

The Top Ten Things I've Learned from Going Digital: Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Zoom



Now that we're careening toward the one-year anniversary of all us having to learn that our faces look best when a ring of light is aimed at them, I thought it might be a good time to take stock and figure out what exactly I've learned and which mistakes I've made when it comes to taking the oldest "you really had to be there" industry, namely theater, into the digital age.

This is in no way an exhaustive list, although I am exhausted.

It is also not meant to come from a place of "Here are the things you should have been doing, other theater people" as much as it is "Look at everything I learned after I did everything wrong four or five

times over.”

That aside, the mantra that I wrote down on a Post-It note last March that I almost immediately lost had one sentence written on it-

“Every crisis presents opportunities.”

In this instance, it was the opportunity to watch all of “Drag Race: Holland” and learn to say five different words in French.

Plus, I took my theater online.

In no particular order, here are the 10 things I learned from going digital-

10. It took a pandemic to make me stop paying lip service to accessibility and really think about it.

Everything we’ve done up to now on my theater’s social media platforms has been free. We also have a service where you can sign up, and give us money, and we give you some cool content, and baptize your children, but other than that — all free.

And while the refrain I heard as we began taking programs online was “But is anybody watching this?” I was watching the numbers, and the answer was-

Yes.

And not only were they watching, whoever “they” are, but they were watching in bigger numbers than would have watched a play in a theater. It’s amazing that someone like me, who saw nothing wrong with performing a one-man show about Herbert Hoover for an audience of 10, suddenly felt like there wouldn’t be enough eyes on a digital production for it to be “worth it for me.”

The biggest takeaway was that while we were reaching people from all over the country, and in some

cases Japan (?), the most surprising thing was hearing from local people who had no experience with our theater previous to the pandemic, but were now familiar with us and watching what we were doing.

When I reached out to a few of those people and did the standard “I hope you’ll join us when we’re back in the theater even though we’ll need you to wear a mask and sit inside a plastic bubble,” those people confessed that they never considered seeing live theater. In most cases, it wasn’t because they weren’t interested, but because they consider it a luxury. Something they can’t afford, or an outing that wouldn’t be welcoming to them because their idea of a person who goes to the theater doesn’t resemble them.

We clearly have a lot more work to do, and not just finding ways to get all kinds of people from all levels of the economic spectrum into the theater, but making them feel like they belong there. There’s more to say on that, but it’s probably best addressed in another essay that’s too long and features way too many commas.

9. Shorter Is Better

I’m not just talking about French emperors. When “all this” (my preferred term for the worldwide trauma we’re still very much in) started, there was an impulse on all sides to rush to that obvious audience favorite — a reading. I don’t know how so many of us forgot, myself included, that while sitting in a theater and watching people read can be somewhat boring, sitting at a laptop while watching it feels like a nightmare dreamed up by Rod Serling. And boy, oh boy, did some of us pick some lengthy nightmares. There are plays out there that can be read in an hour’s time, but apparently, those were all uninteresting to us in March and April, and instead, we opted for perennial mood-lifters like *The Lower Depths* and *Mourning Becomes Electra*. My favorite experience was attempting to watch a bunch of A-list actors perform a Mamet play on Zoom, only seeming to realize, in real time, that cross-talk doesn’t work so well on Zoom, and Mamet is, aside from being a colossal prick, *really* into cross-talk. You would assume that in the age of TikTok and Insta-stories that we’d understand people want less not more, but then again, Quibi failed miserably, so what do I know? I think the point is, at least if you plan on doing something brief and it doesn’t work, it’ll be over soon. If you start reading *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* and you realize your mistake early on, you’re still in for a *very* long night.

8. Everyone Is Available

Some of the people I’ve gotten to agree to talk to me on my theater’s interview show are people I’m assuming I never could have gotten during normal times. It took me way too long to figure out that NOBODY IS DOING ANYTHING. The fact that most of the guests are also very kind people doesn’t hurt, but scheduling sure is easy when there’s absolutely nothing going on. Initially, I was only asking the

people I regularly work with, and then a very bright person, who I no longer speak to because interacting with bright people is bound to lead to insecurity, suggested that I try expanding my range of guests. So I started reaching out to friends in far away places, then strangers, then strangers in far away places, and I'm sure, at some point, this will all lead me to Angela Lansbury. I can't wait.

7. Give Out Your Passwords

If you had told me a year ago that I would willingly give out the passwords to my social media pages to 10 different people, I would have assumed that it was under duress, like, I don't know, perhaps I'd be kidnapped or Channing Tatum was blackmailing me with that video of me at his 27th birthday party (it's hardly the *worst* anybody's behaved at an Outback Steakhouse). It turns out that when you need a wonderful, talented, generous group of artists to create content for you, the easiest way for that to happen is to loosen up on the reins and let them have as much agency as possible. While I think nearly anybody in charge of anything prefers to keep as many cards close to the chest as possible, it's so much easier to put them down on the table. (I don't play cards, so I have no idea if this analogy is working. The point is, learn to give up some control.)

6. It's Okay to Be Silly

Some of the programming we've created over the past year has been frivolous. Goofy. Nonsensical. And that's on top of posting tweets about dogs that look like Paddington and people who dip their french fries in milkshakes (I know, I gagged as well). Somewhere along the way, I came to believe that theater was a very serious thing that needed to, at all times, convey its seriousness. Yes, we could be irreverent, but at no time could we be *silly*. The trouble is, when a plague is sweeping the land and all you have at your disposal are memes, silly goes a long way. Silly actually tripled my engagement on our digital platforms, and, I don't know, it just feels good? It feels like playing. Remember playing? Being at play? Maybe we can go back to that. I forgot how much fun it is.

5. Everything Is Going to Go Wrong and Then It's Going to Go Worse

For a while, I was one of those people who strove for perfection, like Martha Stewart or every character Reese Witherspoon plays. When I started curating digital content, I was immediately taken aback by how many errors I was expected to just brush off. People on mute when they were supposed to be talking. Bad Internet connections. Shoddy video. Videos that wouldn't upload. Disappearing posts. The choice was: Either learn to live with all this and assume people are cutting you more slack than you're cutting yourself, or give up. I'm glad I didn't give up. Theater was never perfect, not even at its best. Why should this iteration of it be?

4. Audio Is Your Friend

I think that when losing a very visual medium, it's understandable to try and recapture the spirit of that medium as much as you can, which, to many, meant video programming. But, oh my god, video is so awful. It is so, *so* awful. And difficult. And audio-

Again, podcasts are so popular.

They're so, *so* popular, and I listen to at least six a day, and somehow, it didn't occur to me until MONTHS into the pandemic that maybe we could do audio programming as well as video programming, and things immediately got easier. Like, overnight. Sound is your friend, everyone. Maybe your best friend. Have you called your best friend? Give them a call. See how they're doing. But first-

3. Try Everything

We're told that branding and sticking to a mission and having a cohesive look and style is important, and it is, or rather, it was, before the entire world got turned upside down and we threw all the rules into a bonfire along with all that sourdough bread we made, but couldn't bear to eat. So just try everything. A lot of what we're able to do now, we're able to do at a much lower cost than what the productions we usually mount require, and the stakes are so low, they may as well be at the bottom of the Mariana Trench, so just throw a bunch of spaghetti at the wall and see what sticks. If you try out 10 digital programs, and one really connects, never talk about those other nine failures, and hope everybody forgets about them.

2. Remember Those Talented, Wonderful, Generous People I Mentioned Before?

I've never seen a theater that didn't have at least two brilliant people working at it, and so while it may seem like the only people who should be creating content right now are artistic directors, actors, and that guy who stands outside the theater selling Hall and Oates t-shirts (Is that just my theater? Ugh, okay. Great. Gotta figure that out before we reopen.), the truth is that there might be people throughout your organization who have interests and hobbies and passions that they want to share with others. And what a great opportunity (there's that word again) to showcase the many different personalities that populate your theater, and hopefully they don't all exist within the head of the t-shirt guy (I really need to check in on Gary). We all talk about how we can get the general public invested in the lives of artists and their well-being, and the first step would be giving them every chance to get to know us as people who have lives and homes and bills just like everyone else. Again, give out those passwords. Then write down what they are, because you'll never remember, and neither will anybody else.

1. Take Yourself Off Mute

Need I say more?

Cover Me!: Where have all the arts writers gone?



I should start by mentioning that even writing this would normally be considered a conflict of interest.

That's because for the past nine years, I've run a theater company.

A small one.

