons, animals, black and white photos, landscapes and even celebrities on the red carpet. In an effort to garner investment, I included images of celebrities and some anime characters that I knew would speak to the interests of certain students. After students looked at the images and created the titles, the second assignment for the week was to pick one title and describe two characters and a conflict for the play. Students allowed themselves to respond with humor and creativity and created stories ranging from a fox struggling with kleptomania, to a Hollywood starlit with an embarrassingly enthusiastic costar. When I graded these assignments, I found myself truly laughing for the first time in weeks. Escaping into their imaginations allowed the genuine spirit of my students to re-emerge from beneath the disease-ridden rubble, bringing joy to themselves, and gifting hope to me.

As a practitioner I have often stated that for some students their imaginations are their safe haven, but I have never been in a situation where every single student, and teacher for that matter, needed a shelter from the storm. As the playwriting unit progressed I learned from my students that our imaginations are the ideal solution to our search for safety, because we all have one and when we share them they grow. Practitioner Peter Slade (1964) once described the phenomenon of "absorption [as] being completely wrapped up in what is being done, or what one is doing, to the exclusion of all other thoughts" (p. 2). As we neared the end of the semester and the completion of their 10-minute plays, students eagerly escaped into their imaginations and some truly exceled as playwrights. I read student plays about a raccoon who is in therapy for his relationship issues and a reimagined version of Pixar's *Inside Out*, where a team of brain workers argue over what their human should have for a midnight snack. I also saw the renewal of the proactive spirit I had hoped to cultivate in my students. A student shared that she wanted to write a play about the small town in Texas where her family was from, not for a grade, but to inspire others to share their stories and roots. These

fantastical and reality based worlds became a light, not only for my students, but also for me. Reading and giving feedback on students' work was a window into the connection and creativity we experienced in the classroom. In these moments I was reminded of the importance of storytelling for connection and as a tool to see a world beyond our current reality.

While a large portion of my students excelled and found escapist freedom in playwriting, it is important to admit that this was not the case for all of my students. Many students were consistently missing assignments and making no contact with me. In order to keep accurate attendance and to ensure the safety of our students, I made phone calls, sent messages and reached out to other teachers each week for students I was concerned about. I was observing the relief writing and creativity provided many of my students, but it seemed the students that needed this most were maddeningly unreachable. In addition, the painstaking process of calling and emailing was exhaustingly methodical, clinical and, as my students continued to say, "overwhelming."

Lastly, I feel it is vital to reflect on how the transition to online learning impacted our overall well-being and health as a community. Practitioner and activist Augusto Boal stated that, "oppression is embodied" and this is exactly what I experienced and observed throughout distanced learning (Bukhanwala, 2014, p. 8). Staying isolated and away from our friends, colleagues and students was the necessary step to keep everyone as healthy and safe as possible, but it was a form of oppression at the merciless hands of COVID-19. During video calls I watched as once vibrant, sarcastic and lively students shrunk to lethargic shells of themselves sitting in a dark room. Furthermore, I saw a decline in my colleagues and leaders as they inadvertently carried the weight of their sadness and exhaustion into our virtual meetings. In conversations with parents I could feel that they were running on adrenaline and trying to keep their family's heads above water. On a basic needs level many of our students were waiting in long lines at our school, sometimes even running out of gas, to try and retrieve food and sustenance for their families. I also witnessed a terrifying decline in students who were not comfortable in their own homes, but no longer could turn to school as their safe haven. And personally, I experienced moments of excruciating helplessness, where I felt powerless to shield my students from the

traumatic, and potentially detrimental, impact of this experience on their development and health.

The antidote to helplessness and powerlessness is often found in reflection and understanding how we can do better for our students. In the text *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, Loyola University Professor Ruby K. Payne (2005), explains that we must provide our students with, "cognitive strategies, appropriate relationships, coping strategies, goal-setting opportunities, and appropriate instruction both in content and discipline" (p. 139). In reviewing this list I feel that our students were missing the fundamental element of coping strategies in a situation where they needed them most. Through assignments, video calls and school community building activities, we were providing our students with opportunities to set goals, strengthen relationships and receive instruction, but not providing coping strategies. As a staff we were receiving articles about best practices for working at home and our administrators were encouraging us to exercise and get outside when we could. These were tools that we shared with our students, but the deficiency was really in the lack of healthy habits and practice using these tools. I regret that wellness and self-care were not a stronger part of my curriculum and I am dedicated to modeling and teaching more of these strategies to my future students.

I embarked upon this critical reflection with an intense drive to analyze my mistakes and uncover some hidden secret to successful online learning in the arts. Inspired by Bell Hooks' (2001) beautiful words that, "the space of our lack is also the space of possibility," I felt I could uncover this possibility through a somewhat myopic reflection of an ongoing crisis. While I do feel there are useful takeaways regarding clear communication and the importance of structure and scaffolding, my biggest takeaway is gratitude. I am of course grateful to all educators, our fierce administrators and to parents and guardians, but I am mostly overcome with gratitude for my students. My high school students brilliantly reminded me that storytelling and imagination are the illuminators we turn to in the darkness. Stories unite us and whether they are fantastical and escapist or raw and unfiltered, they are the ultimate connector and true power of theatre.

Our country is suffering from disease of the body, mind and heart, as we face a merciless virus and a long overdue reckoning for systemic racial injustice and senseless denial of basic human rights. As I write this conclusion, I am preparing to return to a classroom with

great anticipation and fear of what teaching safely in the time of COVID-19 will look like. However, I have hope. I am hopeful because that "space of possibility" is occupied by all of our students, as they teach us to listen through storytelling and illuminate the way forward by daring to imagine.

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Development.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Roxane E. Reynolds is a drama educator currently working at a high school in Dallas, Texas and is a certified teacher in both New York and Texas. She received her MA in Educational Theatre from NYU in 2018 and received her BA in Musical Theatre from American University. She has worked as a teaching artist throughout Manhattan, as well as a full time teacher at the Salk School of Science. Roxane's drama classes are rooted in critical thinking and empathy and cultivating a culture of inclusiveness, equity and kindness.

Supporting Students in Rural Regions in the Age of Distance Learning

JESSICA HARRIS

EMPOWERED PLAYERS

ABSTRACT

As theatre educators shift to embracing virtual and distance learning strategies, it is important to recognize that not all online spaces are created equal when it comes to ensuring positive outcomes for students. For communities in rural areas, virtual learning might be difficult or practically inaccessible, due to lack of reliable internet or inability to facilitate remote work. Furthermore, virtual spaces may prove to be challenging in the replication of ensemble-oriented work that fosters students' social skills and self-concept. This lack of access and support creates inequitable outcomes for students in rural Fluvanna County, Virginia. Reflecting upon Fluvanna's arts education nonprofit Empowered Players (EP), this article addresses the significant challenges that arts educators in rural areas may face in implementing distance learning. The article highlights important considerations for teaching artists striving to replicate emotionally-supportive environments, and for those working to eliminate barriers to entry into the virtual space. Using my experiences with EP as a case

study, the article seeks to provide possible answers and innovations for teachers searching for equitable and sustainable models for distance-learning / socially-distant theater education.

INTRODUCTION

For Empowered Players, an organization located in rural Virginia, the COVID-19 Stay-at-Home orders and unplanned shifts to virtual learning led to important considerations on how to meet social distancing guidelines, foster safe environments for students, and preserve high-quality arts experiences. As these adaptations were made, significant changes to organizational structure and classroom engagements also presented challenges for students for whom distance learning is either a) not possible or b) does not provide the same level of engagement needed for positive development.

Primarily, for an organization that serves nearly one hundred students of a variety of backgrounds and needs each semester, safety concerns necessitate a move to a distance learning model, but this model must be innovative, engaging, and equitable. Additionally, in rural communities like Fluvanna, one-size-fits-all virtual learning opportunities do not exist, as students have varying levels of access to internet, transportation, and extra-curricular opportunities. Thus, many factors and elements must be considered in order to provide the best experiences to students as possible.

I serve as the Founder, Artistic Director, and chief educator for Empowered Players. For the past six years, I have studied theater education and nonprofit management—examining the impacts of arts in education, youth development, and social justice. I have grown up in the Fluvanna area and continued to teach with EP throughout college and graduate school, now returning to the area as a teaching artist and educator. Using my experiences with Empowered Players as a launchpad for further dialogue, I hope to share my reflections on engagement and emotional support of students.

RURAL AREAS & ARTS

When examining the difference in arts access in rural areas as

compared to more urban cities, the greatest presumed barriers are often geographic location and cost. In a recent survey by the National Endowment for the Arts (2017), roughly 40% of rural arts organizations consider the lack of available broadband internet an obstacle in competing with other arts organizations, compared to just 14% of urban-based companies. Comparatively speaking, urban areas are more likely to have access to home broadband than rural areas (Perrin, 2019). The NEA (2017) also found that 32% of rural arts organizations consider local roads and transportation a barrier to competing, whereas only 10% of urban organizations feel transportation is an obstacle. While rural areas may offer quiet neighborhoods and a slower pace of life, the limited access to internet, cultural hubs, and artistic experiences proves challenging.

In Fluvanna specifically, there is limited industry and a scarcity of available jobs located in the community. As such, residents have an average commute time of 31 minutes (Data USA: Fluvanna County, Virginia). Given this reality, a large number of students' parents commute, and thus may be unable to drive from Fluvanna to other localities after returning home from work. Average per capita income in the county is around $39,000, thus presenting a hurdle in affording access to paid extracurricular experiences (U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts). Demographically, the county is roughly 80% White, 15% Black, and 5% Other (U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts).

With regards to internet access, a report by the Center for Innovative Technology (2017) found that roughly 15% of Fluvanna has no access to the internet. 22% of those with internet access depend on inadequate and/or expensive services, and 61% share that their access does not adequately meet their needs (Center for Innovative Technology, 2017).

In terms of the arts, the local school system only offers theater education at the high school level, limiting the opportunities students have to remain engaged. In Fluvanna, the nearest opportunities for extra-curricular theater education are at least thirty minutes away, where costs of even one-week camps can be exponentially high and sometimes upwards of $1,000. Thus, even if students and families are able to make the sacrifice to engage in those experiences, sustaining such involvement may prove challenging in the long-term. With the increased commuter time and limited in-county after-school experiences, students are relegated to in-school experiences and other

affordable options for involvement. Therefore, the need for broader community engagement, connection with students, and opportunities for achievement and growth becomes even more paramount.

BENEFITS OF ARTS EDUCATION IN THE COVID-19 AGE

Addressing inequities in access to arts education is key, as numerous studies show that the arts improve the academic, social, and emotional experiences of students. To begin, Catterall (2002) found that for 8th graders who engage with the arts at a high level, they were four times less likely to drop out of school than those who engage at a low level. Things such as test scores and community engagement levels, as well as grades overall, are higher for students who engage with the arts (Ruppert, 2006)—and even so, these measurements highlight only narrow aspects of achievement in non-artistic realms. Additionally, Catterall, Chapleau, and Iwanaga (2000) find that "sustained student involvement in theatre arts (acting in plays and musicals, participating in drama clubs, and taking acting lessons) associates with a variety of developments for youth: gains in reading proficiency, gains in self-concept and motivation, and higher levels of empathy and tolerance for others" (p. 2). These findings serve as a reminder of the importance of arts education, particularly during unprecedented times when students face increased isolation from peers and new academic challenges.

