

Senior Theatre adapts to the pandemic:

COVID-19 teaches older actors new tricks



With the pandemic's challenges to public health, a leading senior theatre organization encourages directors and programmers to take their groups online. Here are tips, techniques and ideas to help you do the same

by Bonnie L. Vorenberg, BA, MS

"You know us creative types, we just have to find a way to express ourselves. You have to deal with the hand you're given."

- A senior theatre director

We never thought we'd turn to online meeting software to do theatre! Perform, but not in person? No way. Then, COVID-19 changed everything. It made us pivot to new techniques and make adaptations so we could do what we've always done: use theatre to connect, inform and entertain.

The most surprising discovery was that senior theatre online produces the same benefits as senior theatre in person. Theatre touches every part of us as humans, stimu-

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The producers created a studio in their retirement center apartment to film the play, Made for Each Other

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lating our physical, mental, psychological, cultural and emotional selves. But the social outcome of performing is the strongest.

When I interview directors, almost everyone ends our conversation by saying, “You know, Bonnie, we are a family.” I am not surprised. The *esprit de corps* (or group feeling) is the glue that holds theatre companies together. It supports the participants through good times and bad. In the pandemic, *esprit de corps* works like magic. Against a backdrop of social restrictions and loneliness, drama groups help actors and audiences connect and performers do what they do best—entertain! It’s a piece of reality that feels oh-so-good right now.

Below, we share with you our story, complete with the challenging learning curve. Our tale will resonate, whether you work in a senior living community, seniors center, or any other setting where older adults gather. Use our experiences to help you get online quickly and easily. These tips, techniques, ideas and resources will give you confidence.

The engagement effort

The pandemic brought our work at the ArtAge Senior Theatre Resource Center to a screeching halt in 2020. The plays, books and materials that we distribute to actors around the world sat on the shelf. Performances were postponed, then cancelled. When we heard the worry in directors’ voices, we jumped into action so we could “stay in touch with the tribe.”

In March we offered our first undertaking, a conference call to talk about senior theatre so attendees could share and feel supported. The conference call format was such a friendly way to connect—so low-tech that no one had to leap any hurdles to join.

The conversations alerted us to the problems facing senior theatres. We investigated with a survey and learned that one-third of all the groups that responded were on a

complete hiatus, while the remaining two-thirds were barely doing anything. It was a deeper crisis than we thought. It made us realize that to sustain the field and make sure it is vibrant after the pandemic, we had to find ways to keep people engaged.

Since the easiest way for older adults to take part in theatre is with classes, we provided training sessions on how to teach online senior theatre classes as well as how to keep theatre moving ahead (see the “Resources” sidebar on page 22). Theatre folks learn by viewing. We knew that for them to understand online performances, they had to see one, so we produced and directed what we believe to be the first online senior theatre performance, *Tech Support* by Arthur Keyser, which reached 798 viewers. Soon, there were a consistent number of online shows to share with our newsletter readers. It was working!



Susie Boyd and DeLeon Grabowski in the Tech Support streaming production, which reached 798 viewers

I was so proud. Here were all these older adults, stereotyped as not tech-savvy and resistant to change, jumping in, inspired and motivated, adapting to the new reality. One reason? Most senior theatre shows are done as readers theatre, with less emphasis on movement and scenery—a perfect fit for online experiences. Interestingly, early adopters came from all levels of senior theatre—from groups with frail actors to those with very active ones. They held meetings, play readings, classes, rehearsals and performances, only to discover that senior theatre online was both satisfying and effective in reaching a broader audience.

So, what do you need to know to take your theatre program or group online? Read on for an outline of everything from platforms to sound delays, and play choices to performance formats.

The process explained

Taking senior theatre online is a transformation of traditional methods to those done electronically. Stages and curtains are replaced with cameras, microphones and Internet connections. It’s all placed on software, relying on numerous platforms like Zoom, StreamYard, GoTo Meeting and Google Meet, among others.

