

PROMPT:

What will the Post-Pandemic Stage look like?

37 Responses

28 Attributable

9 Anonymous

All insightful

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Even outside of the current crisis, but especially now, I think that gathering spaces like a theatre should be focused on supporting the local community. The building should foster social cohesion, designed to be inclusive, include collaboration spaces and workshops, be of this place not any place, be an all-day space not an 8 shows a week place, and be flexible enough to transform over time.

Having offered this opinion, I think we as theatre planners should be quiet for a bit and listen intently. Yes, we know a number of ways to build the theatre machine and make sure the audience is well accommodated but too often we still end up with; that is the performance space over there and this is the audience space over here.

Personally, more than anything, I want to without worry, sit in a packed theatre or stand shoulder to shoulder with other people and share a great moment. I want to be close enough to the performance to have a visceral experience, to feel deeply, and to be completely immersed in a moment, and then, not be able to shut up about it later.

I want to collaborate with others to design THAT building!

-Jim Hultquist

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This question needs to be divided into two subcategories; the buildings and the art forms. One unified response does not do justice to both of these topics.

Buildings: Nothing. Theatre has existed for thousands of years. We don't respond in a reactionary manner to something that will eventually be behind us. Nothing in between makes sense. If you reduce audience numbers to percentages of percentages, it isn't economically viable. If you spend a ton of money cleaning the venues, it is impossible to guarantee beyond a shadow of a doubt that they are truly safe, and what happens if that sick person attends the show. It is all for naught if you're sitting next to them. The buildings have survived pandemics in the past and will again in the future. We should not change what already works.

The Art forms: Here is where one can imagine more substantive changes. All of the envisioning in the LA Times article is valid and it is my ultimate hope that living through this dark period of people not gathering in spaces to share experiences will create such a back log and pent up desire that it will explode when it is safe to do so. And that all of this creative "down time" will produce some of the best works of theatre, dance, opera, music and art that one will almost be able to say there was truly a light at the end of that tunnel.

-David Rosenberg

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I started this game with two 3-color border lights, one 3-color footlight, 8 fresnels, and a follow spot for everything from "Born Yesterday" to "Mikado". The amount of change in theater technology from when I began in 1946 until just before the pandemic may well be equaled by the amount of change that theater technology and performance will undergo for our post-pandemic theaters.

-Jim Read

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First, more broadly, there's the question of what the post-pandemic world will look like? That will inform every aspect of our lives, not just theatre. Time will tell about that...

The post-pandemic theatre – lower case “t”, the theatre buildings – hopefully will be designed and maintained as healthy environments for performers, technicians, and the public. We shouldn't have needed a global pandemic to foster this.

While there will be – and should be - measures like fewer seats, more space between patrons, etc., these must be short term measures. What is more contrary to the spirit of live theatre than “social distancing?”

The post-pandemic Theatre – capital “T”, the art of theatre – is bound to be different, for the better. In the way that the pandemic has prompted consideration of the physical environment, it has also prompted artists to think about Theatre in new ways – ways as varied as the individual artists and their work.

Audiences are thinking about Theatre differently too. Maybe it's as simple as realizing how much they miss live performance. Once live theatre returns, maybe audiences will be larger. Maybe there'll be more financial support (time will tell about that too...).

While we're all tired of Zoom and Teams and YouTube and everything digital (well I am at least), technology has enabled the world to function in ways that it never could 10 or 15 years ago. While I long to see a show on a stage, I appreciate being able to see a performance on YouTube. It's better than nothing, it keeps theatre alive, and it brings theatre to people who can't afford it, or simply hadn't seen a “live” performance. It's also forced artists to be more creative in how they present their work, necessity being the mother of invention.

What will the post-pandemic stage look like? Fingers crossed.

-Joe Mobilia

I think the post-pandemic stage looks like a somewhat broke, slightly broken, but very hopeful return to a place to tell our stories. I am confident that it will return and will rebuild the things we love most about it.

I think that “The Empty Space”-style productions in large open venues will have early success and that fixed-form theatres (in all their shapes) will soon follow.

Theatres will continue to develop audience safety measures. Enhanced ventilation, larger milling spaces, and more touchless surfaces may become widespread. They could even influence changes in the building codes.

I believe that operators will implement and maintain real protections and protocols to help cast and crew.

I think that audiences will be skittish to return, even with a vaccine. The first productions to return need to be uber-safe, so that audiences don't recoil from news about infections.

When this pandemic has truly passed us by, I want the stage to be as exciting, intriguing, and CLOSE as it ever was. We need to retain what's essential in live performance. We need those performers connected to us. We have to hear them breathe. And we have to breathe WITH them!

-Todd Hensley

What resonates with me is the idea of starting over - pushing the reset button. As "sages" of our profession, it is easy to fall into thinking that we have all of the answers - that we know what theatre is and how it should be and we get hyper-focused on the practicalities of contractors and building codes, donors and executive directors, and conventional wisdoms about theatre spaces. I think the post-pandemic stage presents an opportunity that we should take to listen to more diverse voices about what the theatre can and should be and how physical spaces can be inviting and accessible to more people, to new stories and methods of storytelling, new technologies and new standards of comfort, safety and aesthetics.

-Heather McAvoy

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Above all it needs to be totally different, responding to a new era of culture. Not bread and circuses, but bread and health care, safe and affordable housing, equity among all humans and this dying planet. Architecture or not, theater will fulfill its essential role of sharing stories and offering hope. Hope in our time of scarcity of hope. May it bring an abundance of love and shared story telling. As "theater consultants" we need to rediscover what it is that makes the space for story telling a space of clarity, equity, inclusion and power for change. I don't think it is about technology... but perhaps how technology can serve the age-old purpose of fostering human connection.