In today's day and age, the COVID-19 pandemic has hit southern rural areas hardest, with limited resources available to support individuals in these areas (Dorn, Cooney, & Sabin, 2020). One source (Leatherby, 2020) indicated that as of October 2020, rural areas accounted for the worst COVID outbreaks in the U.S. More specifically to Fluvanna, the county faced at least two significant outbreaks of the coronavirus (Virginia Department of Health, 2020), and cases continue to rise (USA Facts, 2020). Thus, for students who are already facing educational, economic, and health disparities, access to the arts and a community that values them and their development is not only a desire, it is essential. For programs like Empowered Players, Fluvanna's only extra-curricular theater organization, determining how to provide a safe haven and place to continue growing as artists and individuals is imperative.

OVERVIEW OF EMPOWERED PLAYERS

Empowered Players is a 501(c)3 nonprofit 501(c)(3) designed to impact the community by increasing access to the arts. The organization promotes youth empowerment, is dedicated to community service, and believes the arts have the power to unite. The mission of Empowered Players is "to uplift the human spirit through access to quality arts experiences, youth empowerment, and community service" (ABOUT | Empowered Players).

EP's goal is to expand access to the arts to bring the associated benefits of academic and personal development to underserved individuals and communities. While creating high-quality artistic content is a goal of the program, the main focus of EP's work is to facilitate and promote Positive Youth Development (PYD). PYD as defined by Benson et al. (2007), primarily involves fostering "youth access to positive experiences, resources and opportunities, and of developmental outcomes useful to both self and society" (p. 895). Thus, our arts camps, classes, performances, and volunteer activities seek to enhance self-concept, increase confidence, and inspire community engagement. This work collectively aims to foster positive developmental outcomes for youth in rural areas, continuing to close gaps in access and enhance more than sheer acting skills.

Now entering its fifth year of operation, EP offers seven programs each semester and during the summer. Around one hundred students participate in a variety of arts offerings including community classes, performance troupes, arts enrichment activities, and mentorship programs. Students' demographics reflect that of the larger county, with roughly 80% of participants identifying as White, 15% as Black, and 5% as Other. While we do not ask for students' economic status, I conjecture that the demographics of EP participants reflect the county's economic statistics.

Derived from the understanding that the arts impact students in a myriad of ways and inspired by a desire to encourage community engagement among students, EP's work revolves around the importance of bringing the transformative power of the arts to individual students and to the greater community (Ruppert, 2006). By viewing the arts as a vehicle for community connection and increased student outcomes, Empowered Players begins the important work of increasing student and community connection, and bridging the divide between these two groups.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CREATING IN-PERSON THEATRICAL SPACES

Given the aforementioned challenges students face in Fluvanna county, providing safe, positive spaces for learning and growing is a hallmark of Empowered Players. All of EP's in-person programs focus on the following aspects:

a) Beginning each rehearsal with a check-in to promote a sense of community and connection;
b) Emphasizing the value of process as being equal to, if not more important than, the value of the product;
c) Each rehearsal, notes for student performers are rooted in positivity and constructive feedback – giving students the chance to take ownership of their performance;
d) Each student is expected to facilitate a positive classroom environment through their words and actions—remaining engaged participants and uplifting one another.

Conceptually, the rationale behind the rehearsal structure ties back to the PYD approach. Program goals focus on making each student feel welcomed in the space, encouraging them to make strong connections with each other in the rehearsal, and helping students understand they have a community that accepts and supports them. EP seeks to use a strengths-based approach as opposed to a deficit-based model (Lopez & Louis, 2009) to help foster positive student connections. Inviting students to share their strengths and abilities promotes a positive culture in which students feel valued and from which deeper connections can form. Further, theater programs like EP utilize role theory, or the phenomenon where students can use acting out roles and parts as a way to practice social interaction, enhancing relatedness more concretely (Hughes & Wilson, 2004). This type of creative exploration helps our students develop empathy and grow in interpersonal skills and fosters positive, safe, and collaborative working spaces.

Since our programs value the importance of creating, we focus on providing what Mary Ann Hunter (2008) describes as a multidimensional safe space. These are understood as environments where students feel emotionally supported and free to explore and take

creative risks, all of which are tasks essential to emotional development and growth. We ascribe to the ideology that instead of simply being safe spaces, our environments must be intentional in fostering students' creative exploration, collaboration, and team-building in ways that enhance student experiences. As Hunter (2008) notes and I agree, these spaces provide a physical safe haven for students in arts education, but can also increase connection, push boundaries, and grant students the freedom to explore and take risks.

CHALLENGES TO DISTANCE LEARNING

As we made the shift to virtual learning, EP immediately recognized there would be challenges faced by both directors and students in the virtual world. While these obstacles are in no way unique to rural areas, many problems are exacerbated by the county's geographic position and limited economic and technological resources. As this adjustment to virtual learning was made, we explored various program options for the different ages and grades we serve. For our high-school acting troupe (9th-12th Grade) comprised of sixteen students, we selected a show specifically designed to be performed on Zoom for free to a larger audience. Rehearsals were two hours each and held on Zoom periodically, consisting of character work, 'staging,' and cast-bonding opportunities. While directors strived to eliminate as many limitations as possible, the difficulties of the rehearsal process and performance persisted.

The first barrier encountered was lack of internet access. As we cast the show and began rehearsals, a student needed to drop out of the production entirely, as their internet access proved unreliable and they did not have the capability of attending a virtual rehearsal. Even for those who were able to attend virtual rehearsals, given the lack of broadband and students' unstable internet connections, over half of our students were often kicked offline, experienced garbled audio/visual, or frequently had to reboot their computers. Wanting to provide as seamless an experience as possible, we were faced with the question of whether or not we should look into investing in individual hotspots or other technical supports for our students. Yet as an organization with limited financial support, we faced the challenging decision of which supports we could provide and how we could continue to offer high-quality instruction given limitations.

A second and crucial barrier to our students' learning was the inability to physically and emotionally separate home life and theater life. Five out of sixteen students in our troupe listed this as a concern in their engagement. Studies have shown that after-school spaces allow for students to enhance their creativity in a space separate from a school context, and allow for strengthened relationships and self-expression (Hurd & Deutsch, 2017). Thus, students need interactions that are not just within their school context or one specific setting – and after-school programs provide one such outlet.

This understanding leads to the question: what happens when these settings collide, or even clash? While working on a production during stay-at-home orders, a student voiced that she had difficulty turning home off since there was no actual theater or rehearsal space in which she could feel separated from the daily engagements of home. Our student's experience further demonstrates the importance of having a supportive in-person creative space that is not connected to the student's home life or living situation. Students in our out-of-school programs are able to separate school, home, and workplace environments during our time together. Yet, given distance learning, all of these environments become inseparable.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR ORGANIZATIONS UNABLE TO FULLY SHIFT ONLINE

As distance learning continues to be a requirement for safety, providing equitable opportunities for students becomes paramount. Thus, three important considerations emerge:

1) How can theater programs offer offline and online versions that are similar, if not essentially equivalent?
2) Given potential internet challenges, what are solutions to bridge the gap between those who have access and those who do not?
3) In what ways can online programs provide a safe haven for students to create and grow together?

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

While we cannot wholly solve internet disparities or fully remove students from their home environments for our classes, there are a few structures and exercises we identified to help eliminate disparities. These solutions are particularly salient for programs in rural areas, and/or programs that focus on socioemotional development and process-making in their educational offerings.

Technological Supports

As has been established throughout this article, students experience incredible inequities in internet access and reliability. If the primary mode of educational offerings is through synchronous Zoom sessions or other virtual meetings, then as many students as possible must be granted access to connect in this way. We found that if students' rooms were positioned far away from their router or modem, their connection would frequently cut out. Thus, explaining this solution to parents, particularly those who may be able to offer students spaces closer to the router, is important. Additionally, a low-cost solution to internet issues may also include providing students with an Ethernet cable to connect their computers directly to routers – enhancing their signal and reducing the likelihood of stressful disconnections. These solutions enhanced the internet connection for three of our students in the troupe, and led to increased engagement.

While certainly more expensive, there are also mobile hotspots that can be purchased to provide students with access to the internet without having an internet service provider (Price, 2020). Given the expense of these devices (oftentimes ~$200+), we were unable to provide these resources to students in the high school troupe's performance in that we had not set aside resources in our budget for such purchases. However, heading into the following semester, we set aside roughly $2,000 in our budget to provide such technological supports. Currently, we are working with three families to determine how to best provide technological support given internet limitations, and will be most certainly be utilizing the hotspot option.

Moreover, given that Zoom takes up significant internet bandwidth that students may not be able to sustain, EP provided virtual opportunities that were asynchronous. These experiences included pre-recorded classes and 'Create-a-Day Challenges.' Challenges

always included three steps: an explanation of an activity like an improv game or craft exercise; a follow-up step encouraging students to try it and add in their own creative modifications and variations; and concrete ways for students to share their work and connect with each other or family and friends remotely. Periodically, challenges were emailed to participants and posted on our website and social media platforms. While still requiring some internet connection, these opportunities are more easily accessible and can keep students of all ages engaged. We had roughly thirty students engage in our asynchronous activities, and this does not account for those who engaged with the content through our social media platform.

Analog Alternatives

Many times, students may not have any access to the internet, or are unable to connect virtually. These instances are harder to navigate as solutions do not seem as readily available. In these moments, we have considered a few alternatives. First, we suggest that postal mailing of resources like worksheets, challenges, materials, and plays may prove beneficial. While these options do not offer students person-to-person connection, they do allow for creative expression and encourage engagement. Along these lines, we have mailed and personally delivered hard-copy scripts to all our elementary school students along with personal notes that encourage them and remind them of the EP community.

Additionally, socially-distanced outdoor rehearsals and performances with masked audience members and participants may prove acceptable. Recently, the NEA (2020) published a guide for arts organizations looking to reopen that offers many suggestions for how to safely engage with audiences and students in the socially-distant world. For Empowered Players, our primary location is a small performing arts center in the county with limited outdoor space around it. Thus, in-person experiences prove to be more challenging. As we continue navigating the COVID-19 era, we are thinking creatively about partnering with organizations like Parks and Recreation and other local groups to provide safe, in-person opportunities.

Another option includes sending students flash drives with videos and resources on them that do not require internet connection to download. Pre-recorded plays are also an alternative, with students

recording themselves reading lines from a performance that can be compiled into a larger piece. This can apply to acting and singing performances, as well. For instance, during a virtual summer camp and given students' technical challenges, students were asked to record themselves singing before the final showcase performance to ensure student performances could still be saved should they be dropped due to lost internet connection. These strategies can help ensure that no student misses out on opportunities due to an inability to maintain strong internet connection.

