

TOP TEN TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL ONLINE THEATRE

By Calliope Weisman, Co-Producer of the online Stage on Screen Theatre Festival at The MAIN Theatre in Newhall, CA

By now we've all been invited to a Zoom event that we were supposed to attend in-person. Of course the rescheduled virtual events aren't the same, but that doesn't mean they can't still be entertaining. Out of all the public locations that shut down six months ago, going to the theater is what I miss the most. I decided early on that I was going to make the most out of the situation, and use the resources I had to their fullest potential.

Now, producing remote theatre for an online audience is a new endeavour for most of us. There's certainly a learning curve, and it can be intimidating. But don't be afraid to think outside the box. (And screen!) Theatre artists are constantly learning and adapting. So, while I hope you all strive to make each show better than the last in some way, don't put too much pressure on yourself. It doesn't have to be perfect, but here are some guidelines to help you avoid some common missteps. The fun is in the process!

Here are ten valuable tips for theatre artists that I've learned this year from producing, directing, and/or stage managing over a dozen shows in quarantine. I know we're all eager to work in live theatre again, but until then, I hope you make the most of your time spent creatively at home.

1. EXPAND YOUR THEATRE FAMILY

Now is your chance to work with people you wouldn't normally be able to. Post your casting calls on a variety of facebook groups to find actors and designers from all around the world. You might even be able to reconnect with old theatre friends who moved out of state. As long as you are all willing to accommodate the time differences, the possibilities are endless. This is a great way to grow your network and learn from a variety of people's experiences. Or even host a reunion of talented artists you haven't worked with in ages.

2. CONNECT WITH YOUR AUDIENCE

One of the things I miss most about live performance is the final piece of the puzzle—the audience! Since performing to a small camera doesn't allow us to hear the crowd's laughter, gasps, and snuffles throughout the Zoom show, we don't get the same thrill as performing on a stage. Actors crave the real-time response from the audience to share in the emotion of the story. It's that live relationship that makes storytelling such a cathartic experience. But you can fill our need for human connection by having a talkback after your show. Have everyone turn on their cameras and microphones to chat with the cast just like they would in the lobby. It's the best alternative to staying connected with your community of fellow artists as well as your extended theatrical family. If your show is interactive, ask your audience to participate in the chat box throughout the show to get immediate feedback and to keep them engaged.

3. MAKE YOUR ACTORS LOOK GOOD

As any theatre-goer knows: good lighting is an essential part of all performances, and it is equally important for online shows. Make sure your online actors have good front

lighting, usually with a ring light or natural light from a nearby window. You do not want your actors to look too orange or too dark because of inadequate or unreliable light sources (like the sun). Also, make sure their camera is eye-level so they are not looking down at us (stacked books can easily solve this problem).

4. MAKE YOUR ACTORS SOUND GOOD

Your living space does not have the same acoustics as an auditorium, so you need to adapt. Room ambience and choice of microphone greatly define the quality of your audio. I do not recommend using headphones, because they usually do not fit as a costume piece. But they can be useful if the actor cannot rely on a completely quiet area that pets, children, or firetrucks might interrupt. Avoid echo-y rooms and turn off that loud fan in the background. Speaking of sound, you actually should not project your voice, as actors are trained to do. Zoom will automatically turn down your sound if you speak louder than their “allowed volume.” This might seem counter-intuitive, but as a general note, speak a little softer than your regular voice, and if your character needs to “yell,” then slightly raise your voice so it does not go higher than the limit. Zoom picks up softer voices surprisingly well. (Also remind your audiences to turn up their computer speakers. You’d be shocked by the amount of complaints we get from people who write “No sound?” in the chat box, but the only problem is that they forgot to unmute their laptop.)

5. DON’T FORGET ABOUT SET

Just because you’re not on a stage, it doesn’t mean you can completely ignore the setting. Set design is also an integral part of storytelling, so put your actors in the world of the play! Try your best to set up a functional set that your actors can interact with, but if you can’t, then a blank wall will suffice as it is clean and not distracting. If actors “share” the same location, keep their backgrounds similar or at least neutral. Virtual backgrounds can work as well. They look the best with a solid green screen and evenly-distributed front lighting which is crucial in creating the sharpest silhouette. If an actor is sitting at a desk in their room, it must be a “character choice” that fits within the world of the play, not just a default. And practice all Zoom settings and tech cues in rehearsals to avoid awkward delays in the show.

6. DO NOT READ STAGE DIRECTIONS

Stage directions immediately remind us that we’re not in the theater, and we want to uphold the illusion as best we can. Plus, those extra lines add minutes to your show and audiences get bored and distracted very quickly. It may feel like you need to make up for lack of blocking, but you can convey those ideas in artistic ways with a little creativity. So often they are as simple as “she takes off her coat and sighs.” SHOW us, don’t tell us. If the stage directions are a bit more complex, challenge yourself to find innovative ways to express those blocking notes, choreographed sequences, or set descriptions through fun camera tricks, sound effects, or extra screens with virtual backgrounds used like projections on a stage. For example, set the scene by opening with an image or slideshow

of that town with the date or time period. Reach out to designers for help; they know how to solve these problems!