As in, "you could fit in the back of a pick-up" small.

Part of running a small theater company, in addition to producing, you know, theater, involves endlessly chasing down press and coverage for the work you're doing.

If you're lucky, you can get a feature here and there for something you're working on.

If you're really lucky, you can get a feature *and* a review for whatever that thing is.

And if you get both, I assume you're married to Rupert Murdoch.

I'm sure there are parts of the country where getting people to write about your work is not difficult, and goodness knows I am far luckier than most when it comes to press, but that's partly because when people ignore me, I dress up a pug to look like Ophelia or antagonize the star of *Pineapple Express*.

I've often been accused of producing "stunts," and it's not an unfair assessment, but I would always point out that stunts get you a returned phone call from an arts writer or a critic, whereas the best production of some play anyone has ever seen could possibly get you a mention in someone's Facebook status.

We have a serious problem with arts and arts writing, and while it may be tempting to blame it all on the pandemic, the reality is, it's been an issue for far longer than that, and it needs to be added to the long list of things we should be addressing before we even think about getting back onstage.

Before we get too far into this, let me just say that I'm sure some of what I'm about to say is not going over well with some people, so I'd like to preface it all by stating that I understand most of these problems are not the result of any one person (aside from Rupert Murdoch, probably), and that systemic elitism and capitalism are likely to blame for it, just like everything else, but by not talking about it, or by pulling the ol' "That's just the way it is" mantra that I heard over and over again when I was asking why coverage for my work and the work of other smaller theaters in the area was so inconsistent, we are looking at a problem that is not all that hard to fix and claiming it unfixable.

And if we can't fix the fixable problems, what chance do we have to fix the bigger ones?

So all that being said, let's talk about pay-to-play.

(I can already feel you bristling. It's okay. Take a deep breath. It's not going to be as bad as you think. Or maybe it is, but there's no way you're going to stop reading now.)

I am not naive to the ways in which money affects just about everything, but perhaps there's a small part of me that would like to believe a state that constantly — and accurately — touts its arts sector as

its main selling point would see the value in writing about and spotlighting as much of that sector as possible.

Instead, we see publications giving coverage to the same major arts organizations time and again, and those organizations just so happen to have the money to take out large ads in the pages of those newspapers and magazines.

Now, I'm not faulting any theater for how it chooses to advertise, and indeed, if most of us were able to afford to play the game, I'm sure we'd play it happily as well, but it doesn't make it any less distasteful that some of the best productions I've seen in recent memory went mostly unwritten about, because it was happening at a theater that couldn't afford to advertise.

Do I have any proof that advertising will automatically get you more coverage?

Well, if you look at who is getting the coverage and who isn't, and what both of those groups are doing and not doing, it seems logical to assume that ad dollars are playing a part, and if they aren't, that means the size of the theater or its perceived reputation or longevity is a factor, and I can't think of a better way to tank a blossoming arts community than to have the media in that community telegraph to its young artists that whatever they do or create will go mainly unrecognized unless they do it somewhere that has been deemed "reputable" or "impressive."

You can imagine what would have happened to the adventurous spirit in theater communities like New York or Chicago if the arts writers there had balked at going to an opening night that wasn't catered or asked to review a show without being given two free drink tickets along with their program. I'm starting to pray that the founders of the next Steppenwolf or NYTW aren't going to make a go of it in Rhode Island, because chances are, they'll be widely ignored.

And if I sound like I'm being unreasonable, please know that I have tried to meet editors and publishers halfway so many times, I now own a condo at the halfway point.

In fact, I once suggested to an editor that if space in a newspaper was an issue, and I'm sure it is, could he just agree to send someone to write about my theater's work and only post the article or review online. I assured him that wouldn't bother me at all since most of my audience base would still see it. I stopped just short of saying, "Because none of them read your newspaper anyway," because I was attempting to be diplomatic.

I was then told that even writing something digitally would be fiscally prohibitive, and I dropped the matter, believing what I was told.

Two days later, an article appeared on the front page of this newspaper's arts section all about a random actor in a random tour that was coming through town, and I had to wonder how that kind of coverage could fit within a budget?

A puff piece to promote a project that really had no local ties whatsoever aside from the fact that it was playing a local venue that regularly advertises in the paper.

Now listen, I'm not against puff pieces. I've written them and I'll read them, but if something has to be prioritized, I think it only makes sense to prioritize local arts in a local paper before you get around to writing yet another review of the latest non-eq *Jesus Christ Superstar* tour that's rolling through the town for a total of three performances.

I'm not speaking morally either.

Yes, covering local theater is the right thing to do, but it also just makes sense from a business standpoint.

My mother has no interest in who's playing Elphaba in the latest *Wicked* tour, but if I'm in even so much as a blurb in *The Providence Journal*, she buys out the newsstand, and I'm sure she's not alone in that. Yes, ad money is important, but so is a paper's responsibility to cover stories based on the interest level of its local readership, which subsequently turns into an investment in that institution.

We frequently hear about how the media is under assault and we need to support our local papers, and I agree with that, but local arts writers, just like our local theaters, also need to be spending this time, as my friend Aaron Blanck says, justifying why they should exist. And if their best argument for that happens to be a thousand words on somebody growing a zucchini that looks like Roger Williams, I'm not sure they're going to be around much longer.

This might be when you present me with the argument that because theaters are not regularly producing in-person programming right now, there isn't anything to write about, and you'd be arguing that with someone who has done nothing but write since all of this began. That isn't me patting myself on the back (okay, maybe a little), but it is pointing out that when there's no art, there are still artists,

and artists are worth writing about, especially as it pertains to how important they are, the fact that they're human beings with bills and livelihoods and personalities and interests that stretch beyond spending five minutes on the phone promoting their latest project.

What an amazing opportunity we've been given right now to talk to artists about their creative process, what they do when they're not onstage, what they'd like to see happen when theaters come back.

Human interest stories, remember those?

And no, the Roger Williams zucchini does not count as human interest.

I spent months after the pandemic began speaking to artistic directors from all kinds of theaters about how they were weathering the storm. I've reviewed digital productions. I've written think-pieces like this that nobody asked for, but seemed worth working on anyway.

There is still plenty to write about, and arts writers or editors saying there isn't is a failure of imagination from a group of people whose job is to celebrate imagination.

This is also not a problem that is specific to Rhode Island. I've heard from theaters all over the country about how their local papers and publications are letting them down at a crucial moment. Yes, many of those papers are, themselves, in dire straits, but isn't that all the more reason why we should be helping each other, and giving each other reasons to champion the work being done on both sides?

While it would be arguably more awful if the arts sections just up and disappeared, at least then, there would be a certain amount of equity to the matter.

Okay, we're on our own. It's horrendous, but at least there's a level playing field.

Instead, what we're met with is the same, ongoing nonsense that we've seen for years-

Smaller organizations not only being ignored, but being given no rhyme or reason for why, and certainly no criteria for how they can find themselves in their local paper, because, chances are, the criteria

involves money, but nobody wants to admit that, so instead, many of us just cross our fingers and hope we'll do something so undeniably brilliant that editors will feel they have no choice but to send in their critics.

I once sat next to a group of women at Trinity Rep who told me they loved theater and wanted to see more of it. My ears perked up, and I asked them what theaters they were currently subscribed to.

"Well, we see everything here," one of them said, meaning Trinity. "And we go to PPAC, and the Gamm, and Theater by the Sea, but we wish we had a few more to choose from."

I then started listing other theaters, including my own, that they could check out. They were stunned. They had no idea any of these places existed. They were general audience-goers. A bit older, and not that active on social media. The way they located events and organizations was by reading the *Journal*, *Rhode Island Monthly*, *Providence Monthly*, and one or two other publications. While nearly every theater appears in at least a few of those once or twice, they regular spotlight on the bigger groups guaranteed that, as far people like these were concerned, they only needed to memorize the names of a handful of places.

The age-old argument that reviews don't matter and you shouldn't read them is not without merit, but even at the height of online participation, there is still the feeling that if nobody is writing about you, it's because there's nothing there worth writing about, and that is unacceptable, but not likely to change, which means what does have to change are the people doing the writing or the ones handing out assignments.

That's where you come in.

Right now, you've probably heard a lot about how much artists need your help, particularly your money, and that's still true. If you can donate to a fund that's supporting artists and freelancers right now, please do.

If you don't have the money to donate, there are still things you can do to help, and I'll be writing more about them later this month, but for now, here's one thing you can do-

Call whoever is left at your local paper and tell them they need to be consistently writing about local artists, and they need to be sure to spread the wealth. Chances are, if the first one happens, then the

second won't be hard to do.