Encouraging Student Autonomy

We strive to encourage students' ability to have autonomy and control over their engagement. As such, we offer a Teen Arts Board (TAB) for our older high school students who help shape the arts landscape of Fluvanna. This board of six students plans events, opportunities, and experiences for both Empowered Players and the county more broadly. Since the pandemic, the TAB has been focused on proposing creative solutions to the shift to remote learning and social distancing. They implemented a "#VocalLocal Artist Spotlight" series, where they interview local artists and discuss their work to feature on social media. They created a Virtual Halloween Costume Contest for students & families to submit photos of their costumes, and to connect with each other in a community-wide livestreamed event. Additionally, they're focusing on in-person events that can be done safely, such as drive-in movies and outdoor concerts. By allowing them to devise these plans and ideas themselves, while also providing them with institutional support, we are encouraging their creativity and sense of autonomy— sparking their motivation and ability to feel connected (Deci & Ryan, 2000). We are also expanding our concept of what might be possible, and gaining a sense of what students need during this time.

FACILITATING POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AND ENHANCING SOFT SKILLS

In understanding ways to facilitate positive environments and promote the development of soft skills in the classroom, key differences in online versus in-person learning impact student engagement. These obstacles include: lag-time and students speaking over each other or

being unable to hear or see; difficulty enforcing that students are paying attention and not engaging in other virtual activities; inability to read body language and lack of connection through sharing physical proximity; and decreased trust due to lack of shared space.

However, as social connectivity is key with Empowered Players programming, our virtual programs have tried to replicate our in-person model utilizing strengths-based approaches and social support. Every session begins with a 'check-in' with students and teachers to ensure that we are all trusting each other and recognizing our needs. These check-ins encourage students to share what their day has been like and may consist of: "Rose, Bud, Thorn" (something good, something blooming, and something not-so-great) or "Physically, Mentally, Spiritually" (being broadly defined as how connected you feel) discussions. Regardless of the specificity of the question, these check-ins help establish what students are carrying, and let students understand that all in the room are invested in their well-being. After checking in, we engage in an ensemble-based activity, challenging students to build connections and relationships. When this warm-up is complete, we then explain the goal of the lesson or rehearsal, allowing time for questions and reflections.

In terms of material, our content has shifted with the move to virtual learning. Current content includes more reflective, more expressive, and more question/answer-based activities. We strive to find ways to incorporate students' feelings into their work. This focus is accomplished through playwriting, improvisation, character development, and other similar activities. By allowing room for students to express new burdens, thoughts, or challenges they face, we are giving them a creative outlet through which they can channel these new experiences in healthy and productive ways.

At the end of each rehearsal, we conclude by asking students what concepts they have learned, main takeaways they have gained, and one thing they enjoyed about the session. By wrapping up with a focus on what the students enjoyed and what they felt they accomplished together, we are asking them to connect with each other, and also to focus on what they did well and where they felt strong, encouraging them to identify as problem-solvers.

Rather than focusing, as we might have in an in-person rehearsal, on more product-oriented goals (specific acting notes, staging, technical elements, set changes, etc.), our shift to distance-learning

has enabled us to emphasize process-oriented goals more heavily. We allow more time for students to connect with each other in the rehearsal room, more time for character reflection and student creativity than blocking, and more classes geared towards self-expression and collaboration than those focused more strictly on performance preparation. These changes have led to students feeling more engaged, expressing heightened interest in remaining in our programs, and sensing increased self-concept.

CONCLUSION

While there are many positives to distance-learning, there are certainly a number of potential challenges theater educators--particularly in rural areas--face during this time. From lack of consistent access to the internet to difficulty maintaining a positive classroom culture, these hurdles should not be overlooked. Rather, by utilizing creative and supportive strategies to maintain strong engagement with students, arts educators will be able to provide for as equitable an experience as possible. The COVID-19 era is certainly daunting, difficult, and serious. However, this should not deter theater educators from brainstorming creative solutions to offering theater education in virtual spaces. By utilizing a creative framework and committing to fostering a collaborative and expressive space, teachers will be in a prime position to help students succeed and thrive, both on- and off-line.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Harris, J. (2020). Supporting students in rural regions in the age of distance learning. *ArtsPraxis, 7* (2a), 13-27.

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Pandemic Lessons

ALEXIS JEMAL

HUNTER COLLEGE, CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

BRENNAN O'ROURKE

TABATHA R. LOPEZ

JENNY HIPSCHER

CUNY SCHOOL OF PROFESSIONAL STUDIES

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 Education[1] (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.

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[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

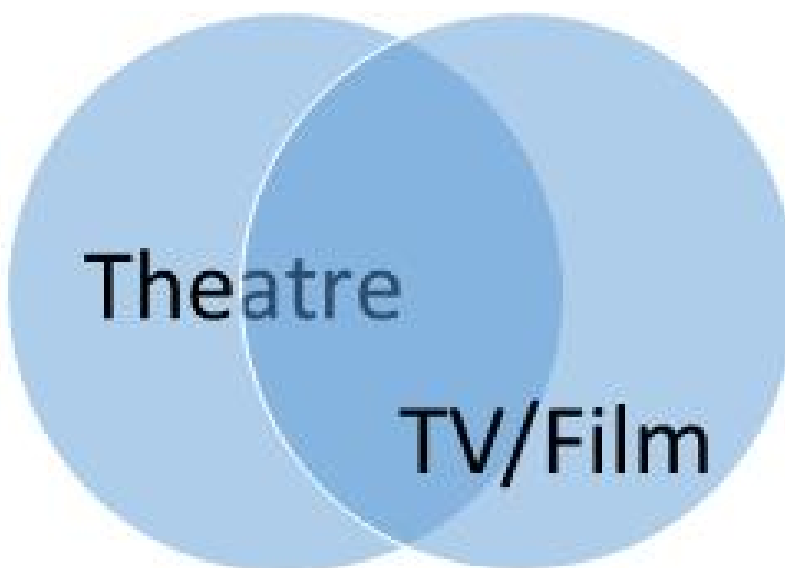film, components that are just theatre, and components that overlap.

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 spotlight[2] 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.

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[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 seating[4] 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

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[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

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[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

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[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.

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

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Alexis Jemal, LCSW, LCADC, JD, PhD, assistant professor at Silberman School of Social Work-Hunter College, is a scholar, writer, artivist, 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

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Challenges in Teaching and Learning in Practical Theatre Courses during the COVID-19 Lockdown at Lupane State University

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ABSTRACT

This research discusses the challenges faced by Theatre Arts lecturers and students at Lupane State University (LSU) during the COVID-19 induced lockdown which forced the university to suspend face to face classes. On the 25th of March 2020, Lupane State University, like all other Zimbabwean universities, was forced to close abruptly in response to the government declared total lockdown restrictive measures. The abrupt nurture of closing created challenges for lecturers and students, chief among them lack of preparedness to transition to online learning, unavailability of online teaching and learning material as well as lack of connectivity. Yet, students taking theatre courses needed to continue learning. We discuss the deployment of blended learning and its impact on the teaching and learning of practical theatre courses at LSU. We also examine how

students (performers and audience) struggled to adapt to the new normal of performing to a smaller audience of invited guests and social distancing during performances against an interactive and social performance tradition.

INTRODUCTION

African theatre is by nature an interactive and social enterprise, hugely characterised by dance, movement, call and response as well as togetherness. These definitive categories of African theatre have come under scrutiny during the COVID-19 imposed lockdown with most countries closing down businesses, public and social service centres to slow down the rate of infection. The theatre performance culture and tradition at Lupane State University (LSU) and many other African universities thus took a knock and had to re-adjust especially in light of expectations by university management that teaching and learning needed to continue during the entirety of the lock down. As a result, LSU lecturers and students had to navigate through numerous challenges to teach/ learn and position these courses as fundamentally important within the university community and nation.

This research discusses the challenges faced by Theatre Arts lecturers and students at LSU during the COVID-19 induced lockdown which forced the university to suspend face-to-face classes. On the 25th of March 2020, LSU, like all other Zimbabwean universities, was forced to close abruptly in response to the government declared total lockdown restrictive measures. The abrupt nature of closing created challenges for lecturers and students, chief among them lack of preparedness to transition to online learning, unavailability of online teaching and learning material as well as lack of connectivity. Yet, students taking theatre courses needed to continue learning. We discuss the deployment of blended learning and its impact on the teaching and learning of practical theatre courses at LSU. We also examine how students (performers and audience) struggled to adapt to the new normal of performing to a smaller audience of invited guests and social distancing during performances against an interactive and social performance tradition.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This research is framed within a case study paradigm. At the centre of this research is a dual process that (1) attaches any teaching and learning action to the process of doing research and (2) presents it as a solution—a product. This dual process encapsulates what Nelson Goodman (1978) characterised as a form of world-making. Schon submits that:

> When a practitioner sets a problem, he chooses and names the things he will notice. [...] Through complementary acts of naming and framing, the practitioner selects things for attention and organizes them, guided by an appreciation of the situation that gives it coherence and sets a direction for action. (1987, p. 5)

In the context of this research, we sought to identify the challenges that could be or were faced by lecturers and students undertaking practical performance-related courses at LSU. We also sought to experiment with 'new normal' possibilities in teaching and learning as we prepare for the upcoming academic calendar year. Schon (1983) is of the view that practitioners need to reflect simultaneously as they take action so that they can improve their practise. As theatre lecturers, we argue that reflecting on our strategies and ways of doing things offers us an opportunity to learn about what works and what does not work in the teaching of theatre during this COVID-19 period.

This process enables us to treat the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on the teaching and learning as a unique case that demands reflection-in-action. However, because this is 'new' zone of practice that is characterised by "uncertainty, uniqueness, and value conflict" (Schon 1987, p. 5), a reflexive approach that escapes the clutches of existing canons was needed. Further, Schon adds that "when a practitioner recognizes a situation as unique, she cannot handle it solely by applying theories or techniques derived from her store of professional knowledge" (1987, p. 5). This calls for a reflection-in-action exercise that explores all possible and available options for both the student and lecturer.

Theoretically, we locate our argument within the Community of Inquiry Framework (CIF) (Garrison and Anderson, 2003). Shannon Vickers (2020, p. 3) identifies "Cognitive Presence, Social Presence, and Teaching Presence" as the three pillars of the CIF necessary for

an online course design and implementation. Garrison and Anderson (2003, p. 28) view cognitive presence "as the extent to which learners are able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse in a critical community of inquiry." Social presence relates to the participants' ability to project their personal characteristics into the community and present themselves to the other participants as "real people" (Garrison, Anderson, and Archer, 2000, p.89). Finally, teaching presence includes course design, facilitation, instructor-student relationships, rapport, and opportunities for collaboration and connection, which result in student success (Martin and Bolliger, 2018). We turn to the process and approach adopted by LSU lecturers in teaching theatre modules online and examine how these three pillars were attended to and the attendant challenges thereof.

