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## University Theatre Programs During The COVID-19 Pandemic

### Abstract

The Spring 2020 semester brought about a huge change throughout the United States, in particular to all aspects of our education system. Universities had little time to implement a system to continue education and change lesson plans to accommodate remote learning. Now, a full year into the COVID-19 pandemic, most students are returning to modified versions of lectures and labs while the performing arts are still struggling to find a balance between being safe and learning skills necessary to work in the industry.

University Theatre departments in the Texas area adapted their courses, productions, and continued to provide top-level training experiences while dealing with funding cuts, low or non-existent production attendance, and health and safety restrictions for rehearsals and performance. Looking at the impact of these changes on how the theatre programs will operate after COVID-19 has been controlled to the point where Regulations can be lifted, especially in Texas where political decisions are

pressuring businesses and schools to reopen the state to normal operations as quickly as possible.

## Preface

*I just finished the play Little Women: The Musical when I first heard about a virus sweeping across China. I thought it was just going to be like ebola and it was going to be contained in one area and we might see a few cases. I was set to be the lighting designer for the second stage show Album. We were a month into rehearsals and with a planned opening two weeks after spring break. The team was already concerned about the short rehearsal and technical time. When we went off to spring break we got the news that we would have another week of spring break, and then the school shut down due to the pandemic. The University went fully online for the rest of the semester.*

No one was ready for the changes that ensued, but even moreso, no one had a plan in place that could ease the transition, and no one was ready for the repercussion that this pandemic has placed on the performing arts. The industry relies on the intimacy of actors, the close proximity of the audience to each other, and the many more bodies backstage in close proximity. We relied on this setup heavily and with little thought to how our close proximity is affected by virus spreading. There were no safety protocols in place because there was never an outbreak like this before. The best thing

for the industry to do at the time was to turn on the ghost light and turn off the lights in theatres both big and small.

Across campus the upsetting feelings of transitioning to remote learning. Students and parents were greatly upset for being forced out of the college experience, having their organizations scattered, and having unreliable access to the remote meetings. The common phrase heard from students was “This was not what I signed up for!” When campus life resumed in the fall semester of 2020 and there was an option to be online or in person for both students and faculty. Many students chose to stay at home as much as possible, but went to class when it was necessary to do so.

## Introduction

COVID-19 shook up the educational system across the country by forcing an abandonment of any relic of normality and forced the nation into a new paradigm where six foot distance, masks, and plexiglass walls were now commonplace. A year into this adjustment, the country is still faced with some critical shortcomings when it comes to the performing arts.

And just like that, schools all around the US either closed or went online with some stumbling results. “The spring semester of 2020 was significantly disrupted by the spread of the coronavirus as more than 1,300 colleges and universities in all 50 states canceled in-person classes or shifted to online-only instruction. By fall, many campuses developed plans to merge in-person instruction (with social distancing) and online learning, with varying degrees of success by institution.”(Smalley) For those in

the performing arts, going online meant canceling shows, reformatting group projects, or outright cancelling classes midway in the semester. The Washington Post found that “with a new survey showing that as many as 40 percent of incoming freshmen will probably pass on attending a four-year college this fall — and that 28 percent of returning students aren’t going back or haven’t decided yet — these schools face a dramatic test.” (Brodeur, Michael Andor, et al. “Empty Classrooms, Studios and Stages: In the Covid-19 Era, an Arts Education Requires an Even Greater Leap of Faith.”). Retention is critical for universities to grow and receive funding, but also it plays a factor into getting the necessary funding for accreditation. According to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board they found that among the public higher education there was a less than 1% drop in enrollment (84,7272 students enrolled in the fall 2019 to 84,015 students enrolled in the fall of 2020)(“Applicants, Acceptance and Enrollment, Fall 2017 to Fall 2020.”). Now while enrollment doesn’t necessarily equal attendance the significance of this is that students are still applying to higher education institutions.

## Accreditation

Certain theatre classes can easily transition to an online format, others cannot. One difficulty concerns the regulations around accreditation that require a certain amount of face-to-face time. It is a barrier in moving to established text-based learning. However, the use of remote/hybrid learning has opened up an opportunity for the

performing arts to establish a lifelong program that would allow students to have access to educational opportunities.

At the time of writing this there will be three semesters of graduating students of this pandemic. Their standards of knowledge have to meet those set out by the accreditation. The accrediting bodies have set out that they are still holding their standards. “One of the things that we have told all of our institutions is that because every institution is impacted by this, the peers that will come in to evaluate compliance understand because they are having to go through the same thing,’ said Wheelan. ‘However, it does not relieve anybody of meeting the standards.’”(Woods, Sarah. “Live Panel Discussion Ensuring Equitable Access and Inclusion During a Pandemic.”). There is no precedent set for theatre classes taught online, but there are institutions that have offered history and introductory courses about theatre in an online format. These classes meet the requirements by being a writing intensive and research based course.

