



Performing artists combat *pandemic pressure* with innovation

Graphic by Eden Leavey

COVID-19 restrictions brought many industries to a standstill, one of which is the performing arts. Students and faculty reflect on how artists continued to produce material throughout lockdowns and created new performance opportunities for themselves despite the limitations of COVID-19 restrictions.

Eden Leavey /
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Audiences file into their seats once again after months of the theaters being closed, performers commence the internal recovery process to aid the performing arts' financial losses caused by COVID-19.

While restrictions brought about a series of physical barriers for performers, the pandemic drove many artistic companies to create new theater pieces from within their homes in response to the novel circumstances.

Theaters close

Performing Arts Teacher Todd Sessoms said professional theaters – namely in the West End in London and Broadway in New York – began to close after the release of research concerning the effects of air circulation, particulates and aerosols in relation to the quickening spread of COVID-19.

Miles Douglas-Mudie ('22) said artists experienced the height of the industry's struggle at the start of the pandemic as "performing arts thrives on having people in the theater."

Similarly, Sessoms said he

worried about performers losing the camaraderie that comes with the "experience of being part of something greater than oneself," as well as "realizing that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts."

With the desire to maintain normalcy, Performing Arts Teacher Helen Culling said professional and youth performance groups and schools transitioned online concurrently. She said these dance companies also implemented scheduling adaptations to adjust to artists' different time zones and living realities, such as varying class times held via Zoom.

"They moved to online classes," Culling said. "They were shorter and at different times of the day. They tried to fit in with a different type of world."

Alongside the timetable changes, Sessoms said his students were required to record their performances from home akin to professional performance groups, which facilitated technological reform within the industry.

"When we were in virtual realms, everything just had to become virtual," Sessoms said. "There were some really interesting opportunities that arose with that. There's lots of virtual choirs and some great plays that were actually written to take place on Zoom."

Adapting to restrictions

Culling said although live performance has been limited, an increase in the digital performance format has expanded audiences to an unprecedented degree.

"A lot of professional companies took their work online," Culling said.

"They possibly reached more people, which hopefully will have developed their audience forever."

Danna Rubesh ('22) said digital theater also manifested itself in more creative outlets than before, "allowing for new creations such as *Ratatouille: The TikTok Musical*, which brought joy to its audience despite being in isolation."

Subsequently, Sessoms said he capitalized on the emer-

gence of these new digital resources, particularly during the initial lockdown.

"I subscribed to a few different digital programs myself, and I certainly tried to keep up with what was happening," Sessoms said.

In addition to his individual presence within digital theater, Sessoms said the High School adopted various streaming services including Digital Theatre+ to access the Broadway Digital Archives and the West End archives.

Meanwhile, upon returning to the stage for the spring Advanced Acting Play Production class' production of *"She Kills Monsters,"* Douglas-Mudie said the safety restrictions remaining in place presented significant challenges.

"Last year, performing with masks was a nightmare," Douglas-Mudie said. "With trying to project and also fiddling with them a lot, it was just generally a really big hassle."

Furthermore, Rubesh said even though many professional theaters have since reopened, some audience members are still hesitant to enjoy the performing arts in close proximity to others, while other audience members are more eager than ever to watch performances after being unable to appreciate them in-person for so long.

Overall, Rubesh said this variety of reactions from audience members pertaining to attending live performances is one of the main reasons the arts have suffered from income loss in recent years.

To compensate for the loss of an income source for artists, the U.K. government has made a monetary commitment of £2 billion to the culture sector, per *The Guardian*.

However, Culling said this compensation will adequately aid only large organizations in returning to live performances.

"I don't think [the compensation] came anywhere close to the amount of smaller companies and smaller production companies that need money," Culling said.

Next steps

Despite limitations put on performing arts, Douglas-Mudie said his love for theater flourished during the pandemic.

With the return of live performance, Douglas-Mudie said COVID-19 has provided an

opportunity by which he can grow.

"I'm moving back more into the freedom of it," Douglas-Mudie said. "It's really exciting because I've always been interested in drama and theater, but *'She Kills Monsters'* was my absolute breakout in theater."

Moreover, Rubesh said performers like herself took time during the lockdowns to find "ways to continue acting and

expressing themselves in different mediums, which is now enhancing their acting skills stepping back onto stage.

Ultimately, Culling said it was disheartening to watch COVID-19 restrictions diminish the performing arts' ability to bring entertainment to audiences. She said she hopes to see its presence regain the traction it had prior to the pandemic.

"A lot of what we do and value comes from very creative places," Culling said. "The pandemic highlighted how important those things are in our lives and that if you strip all that away, you're left with a mundane existence."

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