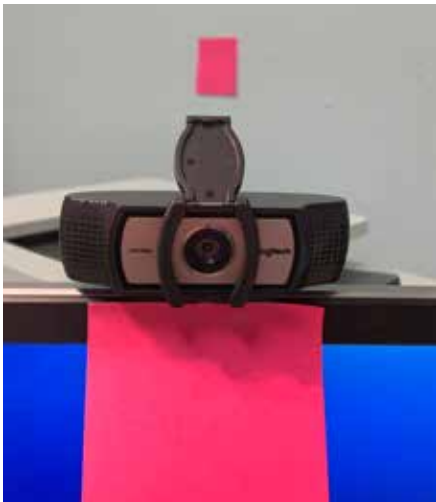
Though some people are wary of the tools, they are actually not too complicated. We have found that after participants learn the basics—like how to navigate around the screen, chat, use their microphone and video, and toggle between gallery and speaker views—they’re off and running. As you move your theatre group or program online, it’s best to keep it simple and focus on the positive. Be patient with the learning curve.

Costs are minimal. Fees for online platforms are based on a sliding scale. In this case, you get what you pay for! Platforms that are free have shorter meeting lengths, limit the number of participants and provide fewer features. We recommend signing up for a subscription.

Other theatre costs are not overly expensive. If you are teaching classes, you’ll have costs for scripts and teacher tools. When you progress to performances, you will have to pay for cast copies and royalties. Online streaming performances also require a streaming license, which gives permission to air the show on a virtual platform.

It’s important to teach basic online skills to participants, and we have found they enthusiastically learn them. Begin with having everyone raise their computers so they are at eye level. Then move to the difficult task of training actors to look at the camera. Ask them to place a bright sticky

note on the camera and another one on the wall directly behind it. Guide them by saying, “Look through the lens,” so they will focus on the sticky notes and not on their screens.



Use bright sticky notes on the camera and on the wall behind it so actors look through the camera, not at the screen

Lighting is tricky because it has to come from in front of the actor, aimed toward their face. The best way to address lighting is to have actors play with a variety of sources and experiment to find the ones that work best. For homework, refer participants to the many excellent videos on YouTube to learn how to light online work.

The background behind an actor is another major element in online theatre. Backgrounds need to be simple. Chaotic, busy ones pull the viewers’ attention away from the actors, so pare down what you’d usually consider as acceptable. Using trial and error, ask actors to try different objects, drapes or screens to find the most pleasing arrangement.

The first sessions

Once the technical elements are addressed, it’s time to move onto the theatre part. Begin with discussions, meetings or other educational experiences, all of which work well online. Use them to explore many kinds of theatre and build a cohesive group

with both novice and skilled performers. Online sessions need to be shorter than traditional ones. Fill one-hour sessions with a variety of activities, so you can maintain attention and keep actors stimulated.

When we teach classes, we use a theme to unify the session. The time is divided into three sections. An opening includes a brief welcome chat. Then we move to creative drama and improvisation also based on the theme. In the final part we bring in the written word with poetry, prose and plays. We close the class with a song or movement to help the actors feel connected. Use the sessions to try out a variety of scripts—you’ll discover new shows you just can’t wait to perform! To learn more about how to conduct sessions, refer to the resources listed in the sidebar on page 28.

Two of the most wonderful parts of theatre, music and audience reactions, are difficult online. If you want to use music, it has to be played directly from your computer. Many organizations or venues have ASCAP (American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers) and BMI (Broadcast Music, Inc.) licenses, but they don’t apply to music that is performed. To avoid entering the dangerous area of copyright infringement, select tunes in the public domain or contact the publisher for permission. (See “Resources” on page 28 for website information.)

Computers are linked via Internet providers, which send signals through several servers before they end up where they’re going. This causes what is called a delay. In online theatre, delays are a big problem. Actors’ voices arrive at different times. So, it is troublesome speaking or singing in unison and picking up cues as well as other sounds we take for granted in traditional theatre. In our production of *Tech Support*, the script called for several phone rings. It was so difficult to have these sounds come in on time, the actors couldn’t predict when the phone would ring. They did what actors love to do: They improvised!



