

Character and . . .

Connection

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A Community Connection

Building the Virtues of Character through Theater

Joe Klinebriel

Abstract

Theater, as an ephemeral and communal art form, has historically provided a space for connection and reflection, fostering virtues such as empathy, integrity, and resilience. Despite challenges to its relevance, theater continues to play a crucial role in shaping individual and collective character, itself even serving as a model of resilience.

Introduction

“Do we even need live theater anymore?” This is a question that, for years, I loved to pose at the beginning of a new semester to students taking my introductory theater class. I always enjoyed their quizzical faces as I placed the fate of my own livelihood in their hands and watched as they contemplated the question. “If we can go sit in a darkened movie theater,” I would continue, “and have the latest multi-million-dollar blockbuster experience, packed with special effects beyond our wildest dreams, is there really even a reason for us to attend live theater anymore? Or forget about the movie theater experience. If we can now easily afford all of the technological advances of big screen televisions that stretch across our walls and envelop us in their Dolby 7.1 surround sound, never having to leave the comfort of our homes or our pajamas in order to be entertained, why on earth would we ever want to drag ourselves out to sit shoulder to shoulder in a darkened theater with a bunch of strangers to see a play or a musical? In this age of advanced technology, what could the experience of live theater possibly still hold for us?”



*Do we even
need live theater
anymore?*

Admittedly, as a theater educator, my question to the students always seemed to be a bit of a loaded one, because I had invariably been certain of its answer. I confidently tantalized them with my secret: that attending live theater held the potential to bring them invaluable gifts that far surpassed simply being entertained. But I listened to them share their various opinions in answer to the question. Some students would immediately adhere to an assumption that live theater was indeed necessary. Others were, at times, ready to doubt the necessity of it and voiced their skepticism. The question had always proven to be an effective means of launching our semester's journey together, and I had established a pattern of confidently relying on my previous years of teaching experience to assure me that they would soon discover live theater's unquestionable value for themselves.

Then, in August of 2020, after the world had spent the spring and summer months in lockdown and isolation, sorting out the implications and complications that had been brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, I, like so many others who led lives and careers in the world of theater, found myself facing a point of reflection, re-evaluation,



Live theater returned, with challenges, once the pandemic eased.

and even doubt. I was preparing myself to emerge from the virtual teaching world I had come to know for a return to traditional face-to-face teaching. Our institution's administration had approved for students to gather in our theater building, a cavernous space that could easily accommodate the mandated 6-feet of lonely social distance needed between each of the twenty or so students with whom I was about to start a new semester.

With cumbersome safety protocols in place, the first day of classes began, and I stepped onto the creaking stage of our beloved old theater building to welcome the masked and shielded faces of my new students. I was nervous but energized to, at last, commune in person again. The students stared back at me through their layers of protection, resembling a patch of lonely islands scattered across the expanse of auditorium seating. Anxious, I stepped toward the edge of the stage and prepared, once more, to launch my

traditional first-day question of theater’s necessity and relevancy. But this time, I was not entirely as certain of its answer as I had always previously been. This time around, having just experienced an intense period of COVID-induced soul searching and questioning, I stood just as vulnerable and uncertain as the students who stared back at me. *Did* we, in fact, still need theater? *Was* this communal art form, which had, for thousands of years, provided a space for connection, reflection, and the development of so many important character virtues, still as essential and vital as I had always thought it to be? What, in fact, *did* it still hold for us?

The Evolution of an Event of Connection

Connecting Through Storytelling

Certainly, having spent the better part of my life devoted to the art of theater, and having walked the stage as an actor, directed scores of productions, and educated emerging young artists about the art form, I had witnessed, time and again, the invaluable gifts that theater could offer. I had watched it instill confidence in those filled with self-doubt. I had been awed by its power to nurture empathy in those on a journey of greater understanding and appreciation of others. I had even seen it unlock a life purpose for those who were floundering in search of one. But, perhaps, above all of these, I had known the art and act of theater to be powerful and life-changing simply by satisfying one of our strongest and deepest human needs: our desire to connect with others.