TEACHING THEATRE AND PERFORMANCE THEORY IN THE 'NEW NORMAL'

One thing that the whole LSU community agrees on is that the COVID-19 induced lockdown found the institution unprepared. Although university management has for quite some time advocated for a blended approach to learning, a lack of an enforceable policy has been its Achilles heel. As a result, when the Government of Zimbabwe declared a total lockdown beginning the 30th of March 2020, the university sprung surprises on its faculty and students. Firstly, the institution demanded that the university community continue teaching and learning online. This was against a knowledgeable background of technical and capacity inadequacies of both staff and students in fully utilising the MOODLE platform or Google Classroom. Vickers (2020, p. 2) observes that any successful online courses require "mindful consideration of equity issues in order to ensure course design is accessible, engaging, and able to mitigate predictable barriers to diverse student populations." The impromptu declaration of the lockdown made it difficult for the generation of a course design relevant and applicable for online learning platforms available to lecturers and students. As a result, most academic staff members turned to WhatsApp, where they shared with students material in the form of documents, recorded audios and messages in line with their

face-to-face course designs. Secondly, the university transferred the expenses of the e-learning exercise in the form of data and laptops to lecturers and students. With data and internet connectivity challenges for both lecturers and students, it became clear that e-learning was best suited for the teaching and learning of theory rather than practical theatre work.

Teaching and learning of practical theatre courses requires that students rehearse and perform or design. This process requires that performers (students) interact with each other in the same space and time without limit or restrictions. In essence, LSU's performance training is modelled on an Ndebele (African) storytelling and communal performance narrative anchored on familial values. These values demand a lot of physical (bodily) interaction which is outlawed under the COVID-19 prevention guidelines. As a response to this challenge, we thought of asking our students to record solo performances at their homes as part of their practical. The recorded videos would be sent to the class WhatsApp group for discussions and feedback. Although students did not object to this, it became clear that the resources available to the students would not make this possible. To this end, we focused on teaching and building in-depth understanding of the Theatre and Performance theory.

The teaching of Stanislavski's method approach using audio recordings over WhatsApp without practicalising them was also challenging. To beef up the strategy and approach, we directed students to You Tube where they could find recorded material from around the world that would provide the practical perspective of the recorded audios. While some managed to access these videos and used them for their rehearsal processes some failed due to high costs of data and internet connectivity. Those students that did not have data received video files from those who had managed to download. Yet, most students got bogged down on trying to visualise their movements and actions as they tried to replicate exactly what they had watched in the videos. To this end, the students' acting became mechanical instead of the Stanislavskian 'inside-out' approach. With the benefit of hindsight, we observed that although we considered referring our students to YouTube channels, for students who are not Theatre and Performance majors this was asking too much of them.

The LSU's Department of Languages' Bachelor of Arts in Language and Communication Studies offers a few performance

related courses which students take up as electives. Students with interest in theatre studies take up Theatre and Performance or Applied Theatre at Level II, Arts and Cultural Industries or Scriptwriting at Fourth Level. Some of these students are integrated into the Drama and Dance Club where their performance skills are further nurtured. However, it can be noted that these students are not fully grounded in either practice or theory and performance praxis as they would have only taken a minimum of two or maximum of four performance related courses at graduation. Thus, referring these students to self-teach using YouTube videos was, in hindsight, not the best approach to take. The Department of Languages has since introduced a Bachelor of Arts Honours Degree in Theatre, Performance and Media Technologies, which should attend to the lack of grounding in theory, practice and praxis. However, there is still need to develop a practicable teaching and learning approach if the programme is to be successfully rolled out under the restrictive COVID-19 landscape.

As the lockdown was eased and Zimbabwe moved to Lockdown Level Two, LSU welcomed back students on campus. The university adopted a prioritisation approach allowing only final year classes and those with practical courses to return to campus. The theatre classes were part of this group that was prioritised. The return of theatre students to campus meant that the students could now resume work on their theatre projects albeit under restrictive regulations. These restrictions related to social distancing, limit of group gatherings and a ban on physical contact. Within the theatre section, we had to negotiate these restrictions during rehearsal and performances, together with students, on a moment-by-moment basis, repeatedly taking action and reflecting on the action.

REHEARSAL ROOM BASED INTERVENTIONS

Rehearsals, audience management and performance formed part of the continuous assessment process for the Theatre and Performance and Arts and Cultural Industries courses. There was need for these creative processes to be undertaken in the most responsible way under the 'new normal'. One of the strategies that we employed during rehearsals was splitting the students into smaller groups of three each guided by the scenes that were being rehearsed. This enabled the

observance of social distancing made possible by the lecturer who split the classes into smaller groups comprising of three people at maximum. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, we ordinarily worked with students as a whole class, only breaking into smaller groups when the need arose. The splitting of students into smaller groups worked well for the Arts and Cultural Industries class where the students were working on their applied theatre projects in different areas such as Drama in Education, Theatre in Education, and Forum Theatre. This was made easier by the fact that the students were already in smaller groups of fives working with different groupings in the university community.

However, this strategy did not work for the Theatre and Performance class that was working on Tsitsi Dangarembga's *She No Longer Weeps*. Before the COVID-19 induced abrupt closure of the university, the students had been given the script, been cast, and completed their script analysis and blocking. The splitting of the class into smaller groups would have meant that we had to re-cast and restart the whole creative process again. Pressed for time as well since the university had allocated only two weeks for the completion of teaching and learning including cumulatively marked practical examinations, it became clear that with a lack of in-depth theoretical and practical skills by students it would be very difficult to rehearse and perform in two weeks. This was also complicated by the fact that the script has 15 characters some of which could not be double casted. Although there was a possibility of double-casting, the integrated quality of the script and characters made it very difficult to do so. As a result, we would have ended up with 15 actors on the stage, which was in conflict with the institutional and state regulations on social distancing.

We then decided, in consultation with the students, to completely cancel the staging of the play and assign students audition monologue pieces that were presented at the beginning of the second week of their return to campus. The students were struggling with their blocking, dialogue, adhering to social distancing, and expressing the psychological and emotional relations with co-actors. This meant that students would no longer need to work in groups but could use the constructive feedback from their classmates during daily rehearsals. These solo performances, which adopted a variety of forms such as songs, poetry, dance and monologues, were performed in-line with the

guidelines of the 'new normal'. Although these solo performances fell short of the objective of the Theatre and Performance course that demands students to perform a full length play, it offered students a practical experience of live performance under the 'new normal'. Manoeuvring past the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic requires that both theatre lecturers and students be adaptive, creative, reflexive and flexible. While some teaching and learning strategies might work, others may prove not to work but flexibility and reflexive actions will position both the lecturer and students to respond better.

PERFORMING TO SOCIALLY DISTANCED AUDIENCES

In African performance, just like other paradigms of performance, the audience or Boalian spect-actor play a fundamental role in the framing, interpretation, and reception of a live performance. These spect-actors in most instances become part of the scenographic architecture of the performances, sometimes defining the performance space and sometimes becoming part of the performance space (Sibanda, 2018). For applied theatre contexts, the spect-actor is pivotal for the intervention to take place and navigate towards social change and transformation. Jerzy Grotowski (1968) is very clear about the need for the audience when he argues that theatre can exist without fancy make up and costumes, detailed sets and properties—but it cannot exist without the live communion between the actor and the audience. The spect-actor question was one we had to contend with.

For the Theatre and Performance class we initially planned to allow the students to perform in an empty auditorium since gatherings of more than 50 people were outlawed by the institution and the state. As rehearsals progressed and students rehearsed in their private residencies, this idea seemed to work until one student, who had had an experience of performing in a purpose-built theatre space to an audience protested against it. Like Thespis of the Greek, who stepped out of the chorus and assumed a distinct role of an actor, this student argued against the idea of performing without an audience calling it a 'dry' experience that killed the theatricality of (African) performances. Another fellow student concurred, observing that the "restriction on gatherings resulted in a few people on campus during those days we

performed. This is demotivating because theatre is meant for an audience…its boring to perform to a few people" (personal interview Yolanda Moyo, 29th October 2020).

Following on a Grotowskian perspective that the audience is central to a theatrical event, the performers pointed out that their need for the presence of an audience was premised on them as first time performers to experience a complete theatrical experience. With the exception of this student who demonstrated against the idea of performing in an empty space, most of the students had never performed except in high school sketches and child's play. They also demanded for an audience because they wanted to get feedback from their peers during the post-performance discussions. As first time performers, some of the students also argued that they needed their friends as part of the audience for emotional, psychological support and solidarity. Generally all the students were in agreement that for a rich theatrical experience to take place there is a need for an audience as reflected in Shadreck J. Ndlovu's submission that:

> kuyabhowa ukuperformela abantu abayi three (3) [Its boring to perform for three people]. It's like there is no one in the audience. Sometimes it demotivates your dream as an artist – you no longer see your artistic future bright…On the other hand kungcono ukubona umngane wakho [it's better to see your friend] in the audience, it motivates you. (personal interview, 29th October 2020)

As a consequence, we toiled with the idea of allowing class mates to watch their class mate's performances and become the audience that students asked for. This idea was discarded as the students felt they needed an audience consisting of people who had not watched their solo performances for feedback. This reliance on an audience not conversant with the demands of theatre and performance for critical feedback meant to improve professional development characterises most Zimbabwean universities offering theatre and performance training. Although it transposes performance from a 'passive' audience to a carnivalesque atmosphere with call and response, whistles and shout-out encouraging the performer, the critical feedback value is usually lost. As such, the concept of audience in university performances needs to be further investigated and engaged so that it is beneficial both for the practice and the trainee performer. Yet,

students argued that the very presence of an audience inspires the actor to feel his/ her part and motivates one to his/ her best. We thus agreed with the students to allow them to invite a specific number who will join the lecturers' invited experienced actors. We had invited these experienced actors to give professional feedback to the students. Due to time limitations we only allowed the professionals to give feedback to the performers.

For the Arts and Cultural Industries course, we decided to undertake contained experiments with both the 'performers' and spectators. The different groups in this class were working on applied theatre projects that required Boalian spect-actors and not an "audience" in the strict sense of the word. We therefore decided that other class members will be the spect-actors when they are not 'performing' their intervention. This arrangement worked, from the perspective of integrating the spectators and adhering to the COVID-19 institutional preventive regulations, because these spect-actors were aware of the kind of environment that was needed for the successful 'acting out' of the interventions. In this scenario where the COVID-19 pandemic induced restrictions affected even the process, the managed experiment approach proved effective. It could be the best available approach for applied theatre projects provided they deal with localised issues and challenges.

Yet challenges arose because of this approach. Applied theatre is a term that refers to a conglomerate of different strands such as Theatre for Development, Drama-in-Education, and forum theatre among others. Christopher Odhiambo (2004, p. 6) observes that Theatre-for-Development is a performance by the people, about the people, for the people with the people. Sibanda and Gwaba (2017) argue that these inter- and intra-relationships are important as they help the community to be self-critical and develop consciousness. To this end, these relationships must be allowed to play in the open, and solutions developed out of the engagement with the entanglements towards social change. The community should not be relegated into a bystander in performances that engage and explore their socio-cultural and political situations as in the case of the Arts and Cultural Industries interventions. This transforms these social change interventions into entertaining public spectacles.

