

May 3, 2020

## **The Pandemic and Accessibility: Why We Should Keep (Some) Theatre Online**

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She/Her/Hers

A friend recently made an observation while we were discussing the renaissance of “tag your friends” memes on social media: life right now feels a lot like it did when we were in high school in suburbia in the early-to-mid 2000s, before we could drive and when much of our social lives were online. This period was also the height of my obsession with *Les Misérables*, the show that started my love affair with theatre. I consumed any media of it I could find, which at the time wasn’t very much. I pored over archives of production photos and the short video clips on the official website, which I watched alongside the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Concert on VHS as much as my parents could stand.

Of course, a *lot* has changed in the years since, and the sheer volume of streaming content available now is, frankly, overwhelming. But I can’t help but think what it would have been like as a young theatre-lover to have access to the amount of professional theatre content I do right now. In the weeks since life went online, I have been able to watch my favorite performers from around the world sing from their living rooms, archival videos of productions I thought I would never get to see, and cleverly orchestrated “Zoom” theatre that was surprisingly effective and moving. Even compared to my time working and studying in cities with great theatre scenes, I have been able to watch more theatre in the past weeks than at almost any other time in my life—*without* spending hundreds of dollars.

Even though I understand some of the resistance to this content, I can’t help but be frustrated with many of the condemnations of it I’ve seen. Some of us will have the ability to return to live shows when things return to some kind of normal, but many will not—and access to professional theatre in the US was already limited. In our desire to keep sacrosanct the live theatre experience, we are keeping the very populations we often claim to represent out. And unless theatre in the US suddenly gets very generous funding (which seems unlikely) it will not be any more accessible once it returns post-pandemic—*unless* we keep doing the work we are doing now. This will be especially true if we need to keep audiences smaller to ensure proper social distancing. There are certainly legal and financial challenges to consider, and I am not suggesting we suddenly livestream *every* show or put all our archival material online. But I think there is a smart way to continue the work we’ve started during quarantine, and we would be remiss to leave it all behind. Part of our mission as dramaturgs and theatre-makers after this pandemic should be to include the audiences who can’t physically be in our theatres, and part of that is accepting that not every theatrical experience will look the way we want it to look.

Of course, for all that, I can’t wait to be back in a theatre. All of the hours I spent as a teen watching those clips of *Les Mis* didn’t compare to the experience of finally seeing the tour a few years later. My former high school students were awed and inspired by the high-quality professional recordings I shared with them, but I still wish they could have experienced those shows live. But I hope we don’t forget the wider audience we’ve been able to reach during the last few weeks. Theatre has survived plagues, bans, and the growth of the film/TV/streaming industries. It *will* survive this, and I can only hope it comes back stronger than ever.