Our call to express ourselves to others through the ritual of storytelling is primal and seems to have been an essential and intrinsic part of our development as humans for as long as we have existed. Storytelling has helped us to build relationships, bringing us closer to each other as we engage in the questions and conversations that stories can prompt. Telling our stories has taught us how to find confidence in ourselves and how to respect others. Sharing our stories has even helped us identify meaning in our own lives as we play out the situations and the choices made by others.¹

Undoubtedly, storytelling has played a crucial role in how we have learned from and communicated with each other. Storytelling allowed us to cast light on our shared truths and gain a better understanding of ourselves and of each other. And as this important ritual grew,



*Sharing our stories
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meaning in our own lives.*

so, too, did our desire to enhance the storytelling act by adding performative elements. Enhancements such as costumes, masks, scenery and even a designated space for sharing in the stories became part of the experience, and storytelling found itself evolving into what we can now recognize as a fully realized theatrical event.

Storytelling as a Theatrical Event: The Traditions and Rituals Are Born

But when did it all begin? And why? While it is believed that some initial form of theater, in both eastern and western cultures, may have existed for several thousands of years, the most robust evidence of the historic beginnings of theater can be found through studying the abundance of surviving artifacts of Ancient Greece. Dating back to the 6th Century BCE, recovered relics of Greek culture, such as their hand painted vases, have revealed to us that, through festivals in celebration and honor of Dionysus, the god of fertility, wine, and pleasure, the citizens of Greece embraced theater as a valuable means of community connection. They prioritized sharing time and space with each other to tell the stories that helped them



Ancient Greek ruins and artifacts offer evidence of early theater.

better understand their own culture, learn about their own history and contemplate their own morality.² The theater event created and refined by the ancient Greeks was valued by its citizens for fostering community, but would this artform have lasting power?

Remarkably, many of the theatrical practices and rituals that were begun more than 2,500 years ago can still be recognized in the modern theater of the western world. In Ancient Greece, the actors performed in masks. A chorus chanted, sang and danced. And crowds of thousands gathered in a shared space to laugh and cry together, to poke fun at themselves, and to analyze and learn from their kings and mythical gods. They strengthened their own character by studying the flaws and choices of the characters they dramatized on the stage. They reflected on their own human behaviors and complexities through the stories told by their playwrights, and, in doing so, worked at becoming a stronger, more balanced community.

The ancient Greeks may also have been the first to establish the connection of a live audience as an essential ingredient in defining theater’s uniqueness from other arts. The swirl of differing personalities, perspectives and energies of the audience is necessary in completing the “circuit” of the total live experience. The shared space between the audience members and the creative artists invites a reciprocal act of live participation, one that creates a relationship between the viewer and the viewed. It is this interdependence that differentiates the theater experience from other storytelling forms like film, television or social media. And though the content of the performance may be repeatable, the audiences, their reactions and their exchanges of energy can never be duplicated. Each performance event becomes its own unique experience of connection; one that is shared only by those who have come together in the shared space.

Furthering the distinctiveness of theater is its *ephemerality*—another essential characteristic of the theatrical event which reflects its impermanence; all aspects of the event will only exist temporarily. The meticulously constructed sets will be torn down. The elaborate costumes and props will be repurposed for future productions. The audience members will go their separate ways. And the stage will begin to be reset for a new story and a new experience. Poetically paralleling life itself, all that which is vibrantly alive and breathing in the theater today—the ideas, the invested time, the devoted energy—will soon become tomorrow’s memory. It’s an inevitability that challenges us to acknowledge theater’s preciousness, to seize and cherish it in the moment and make ourselves present for it while it lives in and around us before our “revels,” as William Shakespeare once coined, “are ended” and “melted . . . into thin air.”³



Each performance event becomes its own unique experience of connection.

