



Theater through a webcam

Hosted by [Anthony Byrnes](#) Mar. 23, 2020 [Hollywood](#)



The email came from a friend: a play on Zoom, Friday, 5 pm Pacific, the day after California began to shelter in place.

I logged on skeptically. After all, how could theater take place on a video conference service?

I was greeted by a screen that's become familiar to those of us lucky enough to work from home - "Please wait, the meeting host will let you in soon." Ah ... waiting outside the virtual door, in a virtual lobby.

When the play, or really play reading began, the use of technology was pretty clever. The actors had their video and audio turned on. Those of us in the audience were asked to mute both our audio and our video. From there, the actors let the magic of technology serve as a kind of video director. As each actor spoke the video feed would shine the cyber-spotlight on them. So it was the actor's speaking that controlled who we saw.

On the virtual stage, I saw familiar and welcome faces from LA (actors you'd recognize from LA's best intimate theaters), but also faces from New York, an actor in Florida, and even one in Perth, Australia. Online, all the world can be the stage.

As the play got underway, it was striking how much broke through this socially distanced fourth wall. Good acting was good acting. There was something joyous about simply going on, about a group of artists coming together to do what we do - make theater.

In some ways it was like watching a new form. Absent a camera man or an editor composing and framing each shot, the actors themselves were in control - as they are in the theater. You could feel them learning from each other and discovering this new space. They'd lean in for intimacy and discover what the edges of this virtual stage would allow.

And you could feel them listening.

I confess I cheated and peeked backstage. By shifting from the singular view to the gallery view on the Zoom platform I could see not just the actor who was speaking but I could see the whole cast. I could watch them off the virtual stage and peer through the fourth wall. It was oddly moving to watch them watch and listen.

Last week, I spoke of how theater brings together the artists and the audience in the same time in the same space. It's the magic of the performing arts - that communal shared moment of being together. I'd thought that would be impossible over a webcam - or perhaps cease being theater and instead be something more akin to film or television.

But for those of us with the privilege of working from home on computer with a webcam - this video conference call world is *where* we are. If we're socially distancing, this is how we see our friends and share a drink. This is, at least for right now, our public square . . . and it can also be our theater.

In fact, it's strangely poignant to see actors on their webcams. It's also profoundly intimate. Each camera captures a small slice of their personal lives. As each actor spoke and the screen shifted to their face, I began to notice the small domestic details. How each actor had lit themselves consciously or not. How through the physical windows in the background you could see the light change and the sun set: first in New York and then in Los Angeles. Rather than being in a theater where the actors were working and the audience was watching - we were all at home. The question of domesticity is present and profound for all of us.

It's the bizarre paradox of our current moment. While in so many ways we are more distant and disconnected than we've ever been, we are strangely all in the same place and more connected by communal experience than ever. The sense of deeply individual but profoundly shared experience unites us. Unlike a natural disaster in California that's simply a news blip in New York, we were all dealing with this pandemic together and all trying to do our best to cope.

How often in the theater can we expect an entire audience to all be grappling with the same profound questions all at once?

For now, this is where we are and this is where our theater is alive.

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