



Ozzy Delaney, Red Chairs, 2013, creative commons license via Flickr

The Theater and Policy Salon

Rebuilding the Theater Around the Audience

**There is a tide in the affairs of men.
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.
On such a full sea are we now afloat,
And we must take the current when it serves,
Or lose our ventures.**

Julius Caesar Act 4, scene 3, 218–224

Reimagining the future of professional theater and expanding its constituency remain key. Theaters that fearlessly innovate can deepen engagement with current and new audiences, in the face of hesitant patrons and likely episodic public health closures. Data on future audience behavior is limited and unreliable and predictions about the course of the pandemic are uncertain at best. The most resilient organizations will be those that seize on changes in the operating environment to create a broader constituency for the theater.

Radically opening up to audiences and artists, in both live and digital modes, offers a path for survival for theaters facing successive impacts of the COVID19 pandemic. Uncertainty surrounding season planning and production dates and unpredictable audience interest in attending in-person theater venues will be the new normal for the sector for the next two to three years, depending on the availability of a vaccine - and possibly for much longer. Predictions of future market conditions will remain murky, even with forthcoming data about audience behavior and intentions. According to an April 2020 Shugoll Research's survey of Washington, DC area theatergoers, "the net waiting period of a few months or more represents almost half of theatergoers (49%)....this suggests a slow build when theaters reopen".

Making a virtue of necessity, theaters need to compete fiercely with other entertainment outlets for audiences both during the crisis and into the post-pandemic world. To achieve sustainability post-COVID19, now is the time now is the time to dramaturses to push theater leadership to combine creative planning and digital technology to meet audiences where and when they are. Many theaters are using digital means to cater to homebound existing audiences during this acute phase of the pandemic. Coming out of lockdowns, those theaters that take advantage of options like hybrid live/digital platforms and flexible performance formats have the opportunity to acquire new audiences and stakeholders while retaining current patrons, subscribers, and supporters. Each individual theater will find its own optimum combination of hybrid live/online programming, variable performance times and unconventional venues, and flexible performance programming.

Given delays to opening in 2020, theaters are already being forced to move beyond traditional season timing. The more fundamental shift would conceive of a theater's output as performance events that are extracted from the ongoing process of artistic discovery and creation. Audience Engagement units can work with theaters to develop potential audience events out of everything from readings of new scripts to rehearsals of fully staged, live productions. Most if not all of these performance events can have an interactive element and become part of expanded audience engagement. Most importantly, each potential event can be designed to be delivered both in-person and digitally, depending on public health regulations or audience public health concerns.

A portfolio of high quality, digital-ready engagement events focussed on artistic and policy themes can also allow theaters to segment patrons, with specific virtual events limited to subscribers, donors, and board members, e.g, virtual "first reads." Audience Engagement units can create expanded audience engagement events such "A Peek-in at The Table" which would invite audience members to observe a table read via video conferencing and then share their reactions in a moderated online conversation. Policy events curated by Audience Engagement units can provide an online forum for audiences to delve into the policy themes from past and future productions and provide feedback on the themes for planned performances. Audience Engagement units can partner with staff dramaturses to curate digital readings of scripts planned for production or under consideration for production, followed by moderated feedback.

Putting audience engagement at the center of the performance cycle provides the opportunity to engage audience members during theater closures, sustain audience interest in postponed or date uncertain productions, and expand audiences' emotional and intellectual connection to theaters. Unlike fully staged productions, audience engagement events can be readily shifted to virtual formats or hybrid live/virtual formats. Audience Engagement units can curate programs that meld artistic responses to and policy questions on the COVID19

pandemic, as part of theater's contribution to the wider community at a moment of widespread fear and dislocation. Importantly, the recent Shugoll survey of DC area theatergoers concluded that "theatergoers would not be more likely to return if the fare was lighter and fun".

To mitigate financial risk, the season calendar might be transformed into a monthly or quarterly performance cycle, with frequent, lower overhead performance events like script readings coupled with more occasional semi-staged readings or table reads of scripts that are going into rehearsal and full productions. Fully staged, live productions would remain the anchors of the performance cycle, but could be postponed or even accelerated depending on public health and financial constraints or opportunities. Integrating regional public health data into planning, theaters could slot digital friendly "two handers" into, say, the winter months with the highest likelihood of successive COVID19 outbreaks, while shifting large cast or musical productions to spring or summer.

Flexibility should extend to performance times and venues. Theaters can amortize their physical spaces by considering nontraditional curtain times, or move toward site-specific or immersive venues. Critically, planning for all in-person events would include specific steps for moving suitable performances and engagement events back to an all virtual format, including for ticketing and financial assumptions. Union restrictions would need to be negotiated, in the context of creative and cast personnel needing additional opportunities to work and earn outside of the standard production cycle.

Finding ways to mitigate the financial impact of more variable ticket and other income remains critical. Donors can add flexibility to project grants and to performance periods, and potentially shift the funding focus to programs aimed at policy themes or the creative process, rather than restricting funds to particular productions. Donations or nominal ticket prices for more frequent, digitally accessible events might offset reduced revenue from main stage productions with smaller inventory and less accessible price points. Particularly for those theaters with a strong subscriber base, a stream of digital-ready performance events might even give patrons a guaranteed stream of content to justify buying or renewing a (full or prorated) subscription.

Arts education programming remains central to theaters' community mission. Theaters have an opportunity to adapt as school curricula and student demand shift. Hybrid live/digital performance spaces can ensure that theaters organizations prove themselves to be committed, connected, and continuing community partners. Dramaturges, teaching artists, and education staff must work to reach arts education audiences when the most underserved kids often only enjoy dependable access to WiFi and internet at school and teaching artists are furloughed or homebound. Arts education programming will be the acid test

for audience engagement when it is incumbent on the theater to entice student audiences to join theater programs from home and voluntarily.

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Pronouns: He, Him, His

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