In my own experience, I have participated in striking sets for countless theatrical productions. I have worked side by side with cast and crew members in a unified effort to deconstruct the physical structure that stands symbolizing the devoted time, passion,

and artistry of an ensemble effort. On each occasion, I have experienced a profound mixture of sadness and pride. The ritual of dismantling something that connected us and built community amongst us becomes a final group bonding experience and an opportunity to embrace theater’s unique ephemerality through a collective act of both mourning and celebration of our efforts.

A Space for Reflection and Connection

But what draws us to the theater event in the first place? What are we hoping to find in our experience of connection? Again, we might turn to Shakespeare and his uncanny understanding of humanity and the power of art to provide us with an answer as Shakespeare was able to capture with poetic precision just what theater has the potential to offer us when we invest ourselves in the experience.

In one of his most complex, most studied tragedies, *Hamlet*, Shakespeare brings to life the story of a Danish prince, who is forced to avenge the wrongful death of his father. Just before a group of traveling actors is to perform for the newly crowned king and suspected murderer (Hamlet's own uncle!), young Hamlet schools a troupe of traveling actors about how to effectively perform a truthful depiction of a murderous act in order to prompt his guilty uncle to recognize his own devious actions being played out in front of him and ultimately confess to his own crime.

In offering his advice to the traveling players, the character of Hamlet does more than further the plot, he also conveys to us, the viewing audience, an observation of what the very event of theater can offer us, explaining: "The purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature: to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure."⁴

In other words, through Hamlet's advice, Shakespeare explains that the purpose of theater might be to let us see our own reflection in the mirror, and, for better or worse, glimpse a representation of the truth of ourselves. We



Hamlet, a character in a play, explains what plays are for.

have the opportunity to witness our shining and proud moments as well as our flaws and vulnerabilities as they are played out in front of us. We can see ourselves and each other. And, through that collective process of reflection and recognition, we can choose to process and learn from our truths.

Theater provides a defined space for such truth-seeking. Existing in a variety of structural forms and environments, these spaces become the sacred places where stories can be shared and connections can be made. Whether built into a mountainside like the majestic open-air amphitheaters of ancient Greece or occurring in unconventional spaces like prisons or churches, all theater spaces share a common goal of creating a designated area to bring together a full circuit of participation. Collaborators offer the gift: a playwright crafts a story, actors bring the characters to life by living truthfully under imaginary circumstances, designers make artistic choices to support the story and its themes, and a director works to ensure that all involved are cohesively telling the story. An audience completes this exchange by receiving the gift. It is in this process of connection where the profound can occur. In our attempts to shine a light on truth, conflicts are explored, humanity is revealed, empathy develops, and the bond of human understanding becomes stronger.



Theater provides a defined space for truth-seeking.

The Rings of Connection

Ring #1: Developing the Character of Me

So, theater can provide a space for us to think, feel and experience, and through this exchange of energy, we are able to, as researcher and storyteller Brené Brown describes, connect with each other in ways that make us “feel seen, heard, and valued.”⁵ And in my years of experience, I have observed this type of meaningful connection occur in widening rings. The first ring revealed itself to me when I entered my first year of high school as an awkward and shy sophomore. I longed to break my habits of introversion and try something bold and new to prove to everyone and to myself that there was more to my identity than the “quiet thinker” that I had thus far been known as. I craved an experience that would bring me out of my shell and allow me to tap into the performance potential that I knew must be buried somewhere inside of me.

A friend suggested that I audition for the winter musical, *Pippin*. Knowing hardly a thing about musicals in general and being completely oblivious about what an audition entailed, I mustered all of my courage and leapt into the unknown. I have no recollection of the quality of my audition (which is probably a good thing!) but somehow the stars aligned, and I was cast to play a bit part in the show. My very first theatrical role! I was ecstatic to

feel accepted, and I excitedly began the journey. I might have been able to predict the intense satisfaction I would feel basking in the applause we received as we took our bows on opening night, but I don't think I could ever have predicted the immeasurable impact of all of the other gifts I ultimately received by choosing to seize this opportunity.