-Tony Forman

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From a practical standpoint, a number of issues will need to be addressed, either in new construction or renovation. These include better accommodations for theatre personnel, especially actor's dressing rooms with more space, better air circulation and better attention to new ADA acceptable access. Public spaces will also need to be reevaluated in terms of social distancing, air handling and access. The probability of current Broadway theatre owners and producers giving up floor space voluntarily for social distancing seems unlikely. It would take the footprint of two side-by-side Broadway houses to provide enough audience and lobby space to allow sufficient "elbow AND breathing room" to meet our likely new post-pandemic standards. But new construction and major renovations will no doubt address these coming standards.

Artistically speaking, It would be fair to assume that the post-pandemic theatre will still require the same basic elements that have been in place since the 7th Century BC: a space, surrounded by an audience and performers with a story to tell. Thus designers should expect to work with our colleague playwrights and directors to provide adequate, hopefully exceptional scenery, lighting, projection, sound and costumes. Whether the production addresses the current state of the world or brings back our 2500 year repertoire, there will be productions presented in dedicated spaces that audiences will attend. We hope and pray!!

-Andrew Gibbs

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I hope the performance space and audience-performer relationship is largely unchanged when this is over. We rely upon the closeness of audience to stage and each other to create an exciting dynamic. I don't think any of us are eager to see that change, otherwise we might as well be designing cinemas or home theaters. There may be changes on the edges - lobby entry space (for health checks along with security?), restrooms, concessions, and backstage amenities - probably even the way venues are ventilated. But I hope the key audience relationship will be unchanged after audiences are ready to come back.

-Paul Sanow

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The pandemic lockdown has accelerated some already developing trends towards remote/virtual interactive performance experiences enabled by new technologies; some of these technologies can be expected to stick around in a post pandemic world as exciting new layers to live performance that might well influence the design of theatre facilities, others may grow into their own discrete forms as occurred with film and television in the last century. Other lasting influences are likely to be renewed attention to fresh air in buildings and similar health and environmental considerations. But the more fundamental impact to the performing arts in the United States will likely be the profound economic shakeup forcing the closure of countless organizations, both non-profit and for profit. Past economic shocks generated responses ranging from the construction of civic auditoria, to the birth of the little theatre movement, to establishment of regional theatre institutions, and more recently arts incubators as urban redevelopment strategies. With each of these efforts new voices were enabled to connect with audiences and communities – and it does not take too much imagination to see the potential for a more diverse and representative flourishing to be nourished from our current cultural, political, and economic inflection point.

-Jon Sivell

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Our entire society is in the midst of the biggest challenge we hope we will ever have to face. Businesses that bring people together - from retail to restaurants, or theme parks to sports arenas – are working feverishly to figure out how to get back to at least a version of normal. They are working to survive the financial tsunami that the shutdown has brought. The same is most definitely true for the performing arts.

Everyone at TheatreDNA is having multiple calls daily with clients and industry leaders to discuss their concerns, their plans, what actions people and companies are taking to address the logistics of reopening, and the potential impact this will have both in the short and long term. What changes can we make to get audiences into a theatre safely? What physical components of the performance space must change - not just for the immediate future, but in the long term?

As we begin to strategize how to get through the coming months, likely until a vaccine allows us to be together again in full force, we are reminded of an experience in TheatreDNA founder Benton Delinger's childhood, which encourages us to bravely face today but not get too far ahead of the art when it comes to tomorrow.

When Benton was young, his parents used to read the story Frederick by Leo Lionni to him and his older sister. It was his sister's favorite book. It tells the story of a mouse who, instead of gathering food for winter, gathers memories of the seasons to distribute to the other mice in the dead of winter.

"Frederick, why don't you work?" they asked. "I do work," said Frederick. "I gather sun rays for the cold, dark winter days."

Artists think up the words... they write the music... they create the colors... they choreograph the movement... all of which tell the stories of our lives and record not just the history but the underlying emotions of the day. What are the memories of this global experience that the artists of today will present to us tomorrow? What colors, words, movement, and music will come out of this to help us make sense of it all?

But the longer we all spend in "lockdown," the more we debate the future of the performing arts. Do we change how we perform? Do we change where we perform? Do we go digital in new or different ways? All these questions are being discussed...so, what should we do?

Perhaps it is best to let the artists determine the path, in their natural time. Let them gather what the world is throwing at them and express it in their unique way, using existing or new tools that they will invent.

continued....

“...and now, Frederick?” “I gather colors,” answered Frederick simply, “for winter is grey.”

Clearly, to survive the short-term financial crisis this has posed to all of us, we are required to solve the short-term health logistic issues of gathering people into compact spaces - and we will do that. But to answer the next question - “what should we be changing for future performing arts venues?” - perhaps we should step back and see where the art takes us...

The arts have always reflected society. Art exists to allow us to escape into another time or place, debate where we are or should be, or expose us to old and new ideas alike. Artists will define this pandemic in the future by telling stories about it. To respond to this unprecedented time, people will paint, sculpt, write plays or books, compose, and choreograph. And they will perform. They will do some things as they did before, and other things differently.

“Are you dreaming, Frederick?” they asked reproachfully. “Oh no, I am gathering words, for the winter days are long and many, and we’ll run out of things to say.”

TheatreDNA is in the business of planning and designing homes for performing and creative artists, and we love what we do. But we also know that, if we are honest and humble about the work, we are creating instruments or creative factories for the artists who use them; it is the artist that “plays” the space, not the designer. How they choose to use it is up to them. Whether music, dance, drama, or spectacle, we are only required to design spaces that support their creative process; it is the artist who makes the space come to life.

And although we always strive to inspire artists and dream of what might be, we will let them be the guide to the future and respond to what they need...not what we imagine they need.

“Close your eyes,” said Frederick... “Now I send you the rays of the sun. Do you feel how their golden glow...” And as Frederick spoke of the sun, the four little mice began to feel warmer.

Was is Frederick’s voice?

Was it Magic?

We hope that you are encouraged, even amidst the turmoil, of what things may come of our circumstances. While some journeys will be more painful than others, we truly believe that the performing arts will come out of this stronger and more poignant than ever. And even though difficult, we will continue. We will adapt. We will evolve. And the art will be the enduring force that will bring us together again.