If you see that a local theater is putting on a digital production of something, or revamping their Instagram, or even regularly making an effort to keep a presence online until this is over, consider writing to an editor and telling them they should be writing stories about it.

They're going to tell you it's a financial matter, and while that might not be a lie, the fact is-

They have to write about something, and if you've pursued any of these magazines or newspapers lately, you can see that they are writing about a lot of-forgive the term-utter crap.

If there's room for movie reviews, there's room for a profile of a local set designer.

If there's room for articles online that are rerun from the AP about a celebrity marriage, there's room for a reporter to spend a day at a small theater that's struggling to keep the doors open.

If there is room for politics and sports and inflammatory hate-speech masquerading as "opinion pieces," then there is room for the arts.

If you're going to put arts on the tourism brochure, you need to put us in *The Providence Journal* as well.

And if anybody working at *The Providence Journal* or *Providence Business News* or *Providence Monthly* or *Rhode Island Monthly*, or any of the many papers in cities and towns all over the state reading this, feels angered by what I've said, I have good news for you.

You can do better.

And I look forward to reading all about it when you do.

Ed. note: Motif maintains a strict separation between our ad and editorial departments, and we never

engage in pay for play.

The New Classics: Ten titles to produce when we're back to producing



As a theater lover, this is usually one of my favorite parts of any season.

January has become the de facto time for theaters to take on some of their most ambitious projects, and normally, that means tackling a classic.

While a season opener sets the tone, and the season ender assists in you going out on a high note, the middle of the season, combined with the arrival of a brand new year, can sometimes be a reset or a chance for an organization to greet audiences who've made a resolution to see more theater with the best it has to offer.

And clearly, we're not doing that this year.

But while most of us agree that many models need to be chucked out the nearest window, I would argue that barring something in the mission statement that has us avoiding anything that isn't extremely modern, we should fight to keep the classics spot alive.

What I think we need to look at is what defines a classic.

First off, let's not get into Shakespeare.

If you love it, fantastic, but it's the customary go-to, right?

Also, I know *The Great Gatsby* is in the public domain now, but for the love of god, don't. We had a wonderful local production only a few years ago, and another fabulous college production before that. Let's put a moratorium on all things Gatsby for the foreseeable future.

Then there are the Tony and Pulitzer winners.

I promise you we have raked those coals bare. One of the benefits of living in an area with so much theater is that your "I've never seen" list gets shorter and shorter until you find yourself wondering why you've seen six different productions of *Bus Stop*.

The question is: What are the new classics?

The shows that wouldn't immediately jump to mind as something that works for both a field trip and guarantees audience and critical acclaim unless you royally mess it up?

These would be my choices for the Top Ten shows we should see not only being produced more often, but conceptualized. Reimagined. Given the kind of signature performance that helps establish younger companies still introducing themselves to audiences and assists theaters with more longevity in demonstrating their acuity at tackling the big texts.

All of these plays are just old enough to have cemented their inarguable excellence while still being new enough to ensure that many of us have probably only seen a few of them onstage. I also tried to weave around choosing titles that are already highly produced even if they could be thought of as new classics (plays like *The Clean House* or *Appropriate*.) I also tried to keep manageability in mind, which is why you won't see *M. Butterfly* on the list. It's a gorgeous play, but only if you can find someone to play the title role, and that's no easy feat.

Feel free to argue with me, that's part of the fun of theater and Top Ten lists, but after you've run to the comments section, run to wherever you get your plays and read all of these.

In no particular order-

10. ***bobrauschenbergamerica* by Charles Mee**

For my money, everybody should do a Charles Mee play once a year. This just happens to be my favorite, but all of them are wild and wonderful. I'm already breaking my rule about audiences though, because boy oh boy, do you need an audience that's willing to go on a ride, but what better way to cultivate one than with work this joyous? Plus, you can read all his plays for free right on his website (charlesmee.com)

9. ***King Hedley II* by August Wilson**

I have no idea why this play isn't done all the time, especially since this is the play that got Viola Davis her first Tony Award. While I'll never quibble about which Wilson play is the best, the 1980s seems like a time worth examining again in the current moment. When I spoke about conceptualizing earlier, Wilson is who I was thinking about. In America, you know we love you when we start deconstructing you, and it seems a shame that Wilson's work has never been attempted by directors willing to view it through a less-than-naturalistic lens. His later work, like *Gem of the Ocean*, even seems to beg for it. I can see why trying something like that with stalwarts like *Fences* might be tricky, so why not give it a try with something lesser known, but equally powerful?

8. ***On the Verge* by Eric Overmyer**

I allowed myself one of those "it used to be done all the time" plays, because this is one even I haven't seen, and goodness knows, I've tried. Go back and read it and you'll find it not only holds up, it holds on. It is long overdue for a professional revival.

7. ***An American Daughter* by Wendy Wasserstein**

When theaters produce Wendy Wasserstein, they produce *The Heidi Chronicles* and call it a day. In my opinion, this is the play we need from her right now. A blistering condemnation of what women face in

the political arena, with observations on the media that seem prescient and dialogue that ranks among her best. Why it wasn't done everywhere in 2016 is beyond me.

6. ***Dot* by Colman Domingo**

No artist should be allowed to be as talented as Colman Domingo, and yet, he's just as good a playwright as he is an actor, which is saying something. His play *Dot* is one of the best I've read about aging and how it impacts a family, and it offers a star-making turn for its title character.

5. ***Sonnets for an Old Century* by Jose Rivera**

Trinity's recent production of *Marisol* should have had everybody going back and looking at the work of Jose Rivera, but unfortunately, I'm not sure we were as adventurous in the before times as Rivera requires. Luckily, we're all game for much bigger leaps once this plague is over, right? And the perfect way to showcase that is by taking a look at Rivera's half-poem, half-exaltation that offers unlimited possibilities for casting, directing and designing. It features some of the best monologues I've ever read and language that you'll never be able to forget.

4. ***What of the Night?* by María Irene Fornés**

It's possible you know *Fefu and Her Friends* and *Mud*, but while you might be tempted to produce *Mother Courage* once you're back in business, I'd plead with you to look at this grandiose theatrical experiment instead. It's epic in scope and messaging, and features the legendary playwright at the height of her prowess.

3. ***Drowning Crow* by Regina Taylor**

Regina Taylor's gospel musical *Crowns* is more well-known, but I found her adaptation of *The Seagull* to be one of the best ever written. It's a no-nonsense, gutsy approach to the work that has no reverence for the source material whatsoever (which is sort of how you have to do it if you're going to adapt Chekhov). Sometimes you have to meet an audience halfway with a story they know, told in a manner they're not familiar with, and this is a great example of that special kind of artistic marriage.

2. ***Satellites* by Diana Son**

Son's play *Stop/Kiss* is her most popular work. Even my theater produced it years ago, and while I can see why it packs a punch, a part of me was upset I didn't discover *Satellites* until much later, and in the middle of an already-programmed season, because it's an elevation of all her previous fascinations in a way that's both humorous and devastating. It's also one of the best plays about city living that I've ever read.

1. ***Father Comes Home from the Wars* by Suzan-Lori Parks**

Before you tell me you're too scared to take on a play this massive, I'd like to remind you that nearly every artistic director I've ever met has wanted to produce *Angels in America* at some point, most of them will eventually, and once the rights to *The Inheritance* become available, I'm sure I'm going to have to sit through at least two local productions of that before I ever get to see something as exciting as *Father Comes Home from the Wars*. Parks' play was met with near universal acclaim when it premiered, and like most plays that look at history and race, it barely ever appeared outside of major markets after that. It's exactly the kind of work we need to be doing when theaters reopen, and it still has all the strengths of any and all American classics, while not letting America off the hook.

If you don't end up liking any of these plays after you read them, use them as a jumping off point to discover more work that could find a home on your stage.

Just please don't make me sit through another production of *The Glass Menagerie*.

I'm begging you.

Transform the New Year: Metamorphosis Dance Company's NYE Extravaganza



It's possible you're missing the New Year's Eve party you would have had if this had been anything resembling a normal year, but it only stands to reason that some of most innovative partiers in the state are more than prepared to bring the December 31 festivities online.

I spoke with some of the artists at TEN31 Productions and the Metamorphosis Dance Company all about how they've managed to soldier on in 2020 and what we should expect from their first virtual end-of-the-year spectacular.