When universities went online they had to change a significant amount of their content and approach to teaching and still receive accreditation from the granting institution. With only weeks until the end of the spring 2020 semester most finished the semester and focused on going back in the fall 2020 semester. “While the emergency shift to online courses is in no way a test of capacity to deliver remote instruction, it can be an opportunity to assess what faculty and students need to be successful and to identify what works better.” (Kinzie, Jillian. “How to Reorient Assessment and Accreditation in the Time of COVID-19 Disruption.”)

Attendance of higher education institutions across the United States has lost students due to the unsatisfactory quality of education. Performing arts students look forward to performing onstage. And with seasons being canceled and restrictions on what can be done, students across the US have decided to postpone their education. (Brodeur, Michael Andor, et al. "Empty Classrooms, Studios and Stages: In the Covid-19 Era, an Arts Education Requires an Even Greater Leap of Faith.") In what can be considered good news, Texas universities have reported an increase in attendance and retention. Texas Tech University stated that while they had more students enrolled, those students took less credit hours.

#### Performance-Based Learning

*It has been over 2 years since I took a performance based class, but I was taking an introduction to play analysis course the semester where the lockdown happened. The final project was going to be an original play with live projections. Our final project had to be changed in order to accommodate being online. I had to instead write a paper. I could only imagine what other students had to accommodate.*

"Interactive or physical classes as well as productions were the trickiest because we so highly value these practical experiences. No classes were cancelled, but as we planned the fall and spring, some classes were rearranged from the standard offerings to ensure we can supply the best educational experiences in our restricted formats. These mostly included dance classes."(Sarah Maines, Texas State University)

Perfomanced based classes had to be adjusted for 6 feet of distancing and a

shortened class time. So what kind of projects could ideally be done in a performance based class? Focus on new forms of theatre and original works became the highlight of the season with an emphasis on voice and body physicality.

Performance classes require intimate interaction between actors which includes physical touch and close proximity, handling and passing around props, and vocal projection and enunciation. Contemporary plays are based on the storytelling of human interactions. To be isolated online with a camera puts a barrier between actors. Even when students are in a hybrid class model the barrier of no touch and mask up prevent the mouth from moving unobstructed.

The benefit to this is that students are learning the value and importance of acting for a camera and learning new ways of showing intimacy besides the stereotypical movements. Students are also learning what is considered important in a character and how to show connection. Also, plays are being written by students and performed about the pandemic, which solidify the emotional events that is happening now.

### Design-Based Learning

The difference between a class that requires the above things and those that require design and research come in the forms of access to technology. There was an easier transition into online learning and adherence to social distancing policies. The world of design is moving to a digital platform with the introduction of computer aided drafting, portable drawing tablets, and more accurate tools for pre-visualization.

The traditional model for a design based course focuses on the research and presentation of design concepts. While technology does exist in the field, it is another thing to learn on top of the fundamentals which can put a strain on how to focus topics. Could we teach CAD drawing alongside lighting or scenic design? Does it hinder the organic nature of design? The traditional model is

There are still hurdles with access to these new technologies. Most students can't afford to buy these software or a computer to properly run it. With the switch to online learning these traditional methods became inaccessible due to the high cost of the materials previously provided by the Universities. The pandemic created a sudden need for new technologies in the classroom, but that high demand came at the expense of time in the classroom.

With this pandemic and moving online it offered a chance to integrate programs like Sketchup, Procreate, Vectorworks, and previsualization lighting software, but in a hybrid model there is an even bigger hurdle of access. The protocols that we see implemented in the classroom do hinder the traditional model. Students couldn't share tools, were discouraged from sharing papers, had no access to water, and also had reduced time in studio spaces. Also, access to technology was not readily available as classes were being reinvented.

## Productions

Universities are a business at its core in that they rely on student tuition and state funding to provide a service. Theatre departments also operate a business in the



form of producing a season of shows with ticket sales and concession as a form of added income. What makes this business special is the way they make and distribute their funds. The issue is that any loss of funds is a major issue for the program.

Though the size of school theatre programs surveyed varied greatly, one commonality was clear: Most programs rely to a large degree on ticket sales from productions to fund their activities. Spring performance cancellations resulted in significant revenue losses for these programs, with approximately half of respondents reporting a loss between \$500 and \$5,000 and another 25% reporting losses totaling between \$5,001 and \$10,000. (“Impact of COVID-19 on Theatre Education.” Educational Theatre Association)

Some theatre programs rely little on box office sales, but the way that they dictate the funds from box office sales still had to greatly pivot as a result of the loss.

