

Where Do We Go Now?
Performance and Plague in a Virtual Age

by Madeline Pages
(she/her/hers)
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What comes to mind when you think of a *theater*? What shapes are generated? Is there a stage? Seating for an audience? What color are the walls—black, white? Are there walls at all? Humans have been constructing physical spaces designed specifically for theater-makers for thousands of years—and those are only *some* of the places where bodies can and do perform. But lately, even before the threat of a global pandemic, few artists have a single designated performance space to call their own. The shelter-in-place order in the United States (and many other nations across the globe) has now made that luxury an impossibility, and theater-makers are tasked with thinking outside of the box while staying *inside* so many boxes—boxes that are our homes; boxes that are our computer screens; boxes in Zoom conferences, Twitch videos, and Instagram livestreams. In turn, these experiments with space become—deliberately or not—experiments in *access* to space and to performances within new spaces.

In the past month of quarantine, virtual reckonings with theatrical space have been so numerous that keeping up with the performances available from home is starting to feel like a greater challenge than when “going to the theater” required pants. Many theater companies are releasing recordings of archived performances on their websites, sometimes mimicking the run of a live show by offering online access only for a limited time. The International Online Theatre Festival (IOFT), a collaboration between The Theatre Times and Digital Theatre+ that began in 2019, has curated a selection of these offerings from theatre companies across the globe in a month-long program (which ends May 15). Projects like “Play at Home,” which was started by a handful of East Coast theaters, are commissioning new plays responding to the pandemic

(available on their website) that are intended to be read and/or performed from home. A recent *New York Times* article by Alex Soloski named at least five different companies from across the country¹ that offer paying audience members remote theater experiences conducted through text messages, emails, and phone calls.

In a society ruled by capitalism, space is a privilege, the designated theater space seen as a mark of distinction, a point of pride, an upgrade. But that same space can also be a burden. Like a child, who requires support and supervision, having a space with your name on it means rent checks, mortgage payments, maintenance fees, and the constant danger that, if these needs are not met, it could all disappear. So space demands economic limitations to access, like rising ticket prices. There is often an expectation that a performance will cater to the people buying tickets or reflect the interests of donors and board members whose financial contributions keep the physical theater space open and running. Now that physical theater spaces are closed, the question of financial support for performing arts institutions and individual artists is loaded and the responses varied. While some companies have constructed online paywalls for access to virtual content, many others are offering virtual access to performances without a ticket price.

Since their physical space in Manhattan’s East Village ceased operations in mid-March, La MaMa Experimental Theater Club has been offering performances for free, including Downtown Variety. Produced with CultureHub, a global platform founded in partnership with La MaMa and the Seoul Institute of the Arts to advance the work of artists experimenting with emerging technologies, this virtual variety show brings together actors, singers, musicians, dancers, clowns, video artists, etc. from across the world for weekly live performances. Downtown Variety is one of the few virtual theater experiences I have had during the quarantine that gives its audience the sensation of live co-presence—being together with performers and

¹Alexis Soloski, “Plunging Into Performances at Home,” *The New York Times*, April 19, 2020.

other audience members in the same space at the same time—that, for me, defines theater. The style of the show is reminiscent of the cabaret nights and small-scale festivals that La MaMa produces in the historic theater space they’ve inhabited since 1969. But Downtown Variety is perhaps more intimate because each artist consciously invites an audience into their private space and works that space into their act. At the same time, they’re reaching out of solitary space towards a community of onlookers and towards an uncertain future for us all. On the third week of Downtown Variety, from behind the piano in his apartment in Mexico City, performer/composer Tareke Ortiz spoke of dreams: “We have the opportunity now to dream more...to imagine unimaginable things. It’s a great chance for fantasy.”

Strange as it may sound, theater in the time of quarantine does look a lot like my fantasy: theater without the price of admission. I want to live in the imagined world of avant-garde film director and performer Jack Smith, who regularly staged “landlordism” protest performances in his loft in the 1970s, or that of the IOFT, with their website touting theater that is “free and open to all.” But that fantasy is a fantasy in itself: in the United States alone, tens of millions of Americans are currently without internet access to view all this new virtual theater—and the rent is still due. I don’t think theater alone can end economic inequality or abolish eviction, but it could increase awareness of the many different kinds of access limitations that the pre-pandemic theater industry ignored or even aggravated. The closure of theaters due to the pandemic has forced theater companies and artists to experiment with new forms: new ways to bring theater to more people, to break down barriers, and to envision a future theater that is more concerned with *who* we want to make theater for and not *where* we want to make it.