Kevin Broccoli (Motif): When putting together an event for NYE this year, how much did the events of the year inform the way you wanted to construct it? I feel like NYE is going to be so bittersweet because everybody is excited to leave this year behind, but celebrating is going to be both difficult and seem difficult with the amount of loss we've had. I'd love to know what the conversations were about how to approach putting together the evening.

Alicia Wilder (Choreographer): When we discussed the idea of applying for the Rhode Island Commerce HArT Grant to put on a performance for the end of the year, we were trying to find a way to spread joy and cater an event specifically to the virtual world. 2020 was overall meant to be a year full of celebration at TEN31, as it was our 20th anniversary year. In May we had plans to host a retrospective concert, highlighting pieces that had been produced by MDC over the last six years, as part of our contribution to the celebration. We decided not to focus the performance on something holiday specific, but instead as a celebration of all that we have accomplished that brought us to this point, and all the hard work the dance company members have put in to keep the space and programming alive through the pandemic. The pieces were chosen based on overall visual impact, smaller cast sizes, and to showcase a wide range of what MDC has to offer.

The process of putting the pieces themselves together has presented us with a new challenge. We had to take all the contact and partnering out of the work, in order to keep everyone as safe as possible. In particular, the piece "Natural Enemies" was 90% partnering and contact. The way these parameters have evolved the piece is truly remarkable. The distance between the dancers is greater, but it in turn increases their mental connection, which makes the space between them vibrate and really brings new life to the piece. I will be working closely with Montage Media Productions, the videography team for this project, to add the camera into the work, almost as an additional dancer. We want the show to have a concert dance feel, but the beauty of video production allows us to take the audience deeper into the work, and really immerse them. My overall challenge, or goal, has been to navigate how the restrictions can send us in new directions and create an immersive experience through film and movement.

KB: It's so exciting that dance is the focal point of the event. Will this be brand new material or work you've been putting together previous to this event being planned?

AW: I agree! The pieces in this show span from works created in 2014 through fall 2019. All of the pieces have been reworked slightly over the course of this process, but nothing has been created brand new for this show. However, most of the pieces were presented at private events, so this is the first time they will be performed for a public audience.

KB: This will actually be the first dance event I've watched digitally since the pandemic began. Can you talk about how you factored in the digital element?

AW: The show will start with a brief introduction and welcome from me, as the dance company director. Then the pieces will be presented one after the other, still having the same feel that an in-person dance concert would have. We have shortened the overall program to fit into a 45min time block, because it is my experience that shorter broadcasts work better on a virtual streaming platform. It's easy to be distracted when you're in your own home. To add to that, we've really thought out how the camera, and in turn the audience, can become another mover in the show. This gives an audience the chance to see details and nuances they may not have seen from their seats in a theater, and also makes them feel like the piece is happening around them. The camera angles to me are so important. Being mindful of how you are visually telling the story, and keeping the audience engaged as well. We could have set the camera up with one wide view and let the audience view it just as if they were in theater, but I wanted to find ways to take it to the next level. My mindset during this whole pandemic is to find the positive. To look for ways to grow and build in the boxes we have been put in, both literally on the dance floor in divided spaces, and mentally. Setting restrictions is often used as a choreographic tool. It's how you utilize those restrictions that creates the magic.

KB: It looked like the event at Roger Williams Park this Halloween was a big success. Did that teach you anything about how to move forward with events like that until we can return to some kind of normal?

Eric Auger (Co-Founder/Artist): Creating a haunted house type of event that adhered to COVID-19 social distancing parameters felt daunting at first, but after having success with a few outdoor, community-based events earlier in the fall, we felt prepared. Adapting our costumes to include full face coverings was the easy part, as it was just an extension of the existing costume in material and design. Our biggest challenge was to figure out how to keep the energy transference of our performance intact with our audience while socially distancing. The Museum of Natural History (where the event took place) had already cleverly designed a one-way path through all of their galleries, so we took what they had already established and embellished it with some living tableaux presented here and there, all socially distanced, of course. What we learned is that 'the show can go on,' it just takes a bit more time to add in these new extra precautionary steps to our normal show guidelines, guaranteeing the safety of our staff and the audience. More importantly, we realized that our performances can still resonate with our audience, even with all of these restrictions; more than ever, people want to make pretend with us, because they have been restricted in their homes for so long. We had a lot of 'thank you for doing this' comments as people were exiting.

KB: How has the company been adapting overall? Ten31 relies so heavily on events and obviously winter is going to be tough for anything indoors. Are you making plans for more digital events?

AW: Overall TEN31 has been doing alright. We have an amazing group of artists who work with us, and are willing to try new things! We've had a few events here and there, but the biggest thing for us has been the ability to shift gears and grow the dance space, and what I hope to soon be an arts and performance hub.

MDC has a Youth Program (MDYP) that is now in its second season. We did lose a few students, due to having to shift virtual, but the program is still going strong and I have a feeling we'll be back to where we were at the end of last year soon.

Our open adult classes had just been one class on Tuesday nights. With the shift of things in the pandemic we now have 10 open adult wellness & dance classes running regularly, which in January we are planning to increase to 14. We offer hybrid classes, so people can come in person and follow all safety regulations, or they can take class from home. Our classes include: yoga, barré, strength and conditioning, jazz, contemporary, ballet, hip-hop and Latin dance. We've been able to bring in outside local artists to the teaching roster, and we can't wait to keep building that.

As for digital events, we don't have any specific shows in mind, but are setting ourselves up with the ability to stream not only classes, but performances as well. We hope to have space for not just MDC and TEN31 to put on shows, but for local artists as well.

TEN31 has also added some new skills to our performance roster, like virtual hosts for your meetings, conferences and parties. To pre-recorded or live performances to fill virtual events with entertainment. We have worked very closely with the clients for the few events we have done to make sure that our performers and the guests are kept safe. The winter does make things tough for indoor events, but we've been working to find ways for our outdoor characters to be a part of festivities as well.

NYE with Metamorphosis Dance Company** will be streaming live on December 31 @ 8pm. Admission is *Free.**** For more information, go to ten31productions.com*

Try to Keep It All the Year: Trinity Rep's "A Christmas Carol"



“There are many things from which I might have derived good, by which I have not profited, I dare say,’ returned the nephew. ‘Christmas among the rest. But I am sure I have always thought of Christmas time, when it has come round—apart from the veneration due to its sacred name and origin, if anything belonging to it can be apart from that—as a good time; a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time; the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys. And therefore, uncle, though it has never put a scrap of gold or silver in my pocket, I believe that it *has* done me good, and *will* do me good; and I say, God bless it!”

While it’s not uncommon to use a quote to kick off a review, I’m probably not supposed to use a quote that large. I did it anyway, because it’s not only my favorite quote from *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens, but it’s also one of my favorite lines in literature, and the one most likely to choke me up no matter what time of year it is.

It's spoken by Fred, the nephew of Ebenezer Scrooge, a miser who spends the day before Christmas terrorizing his employee, Bob, dismissing his beleaguered nephew, and mocking those collecting money for the poor.

"If they would rather die, . . . They had better do it, and decrease the surplus population."

Reading that is almost like listening to C-SPAN, isn't it?

The most famous Christmas story of all time, aside from the Nativity, also happens to be the most popular, go-to holiday programming for seemingly every theater in the country. Annual productions are usually a great way to bank some money, and a way for directors and adapters to play around with a story audiences know well enough to allow for some artistic interpretation.

This year, that interpretation comes with the added challenge of taking the magic of Dickens and putting it on televisions and laptops. For many people, this might be the first digital production they've agreed to sit through since the pandemic began, and while all audiences these days have dwindling attention spans, you can see how it might be difficult to convince the kids to sit and watch a streaming version of something that has a hundred other purely cinematic versions—including one with Muppets.

(Or as I call that film, "the definitive *Christmas Carol*.")

So rejoice, because Trinity has stuck the landing.

A series of smart directorial choices, and a bevy of enchanting performances, has made this *Christmas Carol* one you won't want to miss, and the best part is, it's free.

Taking the story to film seems to have opened up the creativity of Trinity's team, including some absolutely gorgeous animation from Michael Guy, when Scrooge is spirited into a book by the always-beguiling Rebecca Gibel as the Ghost of Christmas Past. Gibel and Rachael Warren pop up throughout the play in various roles, and the two of them were playing off each other so well, I completely forgot they were filming from separate locations.

Filming actors from various places, including their homes, a cemetery, and the streets of Providence, is just one hurdle the production had to clear. Director Curt Columbus and director of photography Albert

Genao had a lot of plates to spin with this one, and they've knocked it out of the park.