After months of dedication to afternoon rehearsals for my very first role on the stage, the big moment came for our cast to finally shine and share what we had been committed to working on every afternoon after the school day ended. Beyond my contribution to the choral numbers in the musical, my theatrical debut consisted of just two solo lines, and I'll never forget them. The first line assignment that I was to deliver involved turning to the lead character and announcing, "King Pippin!" My other line responsibility came at another point in the show, when I was to leap out from the wings onto the stage and exclaim, "Now?!" to cue the show's finale. A grand total of three words. Granted these may not have been the most profound lines ever to be spoken on stage, but I took great pride in them and knew my duty was to make sure they were heard by everyone in the audience and that my delivery was timed just right.

But as often happens in the theater, a challenge surfaced during the final dress rehearsals. I had become sick and was diagnosed with walking pneumonia. I was distraught that there loomed the very real possibility that I was not going to be able to finish what I had started all those weeks ago. Illness (and smart choices) be damned, I was determined to show up for our production, an endeavor that I had already learned so much from and one that I had grown to care so deeply about. Nothing was going to stop me from reaching the finish line! Feverish, sweating, and having lost almost all of my voice, I croaked out my lines with all of my might. I likely prompted audience members to turn to each other in confusion and disappointment, uncertain of what the raspy whisper that came out of my mouth was truly supposed to represent. But in my heart, I knew that my personal triumph had eclipsed the rough quality of my performance; I had finished what I had begun, and theater revealed to me a character virtue that had become a part of my identity: *resiliency!* I can look back now on the many moments in my life and in my art when adverse circumstances could have caused me to throw my



The gift of resiliency that I received from that first experience on stage has stayed firmly a part of my core.

hands in the air and give up. But the gift of resiliency that I received from that first experience on stage has stayed firmly a part of my core, allowing me to push through almost any challenge to finish what I believed was worth finishing.

My story of getting “bit by the theater bug” most likely resembles that of countless others, and though the gifts that it has brought ultimately developed in widening rings of connection, that first experience was on a very personal level, and it gave me a sense of confidence that I had not previously known. After completing my first musical, I chased every performance experience that I could find. And as I got my chance to bring more characters to life and commit to those characters’ truths, I learned to become vulnerable. I had to let down my guard and make myself emotionally accessible in order to serve the story, if I wanted to make a truthful connection with the audience. Getting my chance to unlock and share my vulnerability meant tapping into a level of bravery and trust in myself and in those around me that I had not yet grasped. And the acceptance I felt from my peers and from the audience was empowering. In making myself vulnerable, I gained their trust and thus began a lifetime process of understanding and claiming another virtue: *integrity*.

Getting the chance to embody characters who faced circumstances, made choices and existed in worlds that differed vastly from my own allowed me to “walk in another person’s shoes” and launched an enduring practice of opening doors of deeper understanding, appreciation and patience for people who differed from me: *empathy*—yet another virtue, another gift!

Through participating in that very first production and the many that followed, I learned what it meant to work, day after day, in rehearsals alongside others who were passionately driven towards achieving a shared goal, and I could visibly see myself growing and thriving. And all I knew was that I wanted more of it. In fact, beyond the gifts of resiliency, integrity and empathy that I had received, I also knew that I had found the answer to the question that my peers and I were all challenged with as we contemplated our futures beyond the bounds of high school: what is it that we needed in our lives to get us out of bed every morning? I had found my purpose. But I also found that there was more to the story.

Ring #2: We’re All In This Together

As my experience in theater grew, so, too, did my awareness of the broader reach of theater’s gifts. Beyond my own personal journey of development, I

began to appreciate how theater could also cultivate virtues in a wider ring of community. Sebastian Junger, American journalist, Academy Award-nominated filmmaker and author of the book *Tribe*, describes how crises such as wars and natural disasters are often events that unite communities, even communities whose members hold opposing ideals, and can offer a sense of purpose to its members.⁶ Junger explains that the “sense of meaning and purpose and belonging to a group [are] absolutely vital in our human evolution because we will literally risk our lives in order to have those feelings.”⁷ While not on the same level of crisis management as a war or natural disaster, theater can offer a similar problem-solving challenge that can satisfy our need to feel purpose in our actions and provide us with a sense of belonging and deep connection.