Include improvisation in your classes

Every actor loves the sound of applause. Some older performers may have never experienced this before so it’s a newfound adrenaline rush. I often say it’s “better than a trip to the doctor!” But online theatre doesn’t have a way for actors to hear audiences laugh and respond. Music, delay and applause remain complexities.

The performance elements

After familiarizing themselves with the online theatre space, participants will start asking to perform. Select from several ways to present shows:

- **Livestream:** The show is presented in real time on a website such as Zoom, Facebook Live or YouTube. Actors will appear in “boxes” similar to the opening credits of the 1970s television series *The Brady Bunch*. This is a nice format because the actors perform just as they would in front of an in-person audience. In addition, you can publicize and charge for the show just as you would a live production. For *Tech Support*, we used Zoom and streamed to Facebook Live with great success. The actors enjoyed that the performance was happening in the here-and-now, just like in traditional theatre.
- **Recorded:** The entire show or scenes are recorded and then blended together to create a performance. They are presented on an online platform like YouTube,

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*Two electronic backgrounds made it look like the actors were on the same park bench in *Just a Song at Twilight**

an in-house channel or another online service. The process is more complex with filming and editing, but actors love it because they can do several “takes” to get it just right.

In online theatre, costumes and scenery are limited. The focus turns to props and costume pieces like hats and shirts since most actors are seen only from the waist up.

For scenery, you can use either set pieces or electronic images. Providers like Zoom offer virtual backgrounds like the ones in *Just a Song at Twilight* (see “Resources” on page 28). However, they can be tricky and distracting since when an actor moves, they can partially disappear.

Movement is restricted online as the actors are in a “box.” You can leap over this hurdle by having actors focus on facial expressions and gestures to take advantage of the restricted space. If you want to add movement, teach actors to move within their box to indicate entrances and exits.

Every production needs to be presented as a package. When audience members arrive online, they should be greeted with a wel-

come slide. When the show begins, insert slides with the title, playwright, sponsor and the permission statement from the publisher. The cast list can be placed either on the beginning or ending slide. Use the closing slide to repeat important information, announce upcoming shows or events, and encourage others to join the theatre group.

We always urge that if you present quality theatre, you should charge for it, or at least ask for a donation. Tickets can be sold online. We have found that older adults are comfortable with PayPal and consider it an accepted form of electronic payment. When audience members buy a ticket, you can automatically send them the link to the show. There are other ways to collect funds, like Vimeo, so research the best system for your group.

Finally, there is the all-important issue of how to select a script. The fun, but challenging process of offering theatre online has led senior theatre directors to mainly perform plays that run 10–15 minutes long, with small casts—comedies are the most crowd-pleasing! Short shows can be

tied together on a theme to create a production of any length that flows smoothly from one piece to another. Most audience members for senior theatre prefer up-to-date shows with modern characters living lives of today’s older adults. Ones that work well online are plays set on park benches, radio plays and plays whose action takes place on the telephone. (See “Resources” on page 28 for information about where to find a complete list of successfully produced online shows.)

All theatre groups, from amateur to professional, pay for cast copies and royalty to insure that playwrights receive compensation for their creativity. Don’t let this be a barrier as the costs are minimal. If you are performing online, you will also need a streaming license, which lets the publisher know the platforms you will use to broadcast the show and when it will be removed. The main point is that plays are copyrighted material and must be removed from online mediums after performance to protect the playwright’s intellectual property.

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Bonnie L. Vorenberg, senior theatre author, director, speaker, and president of ArtAge's Senior Theatre Resource Center

The silver lining

The pandemic, with its many challenges, has taught us that senior theatre online can be a meaningful experience. These performances keep directors and actors encouraged, as it reminds audience members that theatre is still around and that your group is ready to perform in person once the pandemic lifts.

Be creative! Have fun! You'll find that online theatre is easier than you thought, more exciting than you imagined, and so creative it will keep your participants stimulated and wanting more. As director Kathie West says, "This online theatre is fun!"