CONCLUSION

As we write this paper, these theatre classes that we discussed in this research have completed both their practical and theory examinations. For Zimbabwean universities to continue to run Theatre and Performance degree programmes under the 'new normal', there is need for tough and difficult choices that university management, lecturers, and students must take. One critical area is the development of innovative approaches and ways of teaching practical programmes and courses during and post-COVID-19 pandemic. In terms of performance practice, staged readings are gaining momentum within the semi-professional Zimbabwean theatre industry. The adoption of staged readings as part of the university theatre training and performance repertoire could provide a possible and feasible social distancing mechanism. This could have been a solution for the challenges that we faced with the Theatre and Performance class. As higher and tertiary institutions prepare for the September-December 2020 semester, there is need for collaboration and note sharing regarding teaching and learning. Although e-learning provides a sustainable teaching and learning platform during and post-COVID-19 pandemic, innovative strategies need to be developed if performing arts and visual studies are to remain relevant in the academy. It remains unclear for how long the COVID-19 pandemic is going to stick with us but what is crystal clear and very important now than ever is that theatre practitioners, lecturers and students must make difficult choices and pathways informed by their contexts, desired outcomes, and cultural spaces to remain relevant.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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Teaching Research-based Theatre Online: A Narrative of Practice

CHRIS COOK

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ABSTRACT

For the last twelve years, students at the University of British Columbia could take a course in Research-based Theatre, a research methodology that transforms data into dramatic performances. Previously, this course has only ever been conducted in-person, but due to COVID-19, the course was offered online for the first time. This narrative of practice explores the authors' experience of translating the course into a virtual form. Throughout their experience of teaching Research-based Theatre over Zoom, the authors returned to fundamental questions: What teaching practices endure in the online Research-based Theatre classroom, and what new ways practices were fostered through our emerging partnership with technology?

RESEARCH-BASED THEATRE: A PROLOGUE

Research-based theatre
Three words, including a hyphen
So, two words
Research-based—meaning based on a systematic, formal research project
Theatre—using an embodied, aesthetic approach to share knowledge

Definitions can be limiting,
Because to do their task, they define rather than open up
Research-based theatre opens up possibilities
In the intersection of research and theatre new meanings emerge
New ways of understanding unfold.

Embodying research awakens the senses
Forces us to see, listen and feel differently
Dwell and consider more intimately,
Simultaneously, more broadly

Dramatizing data translates and extends research
It uncovers and untangles
Reveals and relishes
Zooms and focuses
Breathing life into research

Research-based theatre
Three words
No, two words
Two worlds…merging
Into one

A GRADUATE-LEVEL RESEARCH-BASED THEATRE COURSE

> Alice laughed: "There's no use trying," she said; "one can't believe impossible things."
> "I dare say you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."
>   -   Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*

For the last twelve years, students at the University of British Columbia (UBC) could take a course in Research-based Theatre (RbT) as an elective within their master's or doctoral programs. RbT transforms data into dramatic performance. An innovative research methodology (Belliveau & Lea, 2016), RbT's central aims are to present an embodied approach to data analysis, and to find engaging ways to share research. RbT is one of many terms that may be used to refer to a process of inquiry that incorporates elements of theatre creation and performance (Saldana, 2011); other names include research-informed theatre (Goldstein, 2011; Gray et al., 2015), ethnotheatre (Saldana, 2011; Salvatore, 2018), and verbatim theatre (Baer et al., 2019). Through compelling dramatizations, RbT effectively answers the question, "Why should I care?" sparking moments of "Yes, I get it!"

The experiential RbT course at UBC introduces students to ways research can be generated, analyzed, and eventually performed, using theatre-based approaches. Students learn the pedagogy and methodology through a collective hands-on experience. The assigned theoretical readings and literature in the field come to life through the in-class lab portions of the course. A major assignment for the course asks students to create a monologue of a pivotal learning experience from their lives. In the process, they develop the skills to write and perform their story.

Most students in the course have no theatre background. Typically, they work as teachers and have an interest in the arts. As such, a goal in the lab portion of the course is to awaken their artistic identities. The desks are moved aside, and the classroom space is transformed into a studio environment where the text is explored through movement, sound, and improvisation. Pair and small group work are critical for experimentation and feedback. As the monologues

develop, students are formed into clusters of 3-4 to create a collective story where their emerging narratives of personal learning moments intersect with one another. This weaving of stories often develops through the use of tableaux, chorus, and the common use of props or settings. The final stage is to connect all the clusters to share the collective story of the class. This métissage is made possible through carefully scaffolded weekly drama-based activities that build cohesion within the group.

But how does one do this through Zoom? Like many universities, in the spring of 2020, UBC suspended all on-campus activities due to COVID-19. We considered cancelling the course. However, we chose to proceed as arts-based research (Leavy, 2009) courses are still rare at UBC, and we did not want students to miss the opportunity to learn about RbT.

Educators, artists, and researchers have explored bringing technology into drama education settings (Hatton & Nicholls, 2018; Schrum, 1999; Vickers, 2020), and utilizing digital technology in theatre creation and performance (Davis, 2012; Owen, 2014; Way, 2017). Schrum (1999) observes that while "theatre has always used cutting edge technology of the time to enhance the 'spectacle' of productions" (p. 66), drama teachers may "avoid the use of the computer... because of its so-called 'distancing effect'" (p. 66). Davis (2012) suggests that debates around digital theatre often position traditional live theatre performances in opposition to those in which liveness is mediated by technology, for example, when audience members attend a performance online. Digitally-mediated theatre is often viewed as somehow less-than-live or less connected. Davis (2012) and Way (2017) both argue against this binary argument of live versus mediated. Davis (2012) writes:

> When working with mediating technologies, feedback channels may be more restricted and may or may not occur synchronously. The lone chat room attendee or the forum poster who receives no response feels keenly the absence of the presence of others. The feedback loop in these cases is not complete. However, when feedback is received and responded to in real time (or something close to it) a sense of liveness and immediacy may be achieved even when participants are not co-present. (p. 510)

Burnett et al. (2019) divide the literature on theatre integrating digital technology into three broad categories: (1) technology used to enrich the live experience, (2) technology used to transmit a piece to a wider audience, and (3) theatre created entirely in a digital space. Burnett and colleagues propose viewing technology as a fellow collaborator influencing the participatory theatre creation process, rather than merely a mediating technology.

In the following narrative of practice, we (Tetsuro and Chris co-led the course, and George advised) interweave our reflections from offering an RbT course online, exploring RbT solely in a digital space. As artist-scholars, none of us had experience developing theatre entirely in an online environment. Without question, we knew the digital environment would fundamentally alter the nature of the course. Would the same métissage, scaffolded drama-based activities, and community building among students be possible through the screen? How could we overcome the 'distancing effect' when learning at a distance was the only option? As Gallagher et al. (2020) write in their reflection on research and teaching in secondary drama classrooms during COVID, "the challenge…for drama educators, is how to establish a sense of intimacy in their now exclusively-online pedagogical work" (p. 641). In reflecting on our online RbT teaching experiences, we draw on questions for digital theatre education inspired by Burnett et al. (2019): What teaching practices endure in the online RbT classroom, and what new ways practices were fostered through our emerging partnership with technology?

USERNAMES AND PASSWORDS: LOGGING-IN TO ONLINE THEATRE EDUCATION

We logged in certain that we would fall flat on our faces over the next few hours as we tried to recreate the experience of an RbT course online. But we decided to approach our first class as if we were beginning a collective creation process. Bringing knowledge gathered from George's previous twelve years of teaching the course in-person, we admitted students from the Zoom waiting room, not knowing what shape the class would take. As is often the case with enrollment in this course, all students were in the Faculty of Education, and all had teaching experience. Some students had previous experience creating

theatre, but most had never taken a theatre course before. One or two admitted that they enrolled because it was the only course they could find with space left. We were honest as well, sharing with the students that this digital classroom environment was entirely new for us.

For our first warm-up, we invited the 12 students to move back from their computer and stand. We emphasized to the students that they had the right to pass or tailor the exercises to work in their particular setting. For example, they might continue to sit or participate with their video off. We began by passing the energy, an umbrella term for various exercises facilitating embodied contact between participants. Rather than standing in a circle in a classroom, students were standing in their homes, calling a person's name on their screen as they threw energy at them with a gesture. After a few minutes of stumbling through the exercise, the students were laughing and smiling. In the midst of this first warm-up activity, glimmers of what this course could offer were apparent—an alternative to a semester of disembodied heads. Rather than technology creating a 'distancing effect', this warm-up exercise suggested perhaps the connections that are lacking for many of us while quarantining could be supplemented by these online activities that invite us to use our bodies and imaginations.

COLLABORATIVELY CREATING A DIGITAL CLASSROOM SPACE WITH STUDENTS

Throughout the course, students shared their knowledge of Zoom and other digital platforms so we could run the online class more effectively, collaboratively constructing the digital classroom space with us, helping to expand the boundaries of what our RbT class could be, the equivalent of pushing the desks aside in a physical classroom. We clearly did not have all the answers. Our willingness to collaborate with the students and to approach the new technology with an attitude of "No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better" (Beckett, 1989, p. 101) modelled the approach we hoped the students would bring to their exploration of RbT.

Trying again was also present in our attempts to increase unstructured student interaction. In one of our early classes, we called our regularly scheduled 15-minute break. In an instant, the mic symbols went red, and the live video feeds turned black, leaving white

block letters spelling names, or maybe a photo, where students' faces used to be. We were about to turn our video and audio off too, when we realized that one student was still there, trying to get our attention. In an in-person class, students might walk up to ask the instructor questions during a break or turn to their neighbour to socialize. These interactions were missing in our online environment. After the break, we encouraged students to keep their video or audio live during class breaks if they felt like socializing with their classmates, but this rarely happened. A few weeks later, when we first assigned students to breakout rooms for a substantial amount of time–-over half an hour— students requested more frequent breakout room use, lasting long enough to work on the exercise we were exploring, with time leftover to connect on topics in the class more generally and their experiences of online learning. The breakout rooms allowed students to have private conversations in smaller groups, without us present. By increasing the use of the breakout rooms, we were able to create more space for student interaction.

A (WI-FI) CONNECTION TO BODY, VOICE, IMAGINATION, AND COLLECTIVE PLAY: THE ONLINE THEATRE WARM-UP

We gestured to each other with digital hands. We messaged each other using WhatsApp, sent links of performances broadcast on YouTube, and shared our screens with each other over Zoom. We also began introducing theatre-based activities. In-person, we would start our exploration of theatre-based exercises slowly, gradually, adjusting to the level of experience in the classroom. The laddering of exercises emerges organically and looks different each time. The same alchemy occurred virtually but required explicit verbal discussion, in the form of regular check-ins to see if students had anything they wanted to express. Below we explore our online versions of traditional warm-up exercises.