As a communal activity, whether produced professionally or on an amateur level, the various circles of collaboration that work on the creation of a theatrical performance, from the actors and the designers to the running crews and the ushers, the theater event requires contributing groups to shelve their egos, prioritize the shared goal, and focus their talents and energy on the common good of the project. And this collaborative process strengthens community character, nurturing virtues like teamwork, trust, and respect for others and deepens a sense of social responsibility.



Casts and crews build connection through the communal activity of theater.

To succeed, theater has to rely on a spirit of community in which all of its members (actors, directors, designers, stagehands) focus on a singular, shared goal and must problem solve and adapt to challenges together, despite personality differences, background, or skill level. To succeed in establishing this communal spirit and ensure its success, all members must be able to trust each other, and trust requires that participants can be vulnerable (actors need to be able to share emotions, directors need to be able to take creative risks, stage managers need to be able to lead their scene shift crews). And it is the responsibility of everyone involved

to contribute to building a healthy, supportive, and trusting environment, one that respects and values the diverse perspectives of all team members working on the project and the perspectives represented in the story being told. And when the team can create theater in a space of trust and respect, its members can fully engage in storytelling that embraces a responsibility to explore important moral, political and social questions.

First published in English in 1953, Irish playwright Samuel Beckett brought to the world his absurdist drama, *Waiting for Godot*, a play about two characters, Vladimir and Estragon, who wait in vain for an elusive character, Godot, who ultimately never arrives. Thematically, *Waiting for Godot* explores the deep human need for companionship and understanding in the face of isolation. In 1957, director Herbert Blau guided a cast of incarcerated men to perform the play at San Quentin State Prison for its inmates. Given the depiction of the two central characters relying on each other for psychological survival, despite the absurdity of their situation, the play's cyclical nature, repetitive dialogue, and existential focus on waiting without fulfillment, the play paralleled the realities of prison life and strongly resonated with the inmates who knew what it was to wait indefinitely for parole.

Facing extreme isolation, both physically and emotionally, *Waiting for Godot* allowed the inmates the rare opportunity to connect with each other and contemplate deeper questions of existence, identity and meaning. They were reminded that even in confinement, people continue to search for connection. The play spoke to the inmates of their own experience of waiting and challenged them, in an environment of collaboration, trust and respect, to confront the absurdities of their lives and to remain persistent in their search for meaning and hope.⁸

Ring #3: Completing the Circuit

Beyond our own personal gains and the gains made through the teamwork and relationships forged to produce theater, the ring of connection widens to its fullest when the stories that have been brought to the stage reflect (and sometimes even challenge) the values and sensibilities of the time. Whether paying tribute to a god, laughing together at the latest hit comedy, or being incited by a play's controversial ideas, audiences have gone to the theater to be entertained, yes, but also to bond as a community, to experience and to learn. Throughout history, audiences and creative teams have engaged in the broadest ring of connection by sharing in the stories that have prompted dialogue about the human condition. Immersing themselves in the lives and dilemmas of the characters on the stage before

them, audiences throughout all eras of history have responded to the stories told to them and have seized these opportunities to connect with each other and with the issues raised, a practice that has helped them cultivate their own character virtues.

In 1857, Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen shocked his audiences with his script, *A Doll's House*, a play that stylistically broke a trend of superficial melodramas that featured two-dimensional characters by introducing the story of Nora Helmer, a woman who ultimately chooses to leave her three children as well as sacrifice her role as a doting, subservient housewife in her desperate attempt to gain independence and find her true self. The play stunned audiences of the time as Ibsen revealed, through his stinging commentary, a reflection of what he saw as the oppressive and false society that surrounded him. As controversial as the play proved to be, the audiences had no choice but to wrestle with this reflection of themselves. Ibsen not only demonstrated bravery and integrity in his central character, Nora, but he also demonstrated these same virtues in himself as the creator of a story that held a decidedly unpopular ending, but one that, for better or for worse, would stir its audiences and prompt them to examine themselves.⁹



RENT challenged social norms and fostered empathy in its audiences.