-Michael Ferguson and Benton Delinger

The post pandemic staging, performing and audience will look similar to the pre-version. It is this interim state that we are figuring out how to do safely.

However, longer lasting changes will be in the audience services - touchless kiosks, programs on your phone, automatic entry doors, etc. . . . things that reduce contact with the building, but don't interject into the performer/audience connection. Where contact is unavoidable, like seating, material choices will evolve. More hard surfaces that are easier to clean and fabrics will have more repellent qualities. Additionally, HVAC system will be rethought for more fresh air, better filtration, more changes of air volume.

Production and design meetings, some rehearsals, and other pre-production events will remain online - the majority of people have learned how to do online meetings . . . less travel needed, and less money spent on travel. Interactions on the production team will be more purposeful.

-Anonymous

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I think it will take a long while (maybe years), but theatre will eventually get back to something closely resembling pre-Covid normal. I think it will however, result in more performance art being collaborative and electronic. Different performers performing live from different locations or recorded separately and combined into a single presentation. Examples of this performance style have been successful in capturing attention during the pandemic. And while these types of performances were happening pre-Covid, the pandemic pushed it further and faster into the mainstream. I don't see this style of performance going away, but it will not replace live theatre. I see the biggest changes coming in mechanical design, finishes, and operational considerations. Touchless fixtures and POS, higher fresh air exchanges, more deliberate patron traffic flow control, more natural light, how F&B is handled, and similar prevention strategies will be more prominent in facility design. These may all be subtle changes the audience doesn't notice but will be there, nonetheless. However, the desire of people to gather close together in a theatre to watch a live performer is not something that can be wiped from the human spirit in a few short years.

-Chip Ulich

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My hope is that we all use this cultural downtime to emerge stronger, post-Covid, with new and exciting approaches to Theatre and performing arts that embrace far more portions of our society.

On a more technical level, I envision a new element of the public lobby that will provide a designated area for security and health inspections, and much more attention being placed on the quality of air in the public, performance and back-of-house spaces.

-Robert Long

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In the near term, audiences will be smaller to accommodate physical distancing. Some may be reluctant to return. Staging and the interactions of performers may be modified to accommodate this as well. The return to "normalcy"--if you can call anything about theatre "normal"--will be one of the last things to happen as a society.

Regardless, of that, theatre will return and at some point, in the future audiences will be full. Theatre has survived for several millennia and overcome greater obstacles in the past. The inherent desire of humanity for community, the shared experience, and story-telling will bring us back to theatres.

-Jody Kovalick

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After reading this collection of thoughts, and the similar one from the NYT which I had already read previously, I have some short-term thoughts, about what we as theatre consultants can do in this moment, and some long-term thoughts. In the coming months and years there will be opportunities as venues close and re-open, sometimes under new ownership. I think Patty LuPone took a simple practical approach; clean up the backstage spaces! I think we should be prepared to help our clients adapt more permanently to some of the new things they have done during these times, perhaps a few more PTZ cameras and a switcher with a video director position somewhere to enhance streaming of live events. Maybe larger lobbies with areas at the entry for health checks (we should be doing this anyway to allow room for bag check and security screening) will be in vogue. We should be responsive to their immediate concerns, but we must maintain long-term vision for buildings that are to last 30-50-100 years. So I do not think there will be any long term, radical changes. Theatre has been dying since the Greeks, and yet it survives. If people stopped going to the theatre after a plague, there would have been no theatres built since the 500 BC.

In the end, humans are social creatures, and humanity has a short memory. I do not see society fundamentally transformed by this experience, and as theatre is a reflection of society, I don't see the Theatre or theatres being fundamentally changed either. I think that in a few years' things will be much as they were before, with a few small changes, but nothing radically different. I have been thinking a lot about what my Legislative Process professor in grad school told once told the class to say when asked a question about a policy we didn't have an answer for. He said we should rub our chins thoughtfully for a few moments, gaze off into the distance, and say in with a profound voice, "I think that ultimately nothing much will come of it."

-Anonymous

The variety of responses to the LA Times' prompt was fascinating. A few engaged the issue literally and focused on the health and safety of venues. Others imagined this moment of enforced closure as an opportunity to rebuild the field entirely from scratch, and identified areas of equity, diversity, access, pay, health care, childcare, and community engagement as demanding reconstruction. Some focused on the relationship between the work and physical spaces and indicated a desire to shift, generally, away from structured formats like proscenium theaters to improvised show-specific environments, found spaces, or itinerant companies working in available spaces of all sorts. Sales of Peter Brook's *The Empty Space* and Grotowski's *Towards A Poor Theater* are clearly up.

This exercise reveals less about the future than it does about our past and present and the concerns and interests that theater artists were already grappling with before the pandemic. Indeed all these subjects were already at the forefront of our national conversation in the theater industry, in lectures, articles, and convenings, and what we've seen articulated most clearly here is the shared hope that what comes next will be substantially different than what came before, rather than a simple resumption of previous practice. I suppose that whether that turns out to be true or not as viewed nationally will depend on the depth of the destruction of the institutions and individuals that comprised our American Theater before the crisis, and whether or not they will be able to return to business as usual. But as they like to say about politics, all theater is local, and what individual artists choose to do is ultimately a greater force for change than what surviving institutions choose to do. While resources are important, ideas are more important, and that is why Artists have always led the way.

-Josh Dachs

I think the post pandemic stage will be split. I think there will be a strong movement to recreate the conditions that existed in February 2020. I think there will be an equally strong movement to use theatre as a means of expressing vast, pent-up rage.

-Anonymous

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Patti LuPone's nails it: "What I do know is if we are to return to our beloved stages, they must be cleaned, sanitized and fumigated. More often than not when theaters are renovated, the backstage, the dressing rooms, the fly floors and the alleys are neglected. We work in perpetually filthy environments."