This *Christmas Carol* manages to be many things all at once: a love letter to Providence, a celebration of family and community, a welcome opportunity to let us take a far-too-brief look back into a performance space none of us have seen for months, and an entertaining hour of holiday fun that balances fine-tuned videography with that special brand of unique theatrical energy that sometimes reads as too much when a camera is aimed at it, but attached to this story seems more than appropriate.

Joe Wilson Jr. is a marvelous Scrooge, who adjusts beautifully to each new medium we see the character in — whether it be standing among the stunning set and props from S. Michael Getz — or on a Facetime call with Fred, played with just the right amount of hope and subtlety by Rodney Witherspoon. There are so many ways to play Scrooge, and a wise actor won't ask how their Scrooge can be different, but what kind of Scrooge the moment requires, and it struck me that this Scrooge seemed more withdrawn than anything else. Instead of just bluster and snarkiness, we see the pain in him right from the beginning. He's left the world, and so it makes his return to it in the finale that much more cathartic.

Daniel Duque-Estrada does double duty as a kind of mad scientist narrator leading us through the interactive portions of the show (get your bells ready), and the Ghost of Christmas Present. His interim pieces between scenes reminded me of the videos you see before you step onto a ride at an amusement park, and while that may sound like a dig, it's actually perfect for keeping the energy aloft throughout the show. It doesn't hurt that Duque-Estrada commits to it fully, and it just feels fantastic to see actors we know can play serious get to be silly for a bit.

One of the most striking moments of the play is the appearance of Stephen Thorne as Marley, standing right outside the Providence Public Library. There's always the question of how scary you actually want *A Christmas Carol* to be since it can run the gamut from "mildly spooky" to *Scrooged*, but I found the scene where Marley visits Scrooge to be exceptionally filmed, edited and performed.

As Bob Cratchit, Taavon Gamble is endearing early on, alongside his equally charming family played by Adam Crowe as his husband Sam, and Tiny Tim, played by the lovely Evelyn Marote. Gamble's performance eventually turns heartbreaking when Scrooge gets a vision of not just his future, but the futures of those he impacts.

It's a good reminder that it's not just about how we, ourselves, change, but how we change those around us.

While theater requires attention to detail, anything on film has its detail magnified by 10. So you'll be

relieved to know Trinity has all its bases covered. The quality is stellar, the costumes by Amanda Downing Carney are exquisite, the music by Michael Rice and the sound design by Peter Sasha Hurowitz are both eerie and evocative, and the lighting by Steve McLellan has that perfect theater glow to it that we all can't wait to see again live.

When done well, *A Christmas Carol* is a story you should take something new from each time you see it, but it's understandable that the proliferation of it in culture has made us numb to its message. We see it because seeing it is tradition, but it becomes just one more thing to check off our holiday activity list as we careen towards the 25th.

This year, I hope when you put on Trinity's *A Christmas Carol*, you do your best to sit and experience the show the same way you would in a theater. Phones off, eyes forward, open to letting a little magic into your life.

With this year being what it was, it's okay if you haven't felt like finding something to cherish yet, but this *Christmas Carol* might just be that thing.

And the good news is-

You haven't missed it.

Trinity Rep's *A Christmas Carol* streams for free now through January 10. For tickets, go to <https://www.trinityrep.com/buy-tickets/>

There's No Other Way To Be King: The Psych Drama Company's "The Lion in Winter"



"How dear of you to let me out of jail." ~ Eleanor

"It's only for the holidays." ~ Henry

No matter how unconventional you think your holiday season is going to be this year, there's no question that the royals of James Goldman's *The Lion in Winter* have you beat. After keeping his wife, Eleanor of Aquitaine, imprisoned for a decade, Henry II has released her just in time to welcome his guest, Philip II, the King of France. The visit, however, is merely an event around which Goldman can construct some of the finest and most devious strategizing and medieval plotting in theater history, and some of its wittiest dialogue.

A story that hangs on its wordplay can sometimes falter in a live setting, but it makes for a perfect audio experience, especially when the sound quality is as good as what Psych Drama Company is offering in their radio version of the play.

We say "radio" now that more and more theaters are turning back to the great tradition of sound-only storytelling, but it's really more along the lines of theatrical podcasting, and I mean that in the best way possible.

The voices Psych Drama have assembled to tell this story are perfectly matched to their parts, and clearly adept at seizing Goldman's rich text and making it sing. I could have listened to Brian Dion as King Henry all day, as he chastised his sons and grappled with his worthy foe of a wife. Wendy Lippe as Eleanor is following in the footsteps of some of acting's greatest—including Rosemary Harris and

Katherine Hepburn. I found her delivery to be less harsh than what I've seen from the role in the past. She creates a woman who isn't afraid to use the perception others have of her to get what she wants, and Lippe is able to take full advantage of the close proximity of the listener to showcase all the ways a clipped tone or a softening speech can hit an objective right in the bullseye.

Even if you're able to witness the play in person, one of the trickiest bits of *The Lion in Winter* is that there are a decent number of seemingly interchangeable men. That's not to say that the characterizations are lacking, but that when you have a group of characters all aiming for the same brass ring, and a very tangible and venerable one at that, a lot of extra effort has to be put in to make each man memorable.

I thought it was very smart to slightly alter everyone's volume level so that, while you could hear everything clearly, you got the sense that loudness is often equated with power in this family. Mark Modena is a forceful presence, and his portrayal of the Lionheart is crystal clear even coming through the airwaves. Mark Prokes strikes just the right balance of charming and sadistic. His interpretation of some of Geoffrey's best lines made for some of my favorite moments. Francis Sheehan as John had the hard task of playing a character mainly defined by his ill temper, but he captured the young prince's immaturity beautifully.

Ryan Perry as Philip has some of the hardest text to pull off, and I thought his confidence going into every line was a great help in keeping the pace of the play. *The Lion in Winter* is one of those warhorses that is never going to be less than two and a half hours, but when done poorly, can easily sail past three. I commend everyone in the company for not savoring speeches, opting instead to use their lines as ammunition and to fire swiftly so they could reload while their counterpart was absorbing the hit.

Much of that attention to detail has to be credited to the co-directors: Lippe and Larry Segel. Along with their technical director Doug Greene, they made a lot of very intelligent artistic decisions, not the least of which was deciding to lean into the play's loftiness. Many revivals of the show have tried to create a grittier tale of a family-at-war, and while the history certainly supports that, the play itself does not.

This is what I consider to be the best of a specific genre known as cocktail theater. The kind of experience that allows you to enjoy a glass of wine, take in some theater, and find yourself a little lighter afterward while still satisfied — and maybe feeling a little punchy.

But when the punches are being thrown with such verve and sophistication in the space of your imagination, they might just sound like music.

For more information on The Psych Drama Company, go to [The Psych Drama Company](#)

Taking the Lead: Dynamic “Dancing Lessons” for the digital age

Dancing Lessons

by Mark St Germain

The Players
112th Season



Directed by Christin L. Goff
Assistant Directed by Mike Daniels

STREAMING

December 4, 5 and 6, 2020



Funding to support The Players is provided in part by a grant from the Rhode Island State Council on the Arts through an appropriation by the Rhode Island General Assembly, a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, and private funders.

WWW.PLAYERS.RI.ORG
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"We should consider every day lost on which we have not danced at least once." ~ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche

For its last two productions, the Players at The Barker Playhouse chose to go the audio route. The result were two highly entertaining listening experiences of *The War of the Worlds* and *An Enemy of the People*. For their latest show, they have upped not only their game considerably, but set a high bar for future digital productions in the area. I've admittedly had trouble sitting down and watching theater on my laptop over the past few months, but when I sat down yesterday to take in Mark St. Germain's *Dancing Lessons*, I was immediately struck by its professional aesthetic. It's also abundantly clear that a lot of thought was given to the theater-cinema balance that all theatrical undertakings are going to have to grapple with for the near future. In this case, I think it was an inspiring success.

Normally I would not include a curtain speech in a review, but I have to say it was unexpectedly heartening to see the show's director Christin L. Goff and assistant director and videographer Mike R. Daniels welcoming us to the show. It's the small traditions that not only seem lost, but forgotten when theaters begin to put together digital productions, and I was glad to see as much attention as possible given to injecting theatricality wherever possible.

