

## Yes, And . . .

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On a recent Saturday evening, I sat on the floor, a glass of wine in one hand, some pretzels in the other and my laptop in front of me. On the screen was a Google Hangouts video call with some people in my improv class. Also on the screen was a Zoom video of an improv performance in progress.

My initial experience of the shut down in Philadelphia as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic was like watching dominoes fall, one-by-one. First, a BalletX performance I had tickets to was postponed until July. That announcement was followed by a flurry of others: Shows were canceled, classes moved online, projects postponed, tickets refunded. I spent the better part of the last few weeks of March dejectedly erasing things from my calendar, rather than adding them. I redid my budget, hoping the financial hit wouldn't be too painful.

A ray of hope in all the cancellations was the idea that the intermediate improv class I had signed up for *would* go on, albeit a few weeks later than planned, and online. I'll admit I was skeptical -- improv is a pretty physical activity. A lot of it relies on timing and, well, being in the same room with your fellow performers. What would we lose by having classes online?

In the "yes, and..." spirit of improv, I decided to put my skepticism aside and try the Zoom version of the class. I'd already set aside the time in my schedule and it wasn't like anything was rushing in to fill the void. Plus, I figured, what was the worse that could happen? A few unfunny scenes, that's what, and really, that's a risk you take with any improv performance, online or in person.

So far, the class has worked out and it's worked a lot better than I was expecting. The same is true of the digital improv performances I've seen. Scene partners might be in different buildings, different cities or even different states, but they are able to make it look as if they're occupying the same physical space. Although performers can't hear the audience laughing, a chat feature lets them see reactions in real-time, as people type in comments or suggestions. My classmates and I have recreated the experience of going to a show together by having a separate video call and a group text chain going on during the Zoom shows. Having only seen most of them only through webcams, I might not recognize any of my classmates were I to pass them on the street. But I'm still feeling a creative bond and a connection with them.

One of the reasons I think online improv performances and classes are working so well is that the thing that's drilled into every improv-er from day one is to say yes. Not just say yes, but say yes, and build. Acceptance and agreement push the scene, and the world, forward.

All of us could have said "no thanks, I want my money back" when presented with the option to do class online. But each person who ended up in the Zoom class decided that it was worth it to go forward, it was worth it to try and build something out of the current catastrophe. The performers who are putting on shows in their living rooms or home offices or even bathrooms are likewise making the best of an impressively shitty situation.

How will things be when we finally get the all-clear, when in-person classes can resume and when we can see shows live in a theater, rather than live, on our living room floors? Will we look back on the situation and think, well that was a weird time, let's go back to how things were? Or will we tap into that flexibility we displayed when asked to do things that were not the norm? Will we remember that we have the ability to adapt when needed, to agree and build?

Saying "yes, and" is crucial for theater and performance's continued survival. Most of us, individual artists and performers, theaters large and small, are going to come out of the pandemic with some scars. Even if we manage to avoid the virus itself, it's going to have lasting effects on us, economically and creatively. But embracing the willingness to accept what's thrown at us and to figure out how to adapt, pivot, and build on it will be what we need to do for theater to continue on in a post-pandemic world.