As theatre consultants we need to continue to advocate for these sometimes-neglected spaces within venues.

-Michael Parrella

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Which kind of Stage? I see retention of the form that we have now, because ultimately medical technology will master this, and we will come down from the pinnacles of fear caused by not knowing exactly how it spreads or how we can effectively immunize against it. Theater forms as we see them today are not significantly different than they were before and immediately after the Spanish Flu of 1918. If anything, we have become more intimate with the growth of black box and basement studio venues, with cast, crew and audience crammed into an experimental space. Although my statements above show a desire to keep a steady hand on the wheel of the ship of state for theatre, I can say that as a designer of performance art buildings, there is a great need to take a more serious approach to what is incorporated back of house for space, sanitation and hygiene. And as for the house, a different mode of ventilation is needed that pulls the ambient air away from audience members instead of pulling it up, or sideways. Enhanced forms of air cleaning are needed instead of large, general purpose filters. If we have the skills to greatly improve air circulation and decontamination safer in airplanes, we can do it in theatres. Environmentally responsible design of HVAC systems is encouraged, but we must first consider the impact HVAC has on arresting pathogen spread, or is it actually helping spread?

I struggle with the idea of semi-permanent seat removal or downsize remodeling in response to the pandemic of this time. Seat blanking perhaps for a time.... but not removal or other severe practices. Unlike much of Europe, US theatre is not government superfunded and actually has to economically survive. Can we add nights and matinees and still keep the doors open? Maybe likely not.

The practice of show streaming is interesting and may have short term value for getting by. But if it continues too long, it will become renamed to what it will become..... television. We go to shows BECAUSE they are live in front of us and we are part of a loyal following.

I am not going to comment on the socio-economic thoughts and suggestions in the referenced news articles, because I leave that to the playwright, producer and show runners. My role is to help design the building in response to support their vision and mission as to how they want to produce. I will say that comments suggesting elimination of grand spaces or mindless musical theatre palaces are selfishly parochial. Theatre in all of its forms, pleasing the widest slice of all representatives of the community is the best theatre, whether or not it is considered politically correct or not.

-Paul Luntsford

I have been cautioning clients for months to not try to redesign the kitchen while the house is still burning. All the while, I've been praying for the fire to go out. It rages on though, and what might have been an inconvenience is now a full-on catastrophe. Still, we must remain optimistic that the world will return to 'normal', regardless of whether or not it resembles the 'normal' we remember. We must also remain grateful for the exciting work we are doing, the important work we have done, and the future, whatever it holds.

We, as theatre consultants, do not lead the way. We follow the theatre makers. While we bring creativity and innovation to our projects, ultimately, we are imitators of the spaces that great directors and scenographers developed before us. We make spaces to serve their needs. When we get out ahead of them - expecting artists to shape their work to our space - we fail. With that in mind, we have no choice but to wait and see what post-pandemic performance looks like. Will we return to 'The Empty Space' as several people have suggested? Will scenery and spectacle become passe? Surely that's a logical prediction. It would be a significant change in popular theatre, and it would inform our work; but we can't predict that, and we do the theatre makers a disservice when we try.

We do well to remember that 'all politics is local'. The artistic reaction is likely to be local as well, and largely based on local economics as well as the appetites and tolerance level of their audiences. There will be no national or world-wide structural change in the way performances are presented. What flies in Atlanta may not be acceptable in Boston. We will have trends and fads, as we always have, and the ones that are successful for one reason or another will trickle from the East Village uptown, and then on to the 'burbs.

The pandemic has shut the events industry almost entirely. Millions of people have had to go find jobs outside of their expertise, and they are finding that those jobs pay well. If there's one good thing that might come out of this, I hope it brings about the end of the 'starving artist'. Underpaying experts, both technical and artistic, is institutional and an embarrassing tradition in the performing arts. The only way that will change is if people refuse to be underpaid. I hope that the forced career changes that many have had awakens them to what a fair wage for fair work looks like.

So let the fire go out. Let the artists get back to work. They will lead us to the future, as they always have.

-Alec Stoll

Slow to get ticket purchase levels back up
Smaller casts
More remote pit bands
Lots of hand sanitizer dispensers
More lavatories
More air exchanges
Anti-viral spray on the seats
UVC lighting overhead
Thankfully employed stagehands, designers and performers!

-Anonymous

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Great article which was in the LA times from minds far better than mine:

<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2020-05-19/coronavirus-reopening-theater-future>

-Anonymous

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Until the Covid-19 virus is completely eliminated, or the infection rates have dropped to incredibly low rates, I see that audience members will most likely need to wear a mask once they enter into the lobby. Auditoriums may only be filled to 25% to 40% capacity so audience members could be seated apart for social distancing. HVAC systems will be adjusted to continuously move and filter the air in the auditorium and backstage areas. Intermissions may last 20 plus minutes to allow the extra time to use the restrooms. Food and drinks may be served but only in designated areas that would allow for social distancing.

Stage technicians and cast will undergo continuous testing along with the wearing of masks. Testing will be important for the cast members as once they are in costumes and make-up, wearing a mask will be impossible to use without ruining their make-up. It will important that all the lead actors have understudies in the event a cast member may have a positive test. Theaters may have to use the pro sports approach towards the cast and crew.

Once a reliable/proven vaccine has been developed and released to the public, it is only then could we see auditoriums opened up to accept 100% seating capacity and return to a "new" normal.

-Robert Smulling

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I liken the pandemic's effect on live performance to a near-death experience. While it's certainly an opportunity for change, we should not let fear and fashion shape that change. Instead, we should cherish the memories and effects that great performances have had on us now, and relish in the newly-reaffirmed power and passion it ignites when we're able to experience it together again.

Kudos to those leaders who are taking this moment of time away from the stage to make change around racial, gender, and social equality. And to those who are finding new ways to make art.