In 1996, Jonathan Larson brought his fresh reinvention of musical theater to Broadway audiences through his rock opera, *RENT*. Larson, a brilliant young composer, lyricist and playwright, prepared to share his creation, which not

only fostered empathy, but demonstrated resilience as well. By immersing audiences in the lives of characters who explore universal themes of love, loss, fear, and aspiration, but who also struggle with specific hardships of their time—homelessness, poverty, drug addiction, sexual identity, and the societal stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS, Larson shined a light on the marginalized. He asked his audience to suspend any judgement or labeling and, instead, find the empathy to see the humanity of each individual character and extend understanding and compassion.

Not only did the story and experience of *Rent* foster empathy, but the events surrounding the project itself demonstrated the resilience that can emerge in a theater community. During the day of the production's final dress rehearsal, its creator, Larson, tragically died at the age of 35 from aortic dissection. His untimely and unexpected death catalyzed a bonding between the cast and crew and a desire to live out the notion that the "show must go on". The production team's mission to bring both the story of *Rent* as well as its creator's story to the public served as an example of the virtue of strength that can be shared by the members of a community, a characteristic that contributes to theater's fortitude.¹⁰

Time and again, theater has helped us develop character virtues by providing the space for connection and exploration of stories and experiences that have helped us to reflect, learn and grow. But the survival of the artform itself has depended on its ability to adapt and persevere. Tested time and again, theater has had to demonstrate its own strength in character, its own virtue of resilience.

A Model of Resiliency

Adapting to a World of Technology

Having survived for thousands of years and weathered an array of adversarial challenges that had accompanied each historical era since the time of Ancient Greece, the art form of theater itself stands as an inspiring and powerful example of adaptability and resiliency. The theater event that began in Ancient Greece gained a momentum that would see it through subsequent hurdles including closures of theater spaces due to fires, plagues and Puritan beliefs. A newly colonized America, the Industrial Revolution and two World Wars all served to influence and challenge theater's ability to adapt and evolve. Retaining its traditions yet embracing its innovations, theater remained resilient for over 2000 years, and its stories continued to bring communities together to share in the human experience. But what about persevering through modern challenges?

With the 20th and 21st centuries being defined by an explosion of technological advancements and virtual gathering platforms that have inarguably altered the ways in which we are able to connect with (and disconnect from) each other, social media has emerged as a presence that has indeed affected theater in a number of ways. While it has presented challenges to the nature of the live experience, could theater again

demonstrate its ability to embrace change and remain tenaciously resilient in order to coexist with and even embrace what social media has to offer?

We live in a world where communication technology, especially social media, certainly carries the potential to compete for the audience's attention, distracting them from being fully present for a theatrical event. And, as Craig Lambert observes in his article "The Future of Theatre: In a Digital Era, Is the Play Still the Thing?," "a youthful generation raised amid a digital culture may prove harder to lure to a live theatrical performance."¹¹ Certainly, technology has infiltrated our theater experience as the ritual of reminding audiences to turn off their electronic devices prior to the start of the theater event has now been a part of standard practice for decades. And the need to keep vigilant in offering consistent reminders for audiences to "unplug" does not seem to be waning. However, despite the choices of technology and social media that offer virtual connections, renowned director Tina Packer, confirms theater as an incomparable necessity by acknowledging, "It's only through people gathering together—which is what theaters do—that you can actually feel the humanity. It's a palpable, visceral feeling—a collective feeling," she says. "You can't feel it on Facebook, you can't feel it on television, and you don't get the truth in any of these places, either."¹²

But social media has also been embraced by the theater as a tool for transforming the theater landscape, often in largely positive ways. It has allowed theaters to expand their reach, build communities, and explore new creative possibilities. It has helped reduce marketing costs and helped theaters manage the financial strain of production costs. The impact of social media on society has even served as a backdrop and central focus for numerous theatrical productions, a piece of our social identity under examination in the theater.