Passing the Energy with a Name

Despite the online nature of the course and our initial doubts that theatre warm-ups would be successful, we found that simple alterations to standard warm-up exercises were effective. For any games that relied on making eye contact with one member of the

group—an impossibility over Zoom—speaking a person's name replaced eye contact effectively.

Standing in a Circle, Apart

In-person, many warm-up activities are done in a circle, something impossible over Zoom. Cziboly and Bethlenfalvy (2020) write that one of their significant challenges in creating process dramas over Zoom during the pandemic was the inability to gather in a circle and lack of eye contact with students. As an alternative, we tried a simple invitation, asking students to lift their arms and stretch them outwards. Something simple yet meaningful happened. As we stretched out our arms beyond the frame, our forearms disappeared, and we all became more or less connected by our upper arms, like a paper people chain. This alternative approach made visible the limitations of standing in a circle: you can't see everyone's faces, but over Zoom, you can. It also enabled us to realize that even when we are in the same room, we are *always* physically separate, but by using our imagination, we can become one. Looking around at the videos of outstretched arms offered a means for us to visualize group connectedness.

Solo Tableaux, Together

In the RbT course, we use *tableaux*. In-person, students usually portray specific situations in pairs and small groups using their bodies. Often it looks like a moment of modern dance choreography 'paused'. But how to do this separately? By simply prompting students with "A tableaux of what you're going to do after class," this allowed students to negotiate what space they had right in front of their screens. It also functioned as a warm-up exercise to explore and build students' autobiographical learning moment narratives. While doing tableaux in-person, those without actor training can feel uncomfortable as they navigate the awkwardness of invading personal space and asking permission to touch each other's bodies. Online, tableaux offered a safe and manageable means of physical exploration. Nonetheless, the online context fostered a new sense of risk for the students, as they were frozen alone.

Looking back, the adaptations of warm-up activities are not unusual. As educators, we adapt theatre-based exercises to our settings and participants–-whether we are in a classroom space,

working with a community group, or making our classes accessible to students with diverse abilities. In all of these instances, and in an online setting, slight alterations allow for more versatile warm-up exercises.

A DIGITAL MÉTISSAGE: VIRTUAL GROUP WORK

The playwright Sarah Ruhl (2014) describes a fire-alarm going off during a performance of her *Passion Play*. As the alarm continued, the actors began performing the play on the steps of the church, their evacuated performance space, adapting the scenes and spontaneously creating sound effects, amid traffic noise and passersby. Ruhl writes that "often there are things for actors to hide behind–-costumes changes, sound cues, pillars, beautifully painted drops, props, and the like. But on the steps…they had nothing but each other, the audience, and the story" (p. 98). Burnett et al. (2019) suggest integrating technology into theatre creations leads to new possibilities because it disrupts. But technology was not the only disruption we were dealing with during the course. In the time of COVID-19, alarms are going off the world over, forcing us out of regular routines, to wait on the steps of typical theatre practices. What will we create as we wait? What opportunities do these interruptions give us to abandon what we may hide behind?

For the online RbT course, we decided to continue with the main assignment from the in-person course: developing and sharing a story about a crucial learning moment, first individually and then in groups. Never have these one-person autobiographical narratives been performed so singularly alone. As students developed their monologues, we used Zoom's function to randomly assign participants to breakout rooms, creating groups of 3-4. Students began designing a collective story in these breakout rooms where their learning moment narratives intersected. Even in groups, the students were performing together while apart.

One of the few limitations we placed on their performances was that they could not be pre-recorded; they had to be performed live. Students gathered costume pieces from whatever they could find in their closets, handmade props, experimented with digital backdrops, audio recorded family members, choreographed gestures, vocal

rounds, and choral moments. Unlike the cues and props that Ruhl refers to above, which may offer a hiding space, these truly made-from-hand-at-home theatrical explorations of personal narratives were testaments to the students' willingness to take risks. In our final class, we presented the group narratives as a single piece.

In theatre, it only takes a moment for the audience to suspend their disbelief. We see an actor 'driving' a car, and we believe it. This happens so effortlessly that it barely registers. However, as we learned, such moments can also happen over Zoom. During our final performances, the awkward interface of boxes on a screen disappeared, and we were drawn into stories that can never be repeated.

In a sense, such a moment is more significant than a suspension of disbelief. Rather, it is the reaffirmation of the belief in the uncanny power of theatre, and its capacity to move, despite the potentially alienating distance that technology imposes. Such moments also demonstrate the ability of a digital RbT course, even with liveness mediated by technology, to achieve moments of intimacy rivalling in-person delivery methods.

DISCUSSION: TEACHING RBT THROUGH THE ONLINE LOOKING-GLASS

When the RbT course concluded—all too quickly—we debriefed. There was much to celebrate, but underlying it all was the question, "What just happened?"

Now that we have had the distance of time, the unexpected success of our experience has led us to question some fundamental beliefs. For instance, why did we think this online course was bound to fail? Perhaps it is because we were holding on to an antiquated definition of theatre, in which the work must take place before a live audience. Part of the magic is that actors and audiences alike are all breathing the same air. Indeed, if you are seated in the first row, you can reach out and touch King Lear. Its intimacy is unrivalled. This definition of theatre falls within a live versus digitally-mediated binary (Davis, 2012).

This course allowed us to consider what an RbT class looks like with only one body in the room. In translating this course online, we become aware of the constraints of sharing physical space. For

anyone who has spent time in acting school, one quickly becomes aware why such training is for the fearless. The senses are assaulted with body odour, bad breath, sweat, and pheromones, on top of the distracting spectacle of bodies stretching and warming up. In art historical terms, drama programs are akin to the plunging depths wrought by the triumph of perspective, and dizzying verisimilitude of trompe l'oeil. Conversely, a grid of faces on Zoom is a flat Byzantine painting. In lieu of depth, it reflects glittering surfaces like a Klimt. Such a flat canvas feels like a much safer introduction to theatre-making. After all, what safer space is there than the comfort of your own home? And one must feel safe in order to be brave.

In his film, *Le Fantôme de la Liberté* (1974), Luis Buñuel depicts a fancy dinner party scene where the guests sit on toilets around a dinner table, conversing, smoking, reading, and occasionally retiring to a cramped room to eat in private. This surrealist scene makes visible the arbitrary nature of our cultural customs. In the same spirit, consider the following thought experiment. Imagine a world where technologically mediated communication has been normal for so long, even theatre is made this way. In fact, no other way is known, for no one is ever in the same room together. That is until a force majeure shuts down all forms of electronic connectivity, and people are (gasp!) forced to be together in the same space. Imagine a group of theatre artists bravely coming together for the first time, trying to figure out a way to move forward. At first, they sit in a row all facing the same direction, and then slowly, accidentally, they bump into others, make physical contact, shove, a kiss, an embrace, and at last, make eye contact.

There is only a vague sense that new ground is being broken. The theatre artists wonder to themselves, "Is it possible that there might be new aesthetic possibilities waiting to be discovered by doing theatre in person?" But the chorus of purists cry, "It's just not the same, look how limited the number of people who can attend! Now we're being elitist and undemocratic. We're going to sit this out and wait for connectivity to resume no matter how long it takes."

Beyond pandemics, if in-person work is necessary for theatre learning and creation, accessibility remains a central issue. What are alternatives for those individuals who cannot access theatre education and exploration spaces?

The RbT course makes an explicit promise to students: there is

space to explore personal narratives in the assignments, and we will learn about theatrical tools for expressing them. Implicitly, there is another: we will create a sense of family, a safe space where the risk of sharing the private is possible. That such promises were still deliverable over Zoom is a hopeful discovery and suggests that even after COVID-19, there is potential and possibility in exploring theatre and RbT education in an online form.

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Tetsuro Shigematsu is a playwright/performer. A former writer for *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*, in 2004, he became the first person-of-colour to host a daily national radio program in Canada, where he wrote and produced over 50 pieces of radio drama. His solo-work, *Empire of the Son*, has played in 18 cities to over 20,000 people, and was described by Colin Thomas as, "one of the best shows ever to come out of Vancouver. Ever." *1 Hour Photo*, was a finalist for the 2019 Governor General's Award for Drama.

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The #StayHome Project: Exploring Community Needs and Resiliency through Virtual, Participatory Theatre during COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

Health Educator and Community-engaged Theatre Artist Saharra Dixon led a virtual 3-month community-based participatory research theatre process with co-investigators Niloofar Alishahi LCAT, Trevor Catalano, Anna Gundersen, Mary Holiman, Adam Stevens RDT, Emari Vieira-Gunn, and Susan Yakoub exploring the concept of home and community during state-mandated Stay-At-Home orders for the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Emphasis was placed on under-standing the health crisis' impact on quality of life, human connectedness, and available resources. The process aimed to identify systematic failures in the United States' pandemic response, while

simultaneously advocating for change to improve individual, community, and governmental response in the future. The process culminated in The #StayHome Project*, an ethnodrama devised from community interviews and fieldnotes. Using our play as reference, this paper will explore theatre's ability to help communities process collective trauma, build resiliency, and facilitate dialogue around politics and what it means to return to a "new normal". We will discuss our drama process and how we were able to adapt virtually. Lastly, we challenge theatre practitioners and health professionals to explore theatre through a wellness-based lens and use arts-based inquiry to further connect with different populations.*

SETTING THE SCENE: A LITERATURE REVIEW

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines Quality of Life (QOL) as an individual's perception of their position in life in the context of their culture and value systems and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards, concerns, physical health, psychological state, and social relationships (WHO, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic highlights two public health essentials that significantly affect one's quality of life: social inequalities and multisector coordination (Ramirez-Valles et al., 2020). Arguably, there have been specific failures in the United States' response to the pandemic which includes failures in surveillance, testing, quarantining, guidelines, best practices, personal protective equipment, telehealth, personnel, social services, and community support. These failures have aided in the decrease of quality of life for our most vulnerable communities.

Health education and promotion in the U.S. has often focused on individual behavior change, largely due to longstanding cultural messages of individual responsibility for health changes (Burke et al., 2009). However, COVID-19 allows us to look at systemic issues through an "upstream" lens. Upstream social determinants of health refers to macro factors that comprise social-structural influences on health and health systems, government policies, and the social, physical, economic and environmental factors that determine health (Williams et al, 2008). Searching upstream helps us tackle issues that are beyond individual control (Minkler et al., 2008). We must move "upstream" to acknowledge and address social inequalities and

develop communal approaches to reduce adverse effects of the pandemic--and over time--reduce persistent racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic health inequalities (Schulz et al., 2020).