With all of that in mind - I think the post-pandemic stage (i.e. building) looks a lot like the old one on the outside, but with a new flame on the inside.

-Clemeth Abercrombie

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The real question is are we in a failure of leadership at the highest levels that should have met this crisis head on and worked to resolve it, or is this the best America can do and we'll all go screaming that the world has ended? Despite leadership, there are millions of good hard-working people trying to resolve the situation. Theatre will come back, including intimate and intense venues. It did in the past, and it will again. But theatre will also evolve based on what needs to be presented. New venues like water shows and E-sports need new solutions.

I've been able to observe a lot of online seminars and what my takeaway is now is a good time to reflect and reevaluate on what we're doing. LEED and the WELL have been around for a while, but should we take them more seriously. Can we push manufacturers to be environmentally responsible? As for theatre design, are long continental seating rows really a good idea? Are compressed lobbies and washrooms safe for patrons and cleanliness. Does theatre seating need to be washable? Regarding actors, do we continue to hide them in windowless rooms, or should all buildings have outdoor accessible spaces? I don't have all the answers but as I always have done, I question what we're doing everyday to try and make it better.

-Anonymous

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

I think sports serves as an example that if it is ok to players, coaches, camera persons and support staff in a "performance" without a live audience, then it should be the same for live theatre or music or dance. I think the post pandemic theatre will not change much from the pre-pandemic theatre but will have more recording of performances and video infrastructure for live recording of performances. I suspect the next version of union contracts (IATSE/SAG/AFTRA etc.) will have rules in place for payments for recording and playback. If the Met can figure out how to do it, surely others can as well.

-Jim Niesel

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I think there are so many ways to try and look at this question it's almost impossible to count! But, that is a good thing and will look forward to seeing as many of those angles explored as time passes....

So, to try and answer at least one part of this, I feel I need look to direct experience (1) as someone who helps implement the geometry and technology of the stage space, and (2) also as a consumer. What I know about the creation and consumption of performance stands on the assumption that people (encompassing all - individuals, groups, and larger society) will continue to need to come together as we always have to view real bodies creating and helping to describe and understand our world real in real time. Indeed, most of us have continued to consume performance straight-through this first six-months of the pandemic - and this is of course is mostly through the vast array of on-line and streaming services that come directly to us wherever we sit. That model will necessarily stay a part of our use and experience of the stage well past when the pandemic fades and we can freely elect to participate in large group events.

Because the creation of performance is ongoing (now,) the economics of being a public artist/creator will continue to demand that almost all live performance will be mediated by and likely preserved (to the best extent possible) by technology. In other words, it seems unlikely that the mechanisms that currently allow us to access performance (safely) in our homes will be discarded by the artists and other producers of performance once we cross some undefinable line of when things might be "normal." In fact, I expect we may demand this different and varied access as consumers. Similarly, the services that currently have been feeding our need to consume performance will still need content to actually sell/stream. That content will continue to include the artforms traditionally seen only on stages by seated audiences, it will still include "live comedy specials," and it will also include hybrid types which haven't been fully exposed/created at all yet.

As a theatre consultant, I have learned that my key value as a creator is to help form a space/stage that allows people to do their work really well - and, I define "work" as both the creation and viable consumption of performance. In a near post-pandemic time-frame, the technology available may matter more than the shape of venue - as long as the venue adequately allows access to that technology. But, as time passes and performers iterate with the technology and the audiences available to them, we have to keep observing closely what their "stages" are looking like. So, it might be they look more like a gymnasium, or a sound-stage, or an exhibit hall than a traditional theater. Those types of spaces have absolutely all been and are still now as viable and active venue types for live performance as the more traditional/formal ones. What matters most is if the stage supports the art and allows the work to be done well.

-Fritz Schwentker

Well first let's define "post-pandemic." To me, "post-pandemic" means when all this chaos and COVID crap is over – probably 18 to 24 months from now. That said, humans are social and crave community. The theatre will feel the same but be "new and improved."

- Lobby expansions to alleviate overcrowding. (Finally!)
- Point of sales for concessions and tickets will move quicker to touchless NFC.
- Tickets will be 90% online sales.
- Seats will be new and refurbished (while no one was in the theatre in 2020-2021) but seating layouts will not be social distanced. (Remember, I'm looking at two years out.)
- Restrooms all be equipment with touchless fixtures.
- Upgraded air filtration, and increased air exchange rates. It will be interesting to see how many theatre operators increase air volume without having an acoustician consult on increased HVAC noise.
- Less on-premise pre-show dining offered.
- Automated temperature scanners at entry, but that will be short lived.
- More queueing area for security screening prior to lobby entry. (Not caused by COVID; caused by 2020.)
- Smaller casts.
- I do not think the live musician count will reduce.
- For the most part, I do not see backstage working conditions being much different from what they were in 2019.
- I wish I could say there will be a move by theatres to go to automated rigging so that stagehands do not crowd together to load weights or run sets. I don't think that will happen. I think it will return to the ways of 2019.
- No over-crowding in dressing rooms. (Finally, right sizing the dressing room count.)
- Less hugging and touching backstage, but little social distancing. The parties will continue, but just how good can they be?
- Great tasting meals catered by the show will be few and far between because the caterer moved to pre-package food offerings.
- More fresh air breaks for casts and production crews when working. (Musicians already get enough smoking breaks.)

That's what Jack's crystal ball says in September 2020. It was pretty cloudy when I was looking into it, so we'll see how much I got correct.

Wash your hands and wear your mask.

-Jack Hagler

I believe the majority of stages will be little used and have low occupancy. I estimate there are maybe 35,000 stages in K-12; 5000 in college and universities; and less than 1000 professional - Broadway and road houses and regional theatres in this country and the K-12 will see many fewer performers and performances for a number of years. Overwhelming and sad. Perhaps in a generation there will be a return or influx of interest in live performing arts - something for some to look forward to.