Bonnie L. Vorenberg, BA, MS, is a senior theatre author, director and speaker, and president of ArtAge's Senior Theatre Resource Center, a leading source for plays, books, materials and information for older performers. On the forefront of this field, ArtAge helps older adults fulfill their theatrical dreams. For more information about ArtAge and for assistance with senior theatre opportunities, visit www.seniortheatre.com or email bonniev@seniortheatre.com.

Images courtesy of ArtAge Senior Theatre Resource Center

[Ed. A client handout follows on page 29, providing pointers for performers.]

Resources for senior theatre

Internet

ArtAge Senior Theatre Resource Center
www.seniortheatre.com

ArtAge exists to help older adults fulfill their theatrical dreams. Its resource center is a source for senior theatre plays, books, materials and information. Examples include:

"Teaching Senior Theatre Classes Online": a webinar class
www.seniortheatre.com/product/how_to_teach_online

"Teaching Senior Theatre Classes": a how-to document
www.seniortheatre.com/product/teaching-senior-theatre-classes

"Streaming and Online Theatre": a webpage listing plays that work well for online theatre
www.seniortheatre.com/streaming-and-online-theatre

Multimedia

Take senior theatre online: It's fun and creative! Presenter: Bonnie Vorenberg,

BA, MS (Theatre). ICAA Webinar Series. This webinar is available free online to ICAA Organizational and ICAA 100 members in the association's on-demand webinars library after February 11, 2021, at www.icaa.cc/listing.php?type=webinar_library. To upgrade an Individual membership or to join ICAA, call toll-free 866-335-9777.

Technology platforms and services

Facebook Live
www.facebook.com/formedia/solutions/facebook-live

Free Conference Call
www.freeconferencecall.com

Google Meet
meet.google.com

GoTo Meeting
www.gotomeeting.com

PayPal
www.paypal.com

StreamYard
<https://streamyard.com>

Vimeo
<https://vimeo.com>

YouTube
www.youtube.com

Zoom
<https://zoom.us>

"It was great working on *Just a Song at Twilight*. All of us in the cast love the heartwarming story and the strong bond between the characters makes it easy for actors to make them believable. The Zoom was a challenge but it was worth the effort because we ended up with a nice size audience. Viewers told us how much they enjoyed the show and the special music that tied it all together."

– Phyllis McQuaide, director, *Just a Song at Twilight*, for Silver City Community Theatre

Top 10 tips for successful online theatre experiences

CLIENT HANDOUT

by Bonnie L. Vorenberg, BA, MS

Theatre touches every part of us as humans. Participating in theatre stimulates our physical, mental, psychological, cultural and emotional selves. As COVID-19 has interfered with the ability to hold in-person classes and performances, senior theatre directors are taking these activities online. Participating in online senior theatre classes and performances is simpler than you might think once you learn some new skills and techniques. Here are some tips to give you more confidence and help you succeed:

1. *Interruptions.* Lock doors, turn off phones, post a “Keep Out, Please” sign on the door to prevent interruptions.
2. *Setup.* Your camera should be level with your face. Do a test to see what you look like online.
3. *Background.* Simplify what viewers are seeing so they’ll focus on you, the speaker.
4. *Dress.* Avoid busy patterns and use colors that flatter. Though only seen from the waist up, you’ll be more alert when dressed head to toe for the occasion.
5. *Sound.* Test microphones and speakers to check for sound levels.
6. *Engagement.* Realize you are “on” and remain in character. Pay attention and stay connected. Your responses are being watched.
7. *Eye contact.* Look through the camera. Use sticky notes to remind you where to look, avoid looking at the screen.
8. *Delay.* Pause briefly before you speak, and be ready for delayed responses from others in the session.
9. *Body language.* Sit up straight, place both feet on the floor. Don’t fidget or make extraneous movements.
10. *Preparation.* Practice, do a dress rehearsal, and plan ahead. Be prepared for the things that will go right and be ready for the things that will go wrong.

Bonnie L. Vorenberg is president of ArtAge’s Senior Theatre Resource Center, a source for plays, books, materials and information for older performers. On the forefront of this field, ArtAge helps older adults fulfill their theatrical dreams. For more information, visit www.seniorthatre.com.

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