A CASE FOR THE ARTS

Our co-investigators were interested in the arts' ability to identify "upstream" issues and provide a means of understanding and collaboration around the COVID-19 pandemic. At what capacity could we explore these topics through a virtual drama process? There are many benefits to using arts in the health and wellness sector, including improvements in community capacity and social cohesion. Arts and culture often influence policy and practice such as health, community development, economic development, and education (Muirhead & De Leeuw, 2020; Shank & Schirch, 2008). *Creating Healthy Communities for Cross-Sector Collaboration* identified five foundational components of arts and cultural engagement in health (Sonke et al., 2019). These include collective trauma, racism, social exclusion, mental health, and chronic disease. We saw all five components represented in *The #StayHome Project*. This may be true because the arts provide frames through which narrative is shared, including poetry, storytelling, music, theatre, drawing, and dance. Sonke et al. (2020) notes, "the sharing of narrative in turn generates increased community capacity for healing, resilience, and social cohesion" (p. 17). Co-investigators and participants were drawn to drama's ability to promote community building for resiliency, encourage processing of collective trauma, and underscore prevalent social issues.

WHAT IT MEANS TO "STAY HOME"

"Staying home" during mandated orders looks vastly different for poor, low-income, and minority populations. African American and Latinx populations are more likely to work in essential services including production and transportation and other occupations where working at home and taking time off (i.e. social distancing mechanisms) are not an option (Miller et al., 2020). Low-income families have fewer resources to stockpile food, resulting in more frequent trips to grocery stores and food banks, increasing opportunity for exposure (Reeves &

Rothwell, 2020). In addition, the adverse effects of biological, behavioral, psychological, and social losses (of people, goods, and livelihood) is exacerbated because it does not allow for family and friends of those impacted to come together for support and grieving (Umberson, 2017; Schulz, 2020).

Staying home during the COVID-19 crisis differs among Americans due to factors like socioeconomic status, class, and race. Community-led movements such as worker protections, housing rights, and environmental justice are positioned well to address underlying determinants of public health and promote racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic equity (Schulz et al., 2020). This underscores the importance of community-led projects such as *The #StayHome Project* in addressing social determinants of health and empowering communities. We aimed to highlight the importance of authentic engagement and community voices in our research and change process (Cacari-Stone et al., 2018; Israel et al., 2010).

We chose a Community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach because it centers community priorities and strengths, establishes a long-term commitment to building an exploratory relationship with community partners (i.e. participants), and applies research results into community action (Parker et al., 2020). Through our research process, we explored how *The #StayHome Project* and arts-based inquiry could assist in conducting QOL needs-assessments that center community voices. *The #StayHome Project* explores themes of processing collective trauma and supporting community resilience, while offering a platform for social criticism and action.

THEATRE: AN IMPERATIVE TOOL FOR PROCESSING AND REFLECTION

The #StayHome Project is evidence that theatre should be leveraged as a tool for public health and brainstorm solutions to unique problems. "...The theatre has long served as a place for a society to gather, witness their own conflicts, and reflect upon possible solutions. This has served diverse purposes for different communities from entertainment to eulogy to celebration to group healing" (Slachmuijlder, 2012, p.5). Community-engaged theatre (or Applied Theatre) comprises two parts; engaging with community members in creating theatre and collective learning through creation. Our community-

engaged theatre project was built through ensemble work, as a skilled theatre practitioner led scaffolded workshop-style interactions with the community members. Dixon presented "lesson plans" of drama activities or devising techniques that lead the group into physical and verbal discussion, reflection and creation. These activities allow for participant accessible interaction with difficult subjects through role protection.

Applied Theatre is the use of theatre in non-traditional theatre contexts, chosen due to its fundamental ability to connect people in creativity, play and storytelling; all elements that allow for relationships to form and strengthen (Landy & Montgomery, 2012). Many theatre performers cite building true empathy and understanding of a person or circumstance through their experience portraying them. Theatre making in ensemble groups also demands its creators to hold space for new ideas, collaboration, and group reflection. When telling or listening to a story, as is the exchange between theatre maker and audience member, the same learning and processing is often an outcome of the interaction. Drama allows participants to express themselves at the level that they find comfortable, whether through written word, the interpretation of another person's words, the portrayal of another persona or, if comfortable, directly. In Philip Taylor's *Applied Theatre: Creating Transformative Encounters in the Community*, Taylor describes how applied theatre can be used to facilitate community healing and change in non-theatrical settings, and using theatre as raising awareness about how we are situated in the world and what we as individuals and as communities might do to make the world a better place (Taylor, 2003; Landy & Montgomery, 2012).

ADAPTING THEATRE FOR VIRTUAL SPACE

The #StayHome Project grew from a CBPR methodology. It was important to choose a collaborative and flexible theatre-making process that would center community voices. We decided to devise our piece because it allows for each collaborator's ideas and experiences to find its way into the final product. Devised theatre is a theatre-making process that can start from our lived experiences, our fantasies, or from what we observe every day and thus perfect for investigative processes like this one. Oddey (1998) notes:

The process of devising is about the fragmentary experience of understanding ourselves, our culture, and the world we inhabit. The process reflects a multi-vision made up of each group member's individual perception of that world as received in a series of images, then interpreted and defined as a product. Participants make sense of themselves within their own cultural and social context, investigating, integrating, and transforming their personal experiences, dreams, research, improvisation, an experimentation. (p. 1)

We started this process with a "call" for Co-investigators. As any typical theatre-making process, we chose to start with ensemble-building activities to build trust. We met via Zoom every weekend on Saturdays and Sundays, with our first meeting on April 5th, 2020. We thought logically about which activities were feasible, yet impactful virtually. Dixon explained the process idea: to act as investigators to learn what staying home means and how COVID-19 affects quality of life. We did introductions like: "Tell us where you are from, what you do, and your experience or feelings around COVID-19 so far." Information was elicited to garner better understanding of group dynamics--responses included:

- Brooklyn, Bronx, Iran, Minnesota, California, Long Island, Delaware, South Carolina, New Jersey
- Art therapy, drama therapy, health educator, barista, writer, public health, creative arts therapy, early childhood education, graphic design, Co-creating, building
- Not being able to visit family or "home", irresponsible, real
- Shutting down operations is the hardest part, miss seeing customers/visitors
- Do not want to be responsible for someone getting sick
- Loneliness took 2 weeks to get a test after expressing they were sick, army gear
- The high unemployment rate, laid off, what will life be like after this is over?
- Low trust in media, bizarre

From this, we were able to learn initial reactions about the pandemic

and discover expertise within the group.

Each week, co-investigators had the opportunity to lead their own check-in activity. It was important for us to build a sense of ritual in this virtual process, as structure during this time would benefit our group and allow us to take more risks. For example, Adam led a story-building activity. He started off with a prompt, and we added lines to finish the "Miss Rona" story which became the play's introduction:

> Once upon a time there was a person by the name of Miss Rona.
> This person, Miss Rona, was very aggressive in her behavior.
> She came suddenly and wrapped everyone under her skirt.
> Her skirt was so big that it covered the entire town; The town was scared.
> …Scared because they couldn't leave their houses, and it made them sad.
> Their houses were widely spread apart, and it was very dark inside their homes
> The people in the next town overheard their pleas and thought they were overreacting.

We explored different ideas that we felt were important in community-based research. One question was "What do you need to see to believe you were listened to by someone else?" Susan answered: "an action plan, and then see it through." Trevor suggested: "Repeating back what you hear, and asking what they need from me as a listener." We played with the idea of "group offerings" which aimed to offer support for starting a new week. Our most impactful "group offering" came from asking: "what is one thing you would "gift" someone to encourage them to tackle the next week. From that we created a mantra that found its way in the script:

Saharra: Resiliency

Mary: Being authentic is powerful

Anna: Breath

Adam: Perspective

Niloofar: Transparency

Mari: Community

We started with interviewing people in our communities about their experiences staying home. We created research questions that stemmed from wanting to explore our main theme: Exploring the Concept of Home and Community during the COVID-19 Pandemic. As artistic and creative director of the project, Dixon took on many roles. That included teaching and educating co-investigators about interviewing, transcribing, and coding for qualitative data. Interviews were conducted via phone, text, and video conferencing. We coded these themes: home, community, panic, differences, we have multiple teachers, the notion of what is essential to survival, predictions for what the world may be like in the future, most of the demographic feel safe in their homes, politics, poor response from government/administration. This allowed us to have some structure thematically about the play. Each co-investigator was assigned a monologue to write reflecting the experience of a particular interviewee. Co-investigators were given loose directions, but encouraged to use direct quotes from the interview and reflect on our themes. These monologues became the body of the script.

We each took turns "workshopping" our monologues, offering ideas and critiques. We adapted acting exercises virtually, including acting out feelings about COVID-19 set to music and a mirroring exercise. We noticed we wanted a greater representation of what it means to return to a "new normal," so we polled a larger audience about their hopes for a new normal. We started thinking about how we might present our working script virtually, and what other art forms could be used to express these themes. Niloofar, an art therapist, led us in "bilateral squiggling," an exercise that integrates the right and left side of the brain.
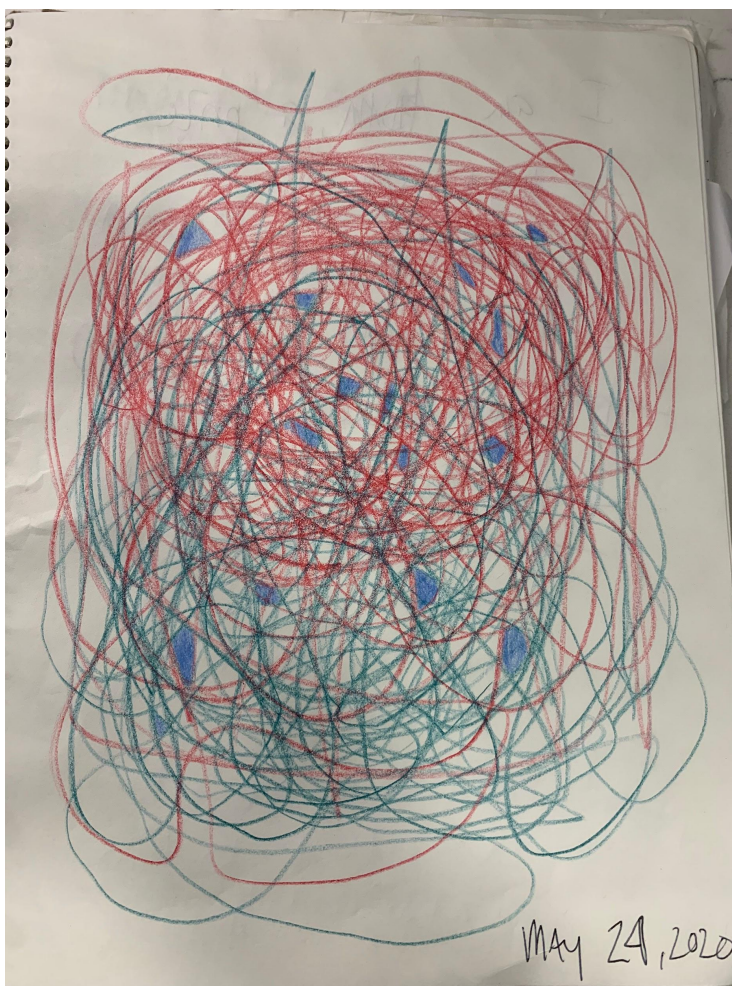
Figure 1. Example of Bilateral Squiggling. Courtesy of Adam Stevens.