-Bill Conner

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

My hope is that once we get back to in-person production, we'll use this time we've had to really focus on the core value of the live performance experience - the shared, collective moment of creating and experiencing art (whatever that might be.) We have all these tools (scenic, lighting, costumes, etc.) and sometimes I think we all forget that they are tools to end. As we've seen, we can leverage all of those tools both in person and remotely, but we're missing that shared moment in the same airspace.

I also hope that this time with our families helps the producing organizations to re-imagine what a work/life balance looks like so that practitioners won't have to make a choice between producing and family (or least as much...)

-Chris Sprague

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

A theater that cares not only about the health and overall well-being of our audience, but also our artists and technicians. No more 80 hour work weeks for low pay, because that's how it's done and how you put in your dues. A theater that supports mothers, families, as we've all learned how lack of childcare impacts the choices a family makes.

A theater that is flexible, accessible to a wider community, a theater that is local and supportive. I believe that theater and the arts are vital, bringing us together to experience a singular event. I believe theater will return, and that we should be taking advantage of this opportunity to hit reset. Maybe easier said than done, due to the financial implications.

-Anonymous

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

Our Theater Design practice focuses much of its work on educational facilities. For completed projects we are getting a lot of calls from former clients who need help figuring out how many students they can accommodate in their auditoriums, black box theaters and large rehearsal rooms for educational purposes. They are converting many of their large performance / rehearsal spaces into lecture spaces. They are using every available space as a classroom space. This of course requires integrating sophisticated AV technology into spaces that were previously minimally equipped. We are helping many of them figure out how to properly equip these spaces.

For our regional/non-profit theater clients they are holding on by a thread. During "normal times" they operate in large part on the generosity of their corporate and personal donor base. While those donors have by and large continued to support the groups the lost revenue from "empty" buildings is an enormous strain on them financially. Many will not survive. Others are reinventing themselves to serve community outreach functions, but those too rely on government or corporate funding. The survival of many of these non-profit arts organizations is in jeopardy.

-Todd Berling

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

What will the post-pandemic stage look like? That is the question that every aspect of our industry has been contemplating since March. My honest answer is, who knows...?

From a practical side, I think we will see some short term physical and operational changes in the form of flexible seating systems/arrangements to allow houses to be reconfigured for social distancing – for a time. I believe more focus will be placed air handling systems to evaluate and control circulation and filtration where possible – for a time. Companies will be smaller, shows will be simpler, and audiences will be cautious – for a time. I am not sure any of those changes will turn into long term trends. I do think we will see a much higher deployment of technical systems to provide capabilities for recording and live streaming of staged content, but I think that was inevitable.

However, as we look forward, I think we do need to consider a wider view than, “post-pandemic.” COVID is (or hopefully is) really the culmination of so many other serious challenges that have been brewing over the last several years and which will have as much influence over our industry as the disease.

The immediate economic crisis - especially for our industry - along with the obvious health concerns and impacts to personal freedoms would seem to be the most immediate concerns as they literally impact putting food on tables. But we are also facing the excruciating and ever growing political divide which has left us scared to talk with friends lest we disagree. We are facing the disappointing and alarming scale of social injustices that were obviously (and unfortunately) still brewing for generations and now have risen to the surface. Top it all off with a complete lack of moral and/or political leadership (dare I say it), I am hard pressed to think of a time in history when we have faced so much adversity from so many directions. Historically when faced with crises, we come together as a whole to support each other. That is not the case today. In many ways, COVID is just the icing on the cake.

Eventually there will be an end to the immediate COVID crisis and, in my opinion, how these times impact our industry specifically and our country as a whole will be dependent on how we look back on these times and what we remember. Experience shows us that we as a people have short memories and are quick to minimize the bad times to a few stories. This is as much self-preservation as anything – we don’t like to dwell on the things that have caused us pain. However, we cannot forget what we are feeling through these times but instead use these memories as inspiration to make headway against the challenges we’ve known are lurking under the surface for years. We cannot just go back to the way it was.

At the same time, I hope we can use these memories – the good and the bad – to inspire new creative outlets into which we can sink our teeth. After all, when you lock people up together in small spaces for long periods of time, there are going to be stories to tell !

-Anonymous

To many theatregoers, the Post-Pandemic Stage will perhaps be similar to the Pre-Pandemic Stage, at least visibly. Most of the world's great theatres will not go through great design changes either due to their location, finances, or their historic nature. Additionally, although a reduction in seating capacity may be a great short-term response on the path back to "normal", the financial realities of live performances will not make this a long-term reality. Rather, the major changes to the Post-Pandemic Stage will not be visible. This will include updated HVAC systems (Coil Sterilization and Air Sterilization), cleaning practices, and operational changes that include allowing "sick" patrons to exchange their tickets without penalties. In reality, it will be the small, hidden practices that will have the biggest impact.

-Anonymous

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

When live performance returns over the next year we will see various forms of safe shows with increasing latitude based on the area's infection rates and risk tolerance. Rene Fleming and Vanessa Williams' recent performance at the Kennedy Center brought me back to a configuration we used in college for small plays. The audience loves to be onstage!

When live performance returns there will be pressure on costs. Some theatre forms may help the renaissance. Flat floor and open space should get some through the transition. The newfound attraction to broadcast performance will be on every producer's and union member's mind. We will come together to find ways to satisfy all parties without excessive risk and expense.

When live performance returns audience attendance will hit levels not seen in recent history. Storytelling and shared live experience are so elemental we may even see cinemas turn back into performance spaces. The reunion of the audience and performer will be a spectacular thing to see.

-Steven Rust

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

One of the joys of my life as a theatre consultant has been travelling the country and the world to become aware of the local theatrical, musical and performance traditions and context of each place. It is often the case that the aspirations of project leaders is to replicate facilities based on other cultural and foreign contexts to be able to compete globally. I would hope in these times we theatre consultants will urge project leaders and steering committees to let the local communities influence the form and goals of venues to really make each venue resonate locally, the global recognition will follow. We can still build venues that can house global tours etc, but the local, smaller venue will always be the one that will give the vernacular voice the platform for original content.