Universities pivoted to producing shows in a very different format than the traditional live experience. “Research shows that the coronavirus can linger for hours in uncirculated air, infecting people as they inhale, particularly in contained spaces such as theaters, auditoriums, and gymnasiums. In recent weeks, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has indicated that the virus can travel further than six feet, the standard spacing for social distancing in many schools around the country.” (Mitchell, Corey. “Theater Educators Struggle to Keep Shows Going Amid COVID-19.”)

Universities have a difficult choice to make when it comes to productions. For most, it is the highlight of their department.

Many universities have taken advantage of the widespread access to aggressively testing their students for COVID-19 and have instituted temperature

checks and online meetings as much as possible. Rehearsals are shorter with longer breaks, conducted outdoors, or even virtually. When it comes to performances most are providing free streaming and free recording of their productions and only allowing the community of the university to attend. Through this, caseloads have been able to stay either low to no cases of COVID-19. This has been the most promising news to the theatre community as it shows that productions can be done without risking a full-blown infection.

During the fall most universities opted to stream shows live. While shows are starting to be recorded and accessible to the public, the great debate on whether watching a film production, live streamed or otherwise, is considered theatre. And again there is a debate on what is theatre. Sergio Costola, a professor at Southwestern University stated in an interview, “The concept of being live and being present are being deconstructed and made more complicated than simply ‘we are in the same place at the same time.’ ... The notion of ‘liveness’ does not dictate the thing itself, but it’s how you experience it.”(Bridges, Meilee. “Scholarly Perspectives on COVID-19, Part 11: Improvising Theatre in a Pandemic.”) Universities were able to get access to cameras, but some did not have a program for film production or offer any class on working with film. This became an opportunity for universities to integrate these kinds of programs and use them in the space offering practical experience. Some are highly considering keeping it around as a new normal for their program.

Ethics

Something that has to be considered is what happens next for the graduating class of 2020 and 2021 and possibly the class of 2022. Professional theaters are looking at the quality of graduating students by the quality of their skills. While students feel uncertain about their time, students are learning a great deal about adaptability through one of the hardest times while using more advanced technology in theatre. There is a huge uncertainty when it comes to the job market of theatre. On the one hand while theatres are opening back up there is a financial hardship of supporting staff which leads to too many people for too few of jobs. Before the pandemic the best way to get into the industry was through internships and assistant roles to develop this repertoire with a particular company, but without that crucial connection within the final years of graduating most students would see little to no internship opportunities.

There is pressure for shows to continue, but also for shows to be canceled. Many universities have a safety committee that dictates how many people can congregate and for how long, whether performers have to wear masks or if they can perform without it, and if they can only stream it or allow an audience to view the show.

For three semesters there has been a focus on the class learning and adapting performances to the pandemic. This has created a small generation of students who has learned how to perform and produce with new ways of connecting and through new media. But without the job market there the next generation will have a huge hurdle to face with getting their foot in the door and gaining access to needed apprenticeships and internships. It will be interesting to see whether or not graduating students will be employed in a theatre related field after the pandemic.

## Future Impact

We have no idea with this virus when we can return to normal, but right now we have a great chance of making a huge change in the way we experience theatre. There is a new generation of actors and writers that are producing plays around the pandemic. Near West Theater in Cleveland, Ohio wrote and performed an original piece called *RISE: The Isolation Project* in which young actors portray the life of being isolated to screens. Theatre is happening through this pandemic and is bringing us together in a new way.

What we can predict from the last pandemic is that theatres will change in the form of space, access, content, and community. In universities, they have a choice to make based on the future market in how they want to invest in their students; whether the future of live streaming is going to be a part of the job market or will everything return exactly the way it was before. This moment is unprecedented and we all are anxious, but we get to write the books now.

## Conclusion

Theatre brings hope to those that attend. Right now, we need hope in the greatest form. We need the community to come together and be a community. Universities recognize the importance of arts involvements in the community morale and economics. The COVID-19 pandemic put this at risk, but universities took a step back, thoroughly thought it over, and came back with what was needed. What we are doing now is more than just learning.

Theatre classes have adapted in a way we never thought possible before, and will continue to adapt with new opportunities and new classes supporting the need for a growing field in theatre, live streaming. Some universities are considering this to continue after the pandemic has subsided and even expanded into offering degrees in film. We have to remember that the effect of these changes are what we as a theatre community make of it, and many of us decided to use this as a positive experience.

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