

The Year in Arts { Theater

By Don Aucoin
GLOBE STAFF

As theater finally resumed this fall after an excruciating 18-month intermission, a change was immediately evident in the number of Boston-area troupes that had begun offering streaming versions of their shows to go along with in-person performances.

That hybrid approach could become even more common in the months to come. Live theater finds itself again in a precarious position thanks to the Omicron variant, which is fueling concerns about what the winter might hold for performing arts organizations.

Streaming theater, whether presented as a livestream of a performance in real time or a recorded performance made available online as video-on-demand, started to take hold last year as a response to the theater shutdown imposed by the pandemic. It was a classic case of necessity serving as the mother of invention.

Now, it's starting to morph into standard operating procedure, not just a form of brand extension for theaters but as a growing part of their identities.

On a pragmatic level, streaming theater offers companies a way to hedge their bets against the chance that in-person audiences will not return to their pre-pandemic levels or that, heaven forbid, there will be another shutdown.

On an artistic level, digital technology offers an opportunity to explore a new frontier, always a welcome prospect for creatives.

An innovator like Igor Golyak, artistic director of the Needham-based Arlekin Players Theatre, leaps at the chance to maximize the expressive potential of a new mode of performance, as seen in a pair of his intricately stylized online productions: "chekhovOS/an experimental game/" and the current "Witness."

This year also illustrated, though, that online presentations are as rife with pitfalls as possibilities. Golyak's expansive work notwithstanding, the virtual productions that worked best tended to feature small casts, tight focus, and absolute clarity in the storytelling.

For instance, Idris Goodwin's three-character "Hype Man: a break beat play," about the divisions in a hip-hop trio after police kill an unarmed Black youth, was even more taut and searing in its online presentation in April by Company One Theatre and the American Repertory Theater than it had been during Company One's 2018 world premiere. Closeups and stand-alone mono-



THE LOOP LAB

As theaters adapt to a new reality, streaming takes the stage

logues created a visceral power that virtually came through the screen as the trio attempted to grapple with sweeping issues of racial justice and individual matters of musical ambition.

Another online success was the New England premiere by Lowell's Merrimack Repertory Theatre of Dael Orlandersmith's solo drama "Until the Flood." Based on interviews the playwright

conducted in Ferguson, Mo., after Michael Brown, an unarmed Black 18-year-old, was fatally shot by a white police officer, "Until the Flood" was recorded on a stage without an audience, then presented online. The camera caught every nuance of star Maiesha McQueen's vividly individualized portraits of multiple characters of different races, ages, and genders.

Other dramas, though, struggled to adapt to the online medium. Flat Earth Theatre made an ambitious attempt to adapt Edgar Allan Poe for our pandemic moment with "7 Rooms: The Masque of the Red Death," seven short plays in seven color-coded rooms, which the audience experienced via a succession of Zoom windows. But a lack of cohesion bedeviled "7 Rooms."



NILE SCOTT STUDIOS

Jennifer Rohn and Nathan Malin in SpeakEasy Stage's "The Sound Inside."

DON AUCOIN'S TOP 10 PRODUCTIONS OF 2021

"**Hedestown**," Broadway In Boston
 "**Macbeth In Stride**," American Repertory Theater
 "**The Tempest**," Commonwealth Shakespeare Company
 "**The Sound Inside**," SpeakEasy Stage Company
 "**The Merchant of Venice**," Actors' Shakespeare Project
 "**Tiny Beautiful Things**," Gloucester Stage Company
 "**Hurricane Diane**," Huntington Theatre Company
 "**Hype Man: a break beat play**," Company One Theatre and American Repertory Theater
 "**chekhovOS/an experimental game**," Arlekin Players Theatre
 "**Passing Strange**," Moonbox Productions

Rachel Cognata and Kadhah Bennett in the online production of "Hype Man: a break beat play."

When the American Repertory Theater presented "The Conjuror's Club," originally created as a live magic show, a certain, well, magic was lost in the transition because the connection with a live audience had also been lost.

SpeakEasy Stage Company's "Project Resilience," consisting of six short plays set in Boston that sought to capture the toll of the pandemic, certainly had its moments, but there was an overall feeling of sameness to the plays; the production's lack of tonal variety was made more noticeable by the online medium.

Some theatermakers took advantage of the online format to comment on, as well as present, the action. In Pascale Forestal's production of "TJ Loves Sally 4 Ever," a reimagining of the story of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings in a present-day context that was filmed without an audience and presented online by SpeakEasy Stage Company in partnership with Boston Conservatory at Berklee, Forestal pointedly incorporated footage of the Jan. 6 insurrection at the US Capitol into the flow of events.

A question that is likely to loom ever-larger is whether online theater can ever be financially viable. At a minimum, streaming theater does allow for extended runs, additional ticket revenue for theater companies, and more chances for people curious about a particular show to see it, theoretically strengthening the bond with audiences. For instance, though The Nora at Central Square Theater's in-person performances of "The Half-Life of Marie Curie" ended Dec. 12, it's available on-demand through Dec. 26.

With few signs the coronavirus will soon relinquish its grip, streaming theater can also allow theatergoers who might not yet feel comfortable in an indoors venue to not miss out entirely. At the Stoneham-based Greater Boston Stage Company, Dec. 23 is the end date for both the in-person and digital performances of the documentary musical "All is Calm: The Christmas Truce of 1914."

Looking ahead to 2022, one thing seems certain: As theaters continue to figure out new ways to present their work and adjust their business model, all will not be calm.

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