-Ed Arenius

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

I am predicting that the long term effects of the current pandemic will be mostly positive. This outlook is based on knowledge of history and human behavior,

During the 2 year closure of London theaters during the plague at the end of the 16th century, Shakespeare wrote some of his best plays. And his best, Tempest, was written shortly after the theaters reopened. So, when this is past us, I expect a Renaissance in better written plays and productions.

Physical changes to basic theater design will be minor and mostly invisible to the average patron. HVAC systems for example, will be designed to provide cleaner, less infectious air, just as systems were changed after the Legionnaires events of the 70's. Social distancing, the antithesis of theater, will fade into oblivion. Existing hall will eventually continue to be used as they were pre-pandemic. I have no doubt theater design will evolve and change, but given the limits of human vision, hearing, and body shape, the design of the audience space will likely not change much. Future changes will be technology driven, as has been the experience of the 19th and 20th centuries.

-Duane Wilson

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

Here are my thoughts about Live Performance in the “New Normal” Future! Note, I did not say Theatre, but all live performance.

1. I read the LA times article you sent and broke into a full belly laugh after reading just the first 6 or 8 responses. Why? Because I felt like I was reading comments from the 1960’s (I know I’m showing my age) when the people I went to university with both in undergraduate school and then when I went for my MFA, who wanted to reform theatre away from the big Broadway shows and do theatre that challenged traditional thinking. The model they used was European (note not England or the US) where Theatre was the voice of social protest with plays like *The Curse of the Starving Class* for example, and feel good entertainment was left to Opera and Ballet.

But, it was my Graduate Student friends that actually got me into Theatre Consulting as they, upon graduation, would find an old grocery or drug store or warehouse (think Alley Theatre) and ask me if I could help them make the space into a theatre. The 1960s I remember were the startup of theatre companies that lead to what we think of as LORT today.

There were a lot of authors who took up the cause to do social activist theatre. But, in the end that movement shifted to others like playwright Lonne Elder, as a voice for the Black People with plays like *Ceremonies* and *Dark Old Men*, *Splendid Mummer*, and others. I even designed many of those Shows because there were no “Black” Professional Scene and Lighting Designers at the time.

But, in the end most LORT theatre turned to comedy and plays like *The Odd Couple*, *Shakespeare*, and musicals that even made it to Broadway. Because they made money! Even the famous Stratford and Guthrie theatre ultimately were forced to do Musicals just for the income.

All I am trying to point out is that there will always be protest theatre, but it fades when the realities of making money turns those playwrights and producers in a time-honored different direction.

2. I do have some thoughts however about things that will affect theatres and performing arts venues and their construction!

A. I think the Diffusion (below the floor) air handling method that Acoustical Consultants have championed for years will become the new normal.

continued...

Why, as it is more expensive to do?

The simple answer is that it is up to 70% healthier than forcing HVAC from the top down. And the reason is simple forcing HVAC from the top down hold the germs down at the floor where it can infect others. But in the Diffusion (below the floor) air handling method the air we breath and the germs rise and then are take away by large Attic type slow moving fans where the air goes through HEPA Filtering before it is reintroduced in the venue.

The point is everyone involved with live performance has seen the closed venues and shudders to think of the companies that may never come back to life when Covid19 finally goes away! And that is true for every type of Live Performance. And, dark venues don't make a dime!

B. Many professionals like playwrights, performers, designers, technicians, and management have been forced to pivot into new lines of work. Some might return but others will most likely not and stay with the new way to make a living. That I believe will have the following effects:

- 1) There will be new opportunities for new people to enter the industry more than there has been since the end of WWII.
- 2) For us it will be easier to find experienced staff for our firms, as people look for new ways to earn a living. IF the economy does not tank because of Covid19 and the big spenders in Washington, this could be a good era for us.
- 3) Finally, I think people we call clients will be more open to creative thinkers not those just doing copies of old work. Remember the 1960s brought on the Ford Foundation's – Ideal Theatre project.

C. Lastly, I do not think that scripts will ever return to the structured idea of Time (clear forward progression of one thing following another), Place, and Action we think of as the Greek and Shakespearian standard. This had already started because Script – Play Writers were so influenced by TV and Film where dissolving into a character's mind in a whole different time was easy to do.

But, now with most of our world doing everything virtually I think that will just be the new normal for new Plays, Musicals, Opera, and even Ballets. So, expect a huge increase in technology to do that! Even to bringing an idea explored in the 1960s in the Chekhovian Exhibit World's Fair show where performers moved seamlessly from being live, to being in a projected form, and back again!

-Van Phillips

THEMES:

PATIENCE - IT WILL RETURN

THE SHARED EXPERIENCE OF LIVE THEATRE WILL PREVAIL

NEED FOR PHYSICAL CHANGES

MEP/LOBBIES/TOILETS/SEATING/BOH

NEED FOR OPERATIONAL CHANGES

CONCESSIONS/TICKETING/QUEUING

OPPORTUNITY FOR SOCIETAL CHANGES

RACIAL, GENDER, AND SOCIAL EQUALITY

FOLLOW THE ARTISTS

NEW FORMS OF THEATRE AND THEATRICAL EXPRESSION, INCLUDING DIGITAL AND OTHER ALTERNATE ENVIRONMENTS

OPPORTUNITY FOR A RESET

OPTIMISM

PATIENCE - IT WILL RETURN

THE SHARED EXPERIENCE OF LIVE THEATRE WILL PREVAIL

Social distancing, the antithesis of theater, will fade into oblivion.

The buildings have survived pandemics in the past and will again in the future. We should not change what already works.

...measures like fewer seats, more space between patrons, etc., these must be short term measures. What is more contrary to the spirit of live theatre than "social distancing?"

Artistically speaking, It would be fair to assume that the post-pandemic theatre will still require the same basic elements that have been in place since the 7th Century BC: a space, surrounded by an audience and performers with a story to tell.