This production begins with Ever, played by Tylar Jahumpa, arriving at his building, and making his way to the home of his neighbor, Senga, played by Gabriella Sanchez. Senga is a dancer, who's been hurt in an accident, leaving her with a serious leg injury. Ever is a science professor, and he's arrived at Senga's door to ask that she tutor him in dance so that he won't embarrass himself at an event. He's willing to pay her well for the lessons, but Senga is both unsure she wants to help and also not sure if she's able. In addition to that obstacle, Ever has Asperger's Syndrome, a neurodevelopmental disorder, which makes social interaction and non-verbal communication difficult. He's also hypersensitive to touch.

The individual circumstances of these two characters create a kind of Meisner exercise for the play, which at the surface seems only about Senga helping Ever learn how to dance, but quickly becomes something much deeper.

Dancing Lessons had its world premiere at Barrington Stage Company six years ago, and the play seems to be in the vein of McNally's *Frankie and Johnny*, in terms of a (mostly) two-hander romance where the characters can't seem to avoid winding up in each other's arms despite their best efforts. That magical DNA aside, it feels like St. Germain settled on his characters having a romance before actually creating the characters, and so when things take a turn in that direction, it doesn't always feel earned by the script. The playwright's best-known success story, *Freud's Last Session*, had the same stilted approach to dialogue, but that didn't hinder a historical drama as much as it will a contemporary comedy. He also seems to write for the broadest market available, which is a great way to guarantee you'll be produced by community theaters, but doesn't always result in a satisfying story.

It's to the credit of the creative team that even with a lackluster script, this production made for a charming theatrical experience. Goff manages to sidestep all of the play's problems as she carefully

directs the actors so that all their actions seem justified even when their character's choices are suspect. The role of Ever, in particular, seems like it could be rife for all the wrong moves, but Goff's sensitivity to the character, and a well-calibrated performance by Jahumpa, help us see the possibilities in Ever even before his dancing partner does.

The collaboration between the director and her leading man brought about a portrayal I think is among the best I've seen when it comes to streaming theater. Jahumpa's eyes so beautifully translate what his objectives are even when his character has trouble verbalizing it. He's both constantly active and also willing to be vulnerable, which allows for a superb dynamic between him and his co-star.

I was totally enamored with Gabriella Sanchez's performance as Senga. She allowed the character's emotional reactions to occur before she could rein them in with her words, both when she's in pain, and when she starts to feel an attraction for Ever. The naturalism both actors adopted helped land more than a few comedic lines that otherwise might have been overwrought, and helped create the kind of intimate atmosphere that might be tricky to pull off in a theater, but not when the theater is in your living room.

The choices Goff and Daniels made in regard to what they wanted us to see and when they wanted us to see it were what helped me believe that theater has barely begun to take advantage of what digital has to offer. One choice I loved was having us see Senga's Aunt Lynn, played by Mary Paolino, as she's frantically calling Senga to check up on her. So much of what makes producing this kind of material work is saying "Why not?" when faced with an opportunity, and if you have the opportunity to showcase Mary Paolino, you'd be a fool not to.

Over the past few years, Barker has been finding ways to level up wherever possible — selecting more interesting titles, pairing up directors with tentpole-type productions, and really delivering on design. The set for *Dancing Lessons* was done by Dan Clements, and it's a great homage to the sitcom-style residences you'd see in shows like "Friends," while still creating that unique New York-living claustrophobia.

What takes this particular production to the next level is the cinematography and editing. Not only is it seamless, but it looks — and I apologize, because we don't often use this word in theater a lot — *rich*. The quality of the video is top-notch, the cuts in the editing make sense and add to the experience, and the directorial tactics to elevate what we're watching from simply a play-on-video to a full-fledged mixed-media production are something equity theaters should borrow from as soon as possible. Enough can't be said about Daniels and his work here as an editor and videographer. If Barker is smart, they'll book him for the rest of the season.

The best compliment I can give is that while I am sure every person working on the show wore at least five hats to make it possible, everything looked effortless. Marcia Layden who stage managed and had a cameo as Senga's doctor, should be applauded for tackling something this ambitious.

Despite my misgivings about the script, it was a solid choice to tell the story of two people desperately in need of something greater than themselves that was physically always close but emotionally so difficult to reach. Watching them triumph over personal conflict was not only moving, but cathartic. I appreciate Goff letting the actors find movement that isn't grounded in anger, as so often happens when directing a show about people who are nursing their own insecurities. Instead, she has them always moving toward understanding and, thankfully, kindness. That then logically takes us to an ending that is well-directed, well-shot, well-acted and well-earned. I'm sure there wouldn't have been a dry eye in the house. There certainly wasn't in mine.

And while it's commonplace now to see theaters either remaining dark over their personal ambivalence when it comes to digital, or making the absolutely deranged choice to try theater in-person, I'm very grateful that I have something to reference when I need an example of what we can be doing right now to remind people how necessary theater is in their lives. If someone asks how I feel about what digital work can accomplish, now I can just say-

"Did you see *Dancing Lessons*?"

For tickets to upcoming shows from The Players at The Barker Playhouse, go to playersri.org

Manifest A Better World: Taylor Mac's Holiday Sauce...Pandemic!



Last year, Providence was lucky enough to experience Taylor Mac's ***A 24-Decade History of Popular Music*** thanks to FirstWorks and the Brown Arts Initiative from Brown University, and now judy is making a virtual return with Pomegranate Arts production of ***Holiday Sauce...Pandemic!***

This new digital iteration is being live-streamed, and features music from Mac's acclaimed holiday album. The show itself is judy's unique blend of burlesque, vaudeville and multimedia extravagance. The Los Angeles Times called it "a present from the island of misfit toys ... and a Christmas miracle."

Every organization presenting the show in their respective city has also chosen to honor a senior member of the community who "has made a significant contribution to nurturing the queer community in their city." Providence will be well-represented by the incredible Kim Trusty, a musician and educator, who often collaborates with FirstWorks.

It should be noted that Mac isn't the only one finding ways to adjust to the new — and thankfully temporary — way of presenting live theater. This is just one event in a series of digital offerings FirstWorks is curating, in what is truly an impressive and diverse slate of content that can all be found on their website at first-works.org.

I had the pleasure of speaking to Mac about the upcoming special. We'd previously talked last summer in advance of judy's show at the Veterans Memorial Auditorium, an unforgettable evening of music and

performance.

This time around, I was curious to hear about how Mac's creative process had weathered the past year, what Judy thinks of our political moment and what to expect from ***Holiday Sauce...Pandemic!***

Kevin Broccoli (Motif): I've enjoyed following your pandemic adventures on Instagram.

Taylor Mac: I really think that they're not very *good* songs, but I think that if I write enough of them, the art of onslaught might be really interesting. I always have to limit myself a bit, because I'm not going to give Mark Zuckerberg all my money, all my glamour. I'm not dressing up for Mark Zuckerberg.

KB: I had a great time at your show in Providence. I slow-danced with a very nice man.

TM: We had fun that night.

KB: I wasn't quite sure how it was going to go over here.

TM: Yeah, [Providence is] a little Puritan, but I remember saying that, and then it being surprisingly exuberant.

KB: I was listening to your holiday album today before the interview. You call it "a Christmas calamity." I read a great review for the album that said "The whole year has been a calamity, so it's appropriate that Christmas goes right along with it." So much of your shows do have this joyous exuberance to them, and I wonder how being in this current time has affected your creation process.

TM: A mentor of mine, Penny Arcade, she did this whole thing about being an introvert. It seems like theater performers, performance artists, would be extroverts, but a lot of us are introverts. I'm a playwright as well as all the other things I do, and so I love my time alone. I really like alone time. It helps me write. It's always been part of my process — to isolate, and then also to be intensely in community. The kind of juggling of those two things is how I do things. So I've had one part of my process, but the other part has been sorely missed, especially at holiday time.

We made this show so that every year in December, we could change our feelings about December. Most of the queers I know and artists that I know — we have mixed feelings about December. It's burdensome, there's always censorship when you go back home, there's always negotiation that feels like a weight. It also feels like maybe you're slightly going back in the closet. You always have to navigate a more normative society at that time of year. Capitalism is so ripe. So there's all these things that are negative about it. But one of the things I learned from my drag mama, Mother Flawless Sabrina, is: "You're the boss applesauce" is what she would say to all of us. We can change the way that we experience this world. We can't just *comment* on the world, or blame it or critique it, we can actually manifest a better world, and so you do that by saying 'Okay, how can I make December a joyous time?' Well, if it's a time where I get to think about Mother Flawless Sabrina every year, that's really great. If it's a time where I get all my friends together, and we make a show, and we tour it around, that's also really great. So now I look forward to December. And with a pandemic, even doing this show, and being together with the collaborators, and seeing them socially distanced so we can record some of the pre-recorded stuff, it lifted my spirits so much. You incorporate the calamity of your life and you twist it around until you can actually *enjoy* your life.