In 2016, the Tony Award-Winning Broadway musical *Dear Evan Hansen* premiered and served as a mainstream connection with audiences of all ages in its reflection of modern topics such as social anxiety and the power of viral messaging to examine loneliness and friendship. Here was an example of how theater, which prides itself on its "in-person" connective dialoguing experience, was once again providing a space for audiences to examine itself, this time shining a light on how we use technological spaces in our desire to connect.

So, through its power of adapting, theater demonstrated its resilience. It embraced and examined a defining societal challenge, and by simply trusting

itself to do what it had always done—bring us together in a shared space to reflect on and better understand a truth of who we are becoming— theater not only survived, it found new ways to thrive. But although it had demonstrated a long history of triumphantly navigating unforeseen shutdowns, crises and interruptions, could theater persevere and survive its most challenging modern test: a worldwide pandemic?

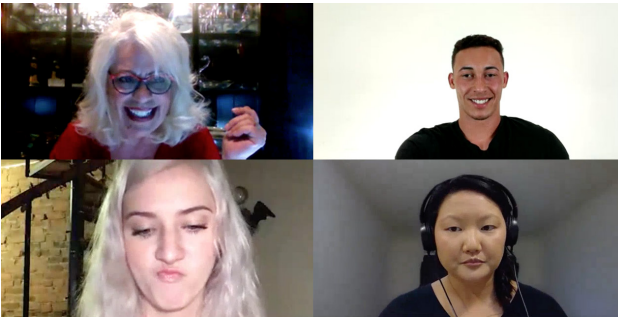
Theater embraced and examined a defining societal challenge and not only survived but found new ways to thrive.

Surviving a Global Crisis: Adapting to New Forms of Theater

The COVID-19 pandemic descended, and as the world became forced to isolate and forego events that included public gathering, the traditional practices of theater became threatened and theater itself seemed, once again, to be facing extinction. Theater spaces of all types, commercial and non-commercial, were shutting their doors. Professional and amateur designers, writers, performers, choreographers, directors, builders, box office staff . . . essentially all members of theater communities were being forced to find new careers and creative paths. Many theater artists, me included, contemplated a question we never thought possible to be posed: Could this 2,500-year-old tradition have finally run its course and reached its conclusion?

During the plague of the Elizabethan era, performers adapted to the theater closures by choosing to travel with their performances. In the 17th century, playwrights dodged censorship issues and other social restrictions by producing closet dramas, scripts meant only to be read but which provided a creative space, if only a cerebral one, for theater to exist. The artform was no stranger to exploring creative solutions to perpetuate its existence. And here again arose an opportunity for the makers and consumers of theater to band together to problem-solve in the midst of a global crisis. The desire to tell stories and commune with others meant exploring new pathways to do so. To keep the spirit of live theater aloft, some theater groups began making their archives of previously recorded productions available for streaming. Additional efforts such as podcasts of plays, interactive web dramas and plays constructed to be performed by audiences in their own homes helped to exercise the muscle of theater.¹³

I vividly remember being asked by a director I had previously worked with if I would fill in at the last moment and perform a role in a public reading of a popular play that he was producing. The performance was to take place virtually through the help of Zoom, one of the cloud-based platforms that we had quickly become all too familiar with in our desperate attempts to find our way to some version of normalcy and keep connected with others. Since “Zoom theater” was quickly becoming one of the only options for producing theater, I jumped at the chance to gain experience with the format.



The show must go on . . . even if that means it goes on virtually.

In our first rehearsal together, as we frustratedly practiced maneuvering through such awkward technicalities as knowing when to turn our cameras and microphones on just before we entered a scene and

where we were supposed to look, the director very bluntly made a sobering observation that stopped us all in our tracks: “Folks, this is how we have to tell our stories now. This is the new theater.” His declaration prompted an emotionally conflicting mix of both sadness and hope. We were mourning our loss of being able to physically create and commune in the same room together, yet here we were telling our stories, combatting our solitude, and reminding ourselves that we were still connected. And as Noah Millman, author of “Theater in the Time of COVID” acknowledged, “A theater that could speak to our moment would have to live in the peculiarity of our moment, a time unmoored from time and a space displaced from space.”¹⁴ And though there existed a sort of lonely ungainliness to the virtual format, we were once again finding a way to look together into our societal mirror to process our human condition.