The inherent desire of humanity for community, the shared experience, and story-telling will bring us back to theatres.

I do not think there will be any long term, radical changes. Theatre has been dying since the Greeks, and yet it survives. If people stopped going to the theatre after a plague, there would have been no theatres built since the 500 BC.

I have been cautioning clients for months to not try to redesign the kitchen while the house is still burning.

NEED FOR PHYSICAL CHANGES

MEP/LOBBIES/TOILETS/SEATING/BOH

Theatres will continue to develop audience safety measures. Enhanced ventilation, larger milling spaces, and more touchless surfaces may become widespread. They could even influence changes in the building codes.

However, longer lasting changes will be in the audience services - touchless kiosks, programs on your phone, automatic entry doors, etc. . . . things that reduce contact with the building, but don't interject into the performer/audience connection. Where contact is unavoidable, like seating, material choices will evolve. More hard surfaces that are easier to clean and fabrics will have more repellent qualities. Additionally, HVAC system will be rethought for more fresh air, better filtration, more changes of air volume.

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LEED and the WELL have been around for a while, but should we take them more seriously. Can we push manufacturers to be environmentally responsible? As for theatre design, are long continental seating rows really a good idea? Are compressed lobbies and washrooms safe for patrons and cleanliness. Does theatre seating need to be washable? Regarding actors, do we continue to hide them in windowless rooms, or should all buildings have outdoor accessible spaces?

Additionally, HVAC system will be rethought for more fresh air, better filtration, more changes of air volume

Environmentally responsible design of HVAC systems is encouraged, but we must first consider the impact HVAC has on arresting pathogen spread, or is it actually helping spread?

NEED FOR OPERATIONAL CHANGES

CONCESSIONS/TICKETING/QUEUING

I envision a new element of the public lobby that will provide a designated area for security and health inspections

Testing will be important for the cast members as once they are in costumes and make-up, wearing a mask will be impossible to use without ruining their make-up. It will be important that all the lead actors have understudies in the event a cast member may have a positive test. Theaters may have to use the pro sports approach towards the cast and crew.

Point of sales for concessions and tickets will move quicker to touchless NFC.

...operational changes that include allowing "sick" patrons to exchange their tickets without penalties. In reality, it will be the small, hidden practices that will have the biggest impact.

- *Less on-premise pre-show dining offered.*
- *Automated temperature scanners at entry, but that will be short lived.*
- *More queueing area for security screening prior to lobby entry. (Not caused by COVID; caused by 2020.)*
- *More fresh air breaks for casts and production crews when working. (Musicians already get enough smoking breaks.)*

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

OPPORTUNITY FOR SOCIETAL CHANGES

RACIAL, GENDER, AND SOCIAL EQUALITY

I think the post-pandemic stage presents an opportunity that we should take to listen to more diverse voices about what the theatre can and should be and how physical spaces can be inviting and accessible to more people

Above all it needs to be totally different, responding to a new era of culture. Not bread and circuses, but bread and health care, safe and affordable housing, equity among all humans and this dying planet

I think there will be an equally strong movement to use theatre as a means of expressing vast, pent-up rage.

Kudos to those leaders who are taking this moment of time away from the stage to make change around racial, gender, and social equality. And to those who are finding new ways to make art.

The variety of responses to the LA Times' prompt was fascinating. A few engaged the issue literally and focused on the health and safety of venues. Others imagined this moment of enforced closure as an opportunity to rebuild the field entirely from scratch, and identified areas of equity, diversity, access, pay, health care, childcare, and community engagement as demanding reconstruction.

My hope is that we all use this cultural downtime to emerge stronger, post-Covid, with new and exciting approaches to Theatre and performing arts that embrace far more portions of our society.

I am trying to point out is that there will always be protest theatre, but it fades when the realities of making money turns those playwrights and producers in a time-honored different direction.

FOLLOW THE ARTISTS

NEW FORMS AND FOCUS OF THEATRE AND THEATRICAL EXPRESSION, INCLUDING DIGITAL & ALTERNATE ENVIRONMENTS

The pandemic lockdown has accelerated some already developing trends towards remote/virtual interactive performance experiences enabled by new technologies; some of these technologies can be expected to stick around in a post pandemic world as exciting new layers to live performance that might well influence the design of theatre facilities, others may grow into their own discrete forms as occurred with film and television in the last century.

Perhaps it is best to let the artists determine the path, in their natural time. Let them gather what the world is throwing at them and express it in their unique way, using existing or new tools that they will invent.

I think the post pandemic theatre will not change much from the pre-pandemic theatre but will have more recording of performances and video infrastructure for live recording of performances. I suspect the next version of union contracts (IATSE/SAG/AFTRA etc.) will have rules in place for payments for recording and playback. If the Met can figure out how to do it, surely others can as well.

it seems unlikely that the mechanisms that currently allow us to access performance (safely) in our homes will be discarded by the artists and other producers of performance once we cross some undefinable line of when things might be "normal." In fact, I expect we may demand this different and varied access as consumers. Similarly, the services that currently have been feeding our need to consume performance will still need content to actually sell/stream. That content will continue to include the artforms traditionally seen only on stages by seated audiences, it will still include "live comedy specials," and it will also include hybrid types which haven't been fully exposed/created at all yet.

I would hope in these times we theatre consultants will urge project leaders and steering committees to let the local communities influence the form and goals of venues to really make each venue resonate locally, the global recognition will follow. We can still build venues that can house global tours etc, but the local, smaller venue will always be the one that will give the vernacular voice the platform for original content.

...gathering spaces like a theatre should be focused on supporting the local community

...as they like to say about politics, all theater is local, and what individual artists choose to do is ultimately a greater force for change than what surviving institutions choose to do. While resources are important, ideas are more important, and that is why Artists have always led the way.

OPPORTUNITY FOR A RESET

OPTIMISM

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