KB: I remember going up to the afterparty for your show when you were here in Providence, and when you walked in, I remember thinking, 'How could you possibly do the show you just did and then have the energy to do anything else?'

TM: I'm so tired after I do a show. It's always like putting on a brave face at those events afterwards, because I've given *everything* on that stage.

KB: I can't imagine. I do *The Glass Menagerie* for six people and I go, 'Get me out of here.' But I was so struck by your relationship to the audience. I don't think I've ever seen somebody connect with an audience the way you do, and I've been struggling a lot with this move to digital, even though we know it's going to be temporary. I'm the theater reviewer for this magazine, and early on, somebody asked if I would review a digital production, and I went 'You're going to make me review this stuff?'

TM: It's challenging. It can be challenging to watch.

KB: But I was very excited to hear that this digital production was coming to FirstWorks. I'm curious to hear about how you approach performing in a digital medium.

TM: Well, we've only done the pre-recorded material so far. I haven't done the live show, but I have performed live digitally before, and it's always been a bummer to me. So this year, I said, 'How can I make it as fun as I possibly can?' I thought, You know what it really is? It's like having your own public access show, like being Robin Byrd. Do you know who Robin Byrd is?

KB: I don't.

TM: It's a generational thing. It's a *locational* and a generational thing. But it's like a channel where anyone can have a show as long as you were a little eccentric, and that's kind of what it feels like right now, during pandemic time. *Everybody's got a show.* There was something beautiful about the art of the collective eccentrics, putting out their shows. It wasn't the shows themselves that were so interesting; it was that they were *doing it*. So I've kind of changed my thinking about the virtual shows, and started to say, *'I'm participating in this much larger art project.'* That's how I'm doing it. We're trying to make our version of it as much fun and as juicy as possible, but I see it as- In a hundred years, there's going to be some library that hosts all the virtual shows.

KB: There's a drag queen who says, "It's only for the archives, darling."

TM: It's only for the archives. Exactly. That's kind of how I see it as- *'Oh look, all these people experimenting all together.'* That's a lovely thing.

KB: I was struck by the generosity of artists at the beginning of the pandemic.

TM: It's a combination of generosity and survival. It always is for artists, especially in America. It's always a combination of *'I've got to do this thing to make myself relevant so that I can pay the bills, but I also want to do this thing because I'm never going to make enough money to pay the bills on this one thing.'* So there's an element of generosity to it as well. Also, everyone wanted to do something. Normally, what we do is we gather people, and we release the pressure valve of normal life for two hours in a theater, or however long, and we couldn't do that. So we all kind of suddenly went, *'Okay! All right! I'll do what I can!'* For a couple months there, we were saying 'Yes' to everything.

KB: Yeah, I said 'Yes' to a lot of things at the beginning, and now the chickens are coming home to roost.

TM: You have to set new boundaries for this new way of living.

KB: Before the shutdown, I vividly remember your post about the show you had up in New York, where the audience was seated in a giant ball pit. I'll regret for the rest of my life not getting to see it. Do you think we'll ever be able to return to a show like that in the near future?

TM: I guess I could have predicted that there'd be another pandemic in my lifetime. I think most theater artists know that's all possible, and that you recover, and you go back to semi-normal. It is the United States of Amnesia, so people do forget. I'm sure we'll all be back in a ball pit in a couple years. But I don't know if *I'm* interested in that anymore. That was something I wanted to do for *that* moment, and now the moment's *different*, so I'll probably have to rewrite the play yet again and figure out a different way for it to exist in the world.

KB: For this album, how much of holiday history — in terms of the customs and the evolution of the holidays — did you and your collaborators look at?

TM: Originally in *A 24-Decade History of Popular Music*, there was going to be a whole decade of holiday songs, but I couldn't quite gather enough from one particular decade. I really wanted the music to consist of songs just from each decade. So I let go of that idea. But I had done a lot of research on where these songs come from, and also the idea of the resurrection. There's five million Jesuses. Jesus is a cover story of a cover story of a cover story.

So that's part of how we've crafted the show, and what songs we've included, and what we haven't. Like finding the pagan in 'God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen' was one of my favorite things to do. The holidays originally come from pagan celebrations, you know.

KB: The holidays feel like a perfect fit for you because it's a convergence of history, religion, politics and fabulosity.

TM: Yeah, that's what we always do though.

KB: It's all pageantry.

TM: I always find a way to bring in pageantry, politics, virtuosity, messiness. I try to find a way to bring all that stuff into it — in every show I ever make. Even the kitchen sink dramas have some of that in there.

KB: Even public access is inherently queer.

Taylor Mac: It was. Tuning in at 3am to learn how to fix a car that you don't have from a guy in Staten

Island. It has a queer element to it.

KB: The last time we talked, I remember it because it was the day Robert Mueller was testifying before Congress, and I was excited to get to talk to you as all that was going on. And right now, we're in an interesting spot where many people are starting to realize that getting a new President isn't immediately going to solve all the problems of the world. I was interested in your feelings on the period that we're entering, having had this Big Bad Wolf for four years to put all our energy into, and now coming out of that, but still being in the midst of a pandemic, and so many other crises, and having to create a show around all of that.

TM: Well, I think Donald Trump is insane. I do think he's an insane man. But I also feel a little bit like, '*Been there, done that.*' It wasn't like Reagan wasn't going insane. He did have Alzheimer's while he was running the country, and he did base his government off of his sci-fi movies. It was insane. He perpetuated an epidemic that has killed millions of people. He created an atmosphere of homophobia in America that was unprecedented. Then Bush Sr. got in, then we got Clinton, and we all felt a little calmer, then Bush Jr comes in, and he creates the worst international disaster we've ever had in our entire history, and he's insane in a *different* way because he's just *inept*. Then we all recover from that with Obama — *yay yay yay moving forward* — and then we've got this horrible guy, and now a new guy — *moving forward* — and are people forgetting that we've been here before, and this is how it works?

To chase perfection is the Great Folly of the Left. It's actually not that chasing perfection is the Great Folly, but *expecting* perfection — instead of doing the daily work. Part of living and progressing the culture is the daily work that you have to do. The civil rights movement didn't just *happen* because Rosa Parks refused to sit in the back of the bus. That was part of it, but they were also doing demonstrations for decades and decades before that. Every single day. It's still a process. We have to keep that in mind.

KB: Because of the nature of your work, does all of that tumultuous stuff help keep you creatively inspired? I know for so many people, it's what keeps them stymied.

TM: That's where discipline comes in. You have to discipline yourself to work. But I love my work. I hate just lying around doing nothing. I go on vacation and I want to write my play. I want to write a song. I want to learn a song. I think if you really enjoy your work then you're okay, because you want to do it everyday.

When I was in the Club World, and I was getting drugs offered to me all the time, and sometimes I'd partake, but most of the time I didn't, because I had a show the next day, or I had a rehearsal the next day, and I had something I cared more about, so I never ended up getting an addiction problem, because the work mattered more, and I think that that's something I wish for people. I wish that they

could have that thing in their life that they can't wait to get up for. It doesn't have to do with whatever or whoever is in charge in Washington. You can't base all your art off of conflict. The fallacy of the theater is that it's all about conflict. If you base everything about off of whether there's enough conflict in your life in order to fight against something, you're only seeing part of the picture.

KB: I'm not going to go track-by-track on your new album, but you do hold the trophy for my new favorite version of '*Silent Night*.'

TM: Well, that's Matt Ray. Matt Ray, our musical director and arranger, he produced the album, and that was his idea. It came as the result of our show also being, in some ways, a wake for Mother Flawless Sabrina, and a celebration of her. The second line is '*a celebration of someone who dies*.' It's about inviting people into the procession. It's a celebratory thing.

***Holiday Sauce...Pandemic!** will be presented live to FirstWorks audiences on **December 12 at 7pm** and will be available on-demand on a pay-what-you-can basis from December 13 through January 2, 2021. Tickets are available now at first-works.org/events/taylor-macs-holiday-sauce-pandemic/. The first 100 ticket buyers are invited to a Zoom afterparty with members of the cast and special guests.*

Constellations Under the Stars: Wilbury's latest play takes the new WaterFire stage



Constellation rehearsal at WaterFire Arts Center

“Once you do a play like that, it’s basically in your bones, so it all just came back,” says Wilbury Theatre Group artistic director Josh Short of Nick Payne’s *Constellations*. Wilbury is teaming up with WaterFire Providence to remount and reimagine the play, originally produced in spring 2019, as a COVID-safe, drive-in experience.