We brainstormed a loose structure to the script. We decided to use the field notes from our process and the monologues to create a parallel between the real and the ideal: where we are versus where we want to be. We had a group writing day where we split into breakout rooms on Zoom. One group analyzed our field notes to see what data we could use, while another group worked to edit and structure monologues.

We decided to create a pre-recorded theatrical video that we could play live on Zoom. We asked community members, actors and non-actors, to help us create content for the video. Opening up our ensemble allowed more voices, cultures, and backgrounds to be represented. This became a far-reaching project with over 20

volunteers to help with video editing, acting, voiceovers, animation, and more. It was necessary not to forgo the aesthetics of the piece for the process. As such, Dixon worked with actors, the animator, and video editors in directing the virtual play experience. We used Facetime to direct actors in their roles, offering feedback and guidance as needed.

Performers

The Student – Roni Petersen
The Traveler – Caitlyn Fernandes
The Friend – Esparanza Antonia Vargas
The Therapist – Alexandra Sheppard
The Concerned – Jalisa Delauney
The Parent – Samantha Simone
The Essential Worker – Anna Gundersen
The Educator – Evan Smith
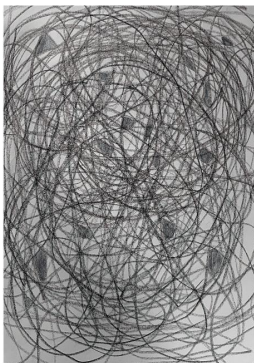
The Community	Video Vision and Editing
Angelica Altamura	Kyra Hanzer
Irene Guo	Andrew McGuire
Chris Elese	
Trevor Catalano	
Adam Stevens	
Mary Holiman	
Niloofar Alishahi	
Susan Yakoub	
Saharra Dixon	

Figure 2. *The #StayHome Project* Cast and Crew. Courtesy of Saharra Dixon

We premiered *The #StayHome Project* on Saturday, June 20, 2020 to a virtual audience of over 80 people. We promoted the premiere on social media platforms and by word of mouth. We wanted this to be a communal and open space, so attendance was free. We facilitated a post-show discussion for both showings. As the final piece to our process, and staying true to a community-based participatory research methodology, it was clear we needed to debrief our process and discuss audience reception and feedback. We also discussed ways the project would continue. This next section will further explain our findings from the project, including ideas and themes that came up in our post-show discussion and project debrief.

HOW *THE #STAYHOME PROJECT* INSPIRED REFLECTION AND CONNECTION

While dealing with the effects of social isolation, co-investigators connected once a week to create art about the rapidly changing world around them. This discussion took many forms such as poetry, dance/movement, storytelling and acting out monologues of those interviewed. We brought our own experiences to the script through exercises, such as encouraging one word responses to describe feelings on our situations, which then created group poems. We also interviewed and polled people outside of the project (i.e. participants). The sense of community grew amongst us as we grew vulnerable and laughed together during meetings. Our community grew as a larger spectrum of experiences were added to the narrative. In coding similarities between the interviews and other source material for the script, it became apparent that while in isolation, the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic may be similarly shared among national and global communities. This weekly process and connection to the greater community's experience of the pandemic alleviated many feelings of isolation for participants. Theatre brings people together for a common goal and allows for a macro-perspective of the world, when examining or unpacking themes for a play.

By the end of this project, not only did co-investigators respond by saying the project gave them a "creative outlet," "purpose," "some structure," but also "formed new friendships" and a "creative, supportive, community." All co-investigators who stayed with the

project from inception to the premiere stated that their involvement had benefited their mental health during this difficult time, whether citing the project "inspired them," "made them happier," or "proud." In a participant debrief of the virtual project premiere, discussion about COVID-19 continued. The final project premiere and initial audience response to the project prompted a more in-depth understanding and processing of the pandemic. A few co-investigators for instance, thought that many Americans are "just pretending it [the pandemic] is over" and that we aren't "facing the facts of the immense death toll" in our country. Participants felt that the project made them confront, critique, and process politics and society.

The creation of *The #StayHome Project* allowed for community building, processing and improved mental health outcomes for co-investigators and study participants. This was possible by connecting a group of people through theatre games, activities and creation. The processing led to examination of country, community, and self, as was evident in debrief conversations and in initial participant interviews. "Traditional strategies to disseminate new knowledge from health research have largely focused on the publication of research results in academic journals. Ethnodrama, a dramatic performance of the lived experience, is an innovative way to convey knowledge" (Nicholson, 2011, p. 244). Theatre was effective in this extremely limited, virtual environment and can be therefore applied in many other formats when addressing community concerns.

OUR RESULTS

There are twenty-four facets of QOL which include social support, positive/negative feelings, work capacity, financial resources, physical safety, accessibility and quality of health and social care, home environment, and participation in and opportunities for recreation/leisure (WHO, 2020). These facets became central points of discussion in our process and script. We found being able to process collective trauma, community building/resiliency, and social critique/support were integral to maintaining and sustaining quality of life during the pandemic.

We saw recurring themes and emotions about COVID-19 in our interviews with a variety of individuals ranging from teachers, retired medical workers, therapists, students, and more. The participants

expressed feelings of fear, uncertainty, and frustration. A teacher discussed how the role he plays in his students' life goes beyond just being an educational instructor. Many students rely on them for emotional support, discipline, structure, and a sense of stability. With that connection being disrupted and the loss of resources due to school closures, they were worried: "that fact alone, makes me unable to sleep some nights." Another interview participant mentioned that even though they are retired, they registered for the Medical Reserves to help combat the spread and growing number of hospitalizations. However, this Parent expressed concerns about living with their husband and daughter, and not wanting to put them at risk.

Furthermore, there seems to be a lack of trust for the government. Several of the participants felt that they are inadequately prepared to handle this situation and believe the government is not doing enough to contain it or provide aid and relief, especially to those who are low-income and unemployed. This feeling is particularly evident in the essential worker who is the manager of a grocery store and a student-athlete. The Student expresses frustration and concern that we cannot go back to the way things were:

> I don't think we can go back to a system that basically exploits people, poor people, and the working class—I think a lot of the systems need to be revisited, like our health system, I think it needs to be completely revamped. It doesn't make sense that millionaires with no symptoms can be tested but those with them aren't. I definitely think things have to change, we can't go back to the way we've been living because it's not working.

The Essential Worker spoke about tensions between the customers and employees as customers tend to give them grief despite certain things being out of their control. They say the emotional trauma of dealing with the panicked public has been the worst and they wish that companies were taking better care of their employees.

The audience had a chance to share their reactions to the piece. We were surprised to find that while many enjoyed the piece and found it "inspiring," some felt "heavy" and "sad" after witnessing. Trevor explains:

> I would offer that that's an interesting litmus test though for our audience...to how they understand their own feelings about it. And

that's why I personally think this [project] is kind of a success story...I find it interesting that people experience that [sadness], because sometimes as a culture we don't acknowledge that feeling...even if it's not what people expected, I think it actually tapped into how people were actually feeling about things.

Mary also notes:

This is something we can get through if we all just stick together…I think America as a country...we never really had so many things taken away from us, at least not in our lifetime. So now that we're forced to quarantine ourselves and not have these little pleasures...it's a new feeling and it's a weird feeling...it's forcing them to acknowledge just how traumatizing being in a pandemic has been.

As a public health professional, this may be an interesting concept to explore further. Our status and culture has potentially affected our ability to recover and process, in turn aiding in poor COVID-19 response. Anna and Niloofar both reflect on how the U.S. is certainly more privileged than places like Iran (Niloofar's country of origin). We must be able to adopt more traits of a collectivistic society than of an individualistic society--a society that depends on group harmony, consensus, and group goals to maintain and improve QOL. As many of our responses underscored the importance of "sticking together," "protecting your neighbor," and "taking care of each other and the earth," we already saw some paradigmatic shifts reflected in the piece.

OUR CALL TO ACTION

The arts have been shown to have a major impact on health and well-being (Ettun, Schultz, & Bar-Sela, 2014). Applied theatre practitioners can do this through a public health lens. Compared to drama therapists, they focus more on cognitive, social and political change. Drama therapists often work toward psychological change through the distance of theatrical fiction (Landy & Montgomery, 2012).

From painting, to poetry, music, and song, the arts fulfills a basic need for creation and self-expression, while empowering and instilling a sense of community (Ettun, Schultz, & Bar-Sela, 2014). Furthermore,

using the arts in the realm of health can be divided into five focus areas:

1. Patient care—using the arts as therapeutic and healing tools
2. Community well-being—engaging people in prevention and wellness activities
3. Healing environments—creating spaces to facilitate healing
4. Caring for caregivers
5. Education

(Schwartz, Speiser, & Wikoff, 2014)

As co-investigators of *The #StayHome Project*, we hope that the arts become a formidable force in the world of public health and wellness. We challenge practitioners, doctors, therapists, medical professionals, and more to explore the arts as a framework to treat, rehabilitate, assess, and spark individual and social change.

The #StayHome Project *will continue to be a living and breathing experience. Co-investigators have [created a website](#) to invite a larger community to share their own #StayHome stories. This may promote community and resiliency, and increase awareness of other community needs that may have been overlooked during our process. We hope to come together in the future to explore new feelings that arise as more time and distance pass. Creating a theatre experience during this time has been daunting, hectic, and oftentimes discouraging. With so much going on in our everyday lives, it is still so important to lead with love, always.*

Our offerings to you:

Susan: Peace

Mary: Unity

Anna: Positivity

Niloofar: Warmth

Trevor: Change

Adam: Hope

Saharra: Gratitude

SUGGESTED CITATION

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Saharra Dixon is a Certified Health Education Specialist (CHES), Sex Educator, and Community-engaged theatre artist. She received her BS in Health Behavior Science from University of Delaware and MA in Educational Theatre from New York University. Saharra uses a mixed-method approach to health, wellness, and social justice. She is passionate about the arts' ability to heal, inspire, and foster change across cultures and lifespans. She is interested in empowering women, girls, & Black and Brown populations. Saharra is founder of Soul Circle, a Women's Arts & Health Collective.

Anna Gundersen received her Bachelor of Arts in Theatre from The Pennsylvania State University and is currently pursuing her Master of Arts degree in Educational Theatre in Colleges and Communities at Steinhardt, New York University. Anna works in the non-profit sector and is a theatre artist, devising plays and acting. Anna's interest lies in teaching and utilizing theatre as a tool for empathy-building, increasing self-awareness and self-empowerment.

Mary Holiman received her BA in Interdisciplinary Studies from Johnson C. Smith University. She is currently a 2nd-year graduate student at NYU's School of Global Public Health in the Community Health Sciences and Practice concentration. Mary is interested in the intersection between the arts, the media, and public health, particularly in Black communities. She aspires to start her own non-profit organization that provides free mental health counseling and creative

arts therapy to at-risk youth and make it more accessible to disadvantaged populations.