And theater’s resiliency during COVID extended beyond creating alternative performance opportunities and gathering spaces. The bonds formed between members of the various circles of theater communities became stronger than ever in some cases. Examples of caretaking and support arose in many areas of the entertainment industry. One such effort, the Costume Industry Coalition, an organization founded during the Broadway theater closures that occurred during the spring of 2020, responded to

the challenges brought about by these closures and helped to galvanize the various independent designers and builders in New York by advocating for the American costume industry. The coalition took fundraising actions and established recovery grants, created publications, marketed products and produced public exhibits to help raise money in an effort to protect its artisans and keep its shops open until working conditions were restored and theaters were reopened. Through its goals to raise awareness about the challenges facing the industry and to promote the value of costumes as an integral part of storytelling in the entertainment industry, the coalition forged a new bond amongst theater costume artists and artisans, and the community discovered a new level of fortitude.¹⁵

Having survived the numerous challenges that it has faced over the last 2,500 years, theater continues to redefine itself while simultaneously holding onto its traditional defining characteristics. And it continues to demonstrate its resiliency, shaping our character and deepening the virtues that guide our actions and relationships, providing a powerful medium for moral and ethical growth.

Conclusion

I think back on my first day returning to face-to-face teaching and the doubtful feelings that filled me. Separately, each of us in that room was a private mixture of conflicting emotions, but together I think we were hopeful. Above all, we were together. Did we need theater anymore? I swelled with a regained confidence in my answer: absolutely. While its forms may have changed and continue to change, its role as a communal, reflective, and transformative artform remains necessary. The fundamental human experience that we engage in through live theater is irreplaceable and will always hold relevance for us.

And that day we prepared to take a step together to figure out how to push this resilient tradition of storytelling forward, social distancing challenges and safety protocols be damned. The first action I took was to ask us all to stand, and, because that sacred theater space had not witnessed a communal gathering, let alone the sound of applause, in over six months, I invited us all to give a standing ovation. The students and I stood together, and we clapped, filling the room with the joyful sound of applause and feeling the spirit of connection. We clapped for the empathy to be gained, for the integrity to be developed, and for the resilience we were living. We clapped because we were together. Connecting.

Joe Klinebriel, MFA, excitedly joined the University of Dubuque community in 2023 to serve as director of theatre. Before coming to the University of Dubuque, Joe served as chair of the fine arts department and theatre director at Clarke University in Dubuque, Iowa. Originally from the Detroit, Michigan, area, he earned his bachelor of arts degree from the University of Alabama as part of the Professional Actor Training Program where he was part of the repertory company at the Alabama Shakespeare Festival. He has directed, performed, and educated locally and regionally. He lives in Dubuque with his wife, Jill, who accompanies the University of Dubuque choirs, and his son, Sam.

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- p. 51: Screenshot by Joe Klinebriel

Notes

1. Collins and Cooper, *The Power of Story*.
2. Taplin, *Pots & Plays*.
3. Shakespeare, "The Tempest."
4. Shakespeare, "Hamlet," acts 3, scene 2; pp. 1209–1210.
5. Brown, *Gifts of Imperfection*, 19.
6. Junger, *Tribe*.
7. Harbinger, "Sebastian Junger," loc. 20:00.
8. Dembin, "Nothing But Time."
9. Gainor, Garner, and Puchner, *Norton Anthology of Drama*.
10. Maslon and Kantor, *Broadway: The American Musical*, 408–10.
11. Lambert, "Future of Theater."
12. Lambert.
13. Solomon, "Theater Under Covid."
14. Millman, "Theater in the Time of COVID."
15. DKC/O&M, "Costume Industry Coalition."

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