Constellations is the fourth outdoor production Wilbury has created with WaterFire since the summer, but colder temperatures have created new challenges. For this production, audience members will stay in their cars, view the actors on an elevated stage, and tune in to the radio to hear them. Wilbury also partnered with Arte Latino New England to produce a simulcast Spanish-language performance for select shows, allowing audience members to tune into a separate FM station to hear the dialogue in Spanish. The production will incorporate live camera footage and pre-recorded projections to increase visibility.

Safety was the number one concern for Wilbury, and they partnered with Brown University School of Public Health to design the most secure experience for both actors and audience members. Initial rehearsals were virtual, as the show’s director, Aubrey Snowden, is based out of North Carolina. Now that rehearsals are live, Short explains, “Everyone gets tested twice a week.” *Constellations* was chosen in part due to its amenability to what Short calls the “brave new world” of COVID-era theater: “No set, no props, just two people, and it was something that would lend itself to a staging that was less than realistic, which would help because the actors need to be 14

feet apart at all times or separated by a piece of plexiglass.”

Constellations centers on the relationship between quantum cosmologist Marianne (Rachel Dulude) and beekeeper Roland (Short). Their story is told through a series of fractured, interwoven vignettes, which apply the quantum theory of multiple universes to the equally perplexing complexity of romantic partnership. The cosmic resonances of the script make it the perfect production to see under the stars, and the story, which deals with illness, distance and uncertainty, has new resonance in 2020. “It’s a play where a woman is sick, and she’s trying to figure out a way forward, and her partner is powerless in the face of it,” says Short. “I think it’s impossible to hear a story like that right now and not think of COVID and the millions of people who have lost someone they love.”

Wilbury has several other upcoming events and productions throughout the winter, including the *Culture is Key: Capture the Block* program; the premiere of a new audioplay, *God Talks to an Agnostic* by Don Mays; and the resumption of their online livestreaming program. “We’ve got a lot of stuff happening right now,” says Short.

Constellations will run from December 3 - 19 at the drive-in performance space at WaterFire Arts Center. Tickets are available at thewilburygroup.org

Your Present Blessings: Trinity reimagines A Christmas Carol for a year like no other



When the Charles Dickens classic *A Christmas Carol* was first published in 1843 by Chapman & Hall, its author was struck by the the world's reevaluation of the famous holiday. Traditions and customs were evolving, and symbols we take for granted today were only beginning to cement themselves, like carols and Christmas trees.

Forty-three years ago, a Rhode Island tradition launched with the very first production of Trinity Repertory Company's *A Christmas Carol*. Since then, it's become a stalwart of the holidays here in Providence and the annual production that has put the theater on the map all over the country. If you're a participant or supporter of the performing arts in the area, *A Christmas Carol* is usually the first thing people ask you about no matter the time of year.

This year, like so many other observances, there was a question of whether there would have to be a break with tradition as it became evident that an in-person spectacular would not be in the cards.

Luckily, Trinity is no stranger to thinking outside the box, and the theater has shown not only versatility in its plan to transform its most popular show into a digital classic, but through the generosity of donors and sponsors, this year's production will be free of charge, allowing for a level of accessibility that will give people a chance to take in the magic of *A Christmas Carol* from the comfort of their homes.

The lengths the company had to go to in order to ensure a safe experience for cast and crew turned this year's holiday play into a production all its own.

"There are so many headwinds that you're facing," says artistic director and this year's *A Christmas Carol* director, Curt Columbus. "You have to create pods of people. So you have to cast people who live together, who can be the Cratchit family, and oh they have to have a child, and then you have to send them equipment. It's not like making a movie in that so much of this is so constrained."

But the work is already paying off as tens of thousands of people have already registered to see the production — and from well outside of the Ocean State.

"We have people from Puerto Rico, DC, the Virgin Islands, Canada," says Columbus. "It's kind of incredible the amount of interest there is."

That excitement has helped overcome the expected hesitation any group of artists might have in putting together a digital production. Over the past eight months, we've seen the highs and lows of what can be accomplished over Zoom and other platforms, and I asked Columbus whether he had any ambivalence when he and the creative team first set out to reimagine what the show could be.

"We started this process going, 'Why would anyone record *A Christmas Carol*? Why would we do this?' Okay, we're doing this because there are people who have lost their jobs, who need hope, who are feeling really lost, and it's a story about in the face of all sorts of [obstacles], you wake up one more and go 'I am alive.' And so that was what motivated doing it at all. So when we started thinking about how this would be distributed, we realized it had to be free, because this year people need it to be free."

There are advantages to taking a story from in-person to digital, and Trinity's been finding new ways to approach the age-old tale by finding opportunities within its new medium.

"It's really been in the last couple of weeks as things started to come together, and these wacky ideas that I had started to look interesting. As an example, our whole *Ghost of Christmas Past* stave takes

place in a storybook. It's an illustrated storybook. We watch the Ghost of Christmas Past (played by company member Rebecca Gibel) who's a librarian, pull him through the screen, and he turns into a little cut-out and she puts him in the book, and that's how we enter the storybook. For the [Ghost of Christmas] Future stave, which takes place in a graveyard, I was actually really inspired by Ingmar Bergman movies, and the way that he uses these medium shots interspersed with close-ups as a very specific tonal storytelling."

When I asked about how to create that notable sense of theatricality that's become the hallmark of every Trinity production, Curt pointed out that the direction the company is going in is still true to its roots, and that they're not attempting to create a movie.

"This is not a CGI film. It is still handmade. We are actors putting on costumes. We're actors reading the story from a book. When Scrooge goes home, he goes to Trinity Rep, because that's where Scrooge lives for us. In a movie, you'd build a set and a house and an apartment, and it would all be perfectly real. Instead, what we've done is, we've taken theatrical tropes and expanded them into a new media framework. Sometimes really self-consciously. When Scrooge goes home and goes into his bedroom for the first time, he turns on the ghost light onstage, and then the lights rise on his bedroom, and we're on the stage. Some things are incredibly Trinity Rep in the sense that we take the story and tell the story. We are still who we are as contemporary people, and the period of the story is acknowledged by costumes and language, but we're still who we are."

And who they are is a theater that's very comfortable viewing a classic story through a new lens. Other productions helmed by Columbus include inventive marvels like *Beowulf* and *Ragtime*, but it's been a while since we've seen him in the director's chair for *A Christmas Carol*. I asked him if coming back to the story with this new challenge ingrained in it had caused him to see the famous parable in a different light.

"It's given me a new appreciation for how the story uses storytelling mechanisms to keep us moving forward. Think about *A Christmas Carol* and how each of the staves is directed by a particular ghost, but the particular ghost informs how the stave is experienced. It's almost like each section has its own temperature, and now, in order to render that in some way [cinematically], you really have to go, 'What are the mechanisms that tell the story in this section?' and interrogate those, and that's been incredibly fun. You have to essentialize the story, that's why the whole thing runs under an hour. Part of what we're doing is trying to shift modes constantly, so sometimes we're in a 1950s TV mode, and sometimes we're in *cinema verite* mode, and sometimes we're on Zoom, and sometimes we're in the storybook. Sometimes it's cinematic, sometimes it's theatrical."

Columbus has been working with director of photography Albert Genoa to create some of the distinct imagery for the production.

“He works with Rhode Island Latino Arts. He’s a genius. He’s been doing these drone shots. He and I just really clicked in terms of what he was seeing and what I was seeing.”

When asked about whether his experience on this has opened the door for future digital productions, he admits to not having an idea for what those could be right now, but he is hopeful.

“I never want to lose a live connection with an audience. But in the current situation where we’re not going to have a live audience until fall 2021, we’ve talked about what it means if we do another piece like this.”

In the meantime, it’s exciting to have one of our grandest local traditions still intact. It’s also a great lesson in the audiences theaters are now able to reach for the very first time, and some who are returning to it from places near and far.

“Folks have been writing to us from across the country saying, ‘I grew up in Rhode Island. This is my chance to see *A Christmas Carol* again and watch it with my family this year.’”

To register to watch A Christmas Carol online and for free, go to A Christmas Carol - Trinity Repertory Company