7. MEMORIZE YOUR LINES

Just like for a stage production, having your lines memorized gives you the freedom to play with your intentions and embrace your surroundings. Relying on a pdf of your script is distracting for the audience because they can see your eyes scan left and right and it does not allow you to fully connect with your distanced scene partner. Our connection with fellow actors is the glue holding these online shows together. The relationships between the characters are what make the audience give in to the suspension of disbelief. If the actors are in the moment, the audience will be too. Even just being extremely familiar with the text will unchain you from staring at the screen the whole show.

8. PRODUCE LESSER-KNOWN WORKS

Get in touch with indie playwrights and ask to produce their plays. They might charge you a small fee or even grant you the rights for free. In my experience, they are honored that you reached out to them and support their craft. New and lesser-performed playwrights love seeing their work produced by independent theatre groups. You'll get exposed to a wider range of plays in various genres and that is great for furthering your theatrical education—and your audience's tastes. You can also find plays from smaller publishing companies like Pioneer and Heuer. They usually reply faster and have many more titles available for online performances. Many big publishing companies, like Concord (formerly Samuel French) and Dramatists, are not granting the rights to popular titles because the playwrights do not want their works online. Even if they do, you might have to jump through extra hoops to get the rights approved, and it can take up to eight weeks! But whatever play you choose to do, make sure you get proper permission and pay the licensing fees BEFORE you start promoting your show in ANY capacity! If you don't want to deal with licensing rights, it's easier than ever to produce original content! Bring a cast together to do a reading of the project you finally finished. Workshop an idea you've never had the time to complete, or devise a new piece with a group of students, distant collaborators, or your own troupe.

9. BE CREATIVE!

Work on shows that you might not otherwise be able to. Experiment with new methods of storytelling, including shadow puppets, homemade props, and collaborative choreography. Don't be afraid to try out special Zoom techniques in order to provide a visually stunning image to your audiences. This can mean using different costumes to portray multiple characters, or standing in several places around the room to give a sense of depth to the scene. Maybe even record some elements to screen as a movie and then have other scenes performed live. Explore this modern medium!

10. HAVE FUN!

This might sound cheesy, but it's so important to love the work you're doing. Especially during this stressful time, doing theatre should be a source of emotional comfort and creative fulfillment, and an opportunity to practice your craft until we can do shows in person again. Work with people who bring you joy and spark your creativity. The team you bring together (or even the team that you are brought onto) should create an environment that fosters growth and a sense of community when it is otherwise hard to create one while stuck at home.

11. KNOW WHEN TO BREAK THE RULES

Think outside the box! Stand in an echo-y room to create a God-like sound. Turn off all the lights in your room and only have the computer light shine on your face for that haunting nightmare scene. Muffle your microphone for that creature hiding in the shadows. Experiment with animated green screens. Do you remember how many forms you had to sign to get permission to light a candle onstage? Not anymore! Not only can you use real candlelight at home, you can even cook food in your own kitchen and turn on your sink if the scene calls for it. We may have new limitations, but we also have new freedoms! Now is the time to take risks and be creative within these weird social and physical restrictions we find ourselves in.

Producing online shows can be challenging, as is learning any new medium, but it can also be just as rewarding. Plus, it teaches us new creative skills we can carry back with us to live theatre when we're fortunate to share a real stage again. Break a leg!

For extra advice and support on your own theatrical production, please do not hesitate to contact Calliope at cweisman@santa-clarita.com.

CALLIOPE WEISMAN is a director and stage manager in Santa Clarita and LA. She is the founder and co-producer of the SOS Theatre Festival at The MAIN, where she is also a House Manager.

Recent work as a director includes an online production of *Proof*, as well as the LA premiere of *Puffs* and *Too Much Light Makes the Baby Go Blind (30 Plays in 60 Minutes)* at The MAIN. Calliope has also worked as a stage manager with independent theatre companies throughout Los Angeles including: the Lounge Theatre, Knot Free Productions, Big Sandwich Theatre Co, Tavern Brawlers, CrowsNest Productions, and Menagerie Theatre Works. She is proud to be one of the founders of The Old Mask Era Theatre Company with her sister, Denim, as well as the ever-growing Santa Clarita Independent Theatre Alliance.

After receiving her BA in Theatre with a focus on arts education and stage management from San Diego State University, Calliope taught at College of the Canyons and Will Geer's Theatricum Botanicum.

Calliope is so fortunate to be able to continue directing and producing with passionate and talented artists to bring a variety of live shows to her community during this time of isolation. She is constantly learning from her experiences and appreciates every opportunity to make her next project better than the last.