

Changing Roles in Digital Performance

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Introduction

Theatre is well regarded as a collaborative art form. But who are these collaborators? Let's look at a (non-exhaustive) list of traditional theatrical management roles:

Production

- Production Manager
- Stage Manager
- Asst. Stage Manager
- Production Asst.
- Technical Dept. Heads (i.e. Costume Shop Manager, Master Electrician, etc.)
- Director

- Musical Director
- House Manager

Administrative

- Managing Director
- General Manager
- Company Manager
- Director of Finance
- Artistic Director
- Marketing Director/Community Engagement
- Theatre Manager
- Box Office Manager
- Development Manager

This is just the beginning. It does not account for the countless designers, crew members, performers, and even patrons. As we adapt theatrical works to digital and socially-distanced formats, we must be sure to adapt these roles as well.

The following piece is meant to serve as an introduction. These mini-sections can inspire and guide one as they begin their creative, collaborative work.

Not all traditional roles in the theatre translate to online performance

Questions to consider:

- How many collaborators is too many?
- Could adding more individuals to your process make it more difficult?
- Are there financial considerations (i.e. salary, wages, etc.)?

Take one look at the list above and think about how many of those managers one would be needed to produce a simple video of a monologue. Not that many, right? Some roles utilized in a traditional theatre setting are no longer necessary in an online setting, as some morph into a hybrid of multiple roles.

When interviewed about her digital performance piece

Arlington2020, Cameron King discussed utilizing a "hive mind" mentality with her four-person creative team. She was essentially the director but took on many of the typical stage management responsibilities of creating Daily Calls and organizing rehearsals. This approach was effective for them, as they didn't necessarily need an extra person on the team.

The decision of which roles to maintain and which to omit is highly dependent on the level of theatre and the scale of the production. In a regional theatre setting, there may be more administrators to adhere to, whereas in educational, the advisors and school Production Manager are fixed roles.

Questions to consider:

- How could the added responsibilities benefit the process and final product?
- How can accessibility be ensured for actors who may not have as many resources?

Collaborators have to be prepared to adapt and take on new responsibilities.

Because designers and technicians cannot be in the same space as the actor (in a fully digital work), the actors' role may increase. In Auckland Theatre Company's *The Seagull*, actors were their own cinematographers and audio technicians, as they carried equipment around their performance space and monitored its functionality.

Similarly, in Wesleyan University's *The Method*

Gun, the scenic designer also constructed hand props and set dressing, which were sent to the actors. The production manager of their piece also expanded upon the traditional management role into one a bit more technical. She was tasked with controlling OBS (Open Broadcast System), which was used in conjunction with Zoom to broadcast their production live.

In *Arlington*, Cameron King noted that the actors' autonomy over their costumes, and virtual scenic design sessions with the team actually benefitted the piece, as it made them more invested in their characters and the creation of the world of the play. However, this can be a fine line to tow. We must not forget the actor's priority: to tell the story.

Adequate time and resources must be available to account for learning curves.

As we ask our collaborators to explore new skills, we must acknowledge the time and patience required to learn these new systems. Providing support is key in making these team members feel valued and respected.

When creating *Arlington*, Major Curda took on the role of learning OBS graciously. This was his primary responsibility in the process,

as he had to learn how to utilize screen video capturing and digital filters in a live manner. His team maintained the philosophy of solving problems together, which was reflected in the positive manner in which he spoke about the process. His team planned multiple tech rehearsals along with a preview to have enough time to practice with the unfamiliar system. This is a strong

practice for any process to implement if possible.

Another strategy that could benefit remote theatre is to bring on an apprentice to assist in the process, who could also learn skills to bring to future digital projects. This practice is common in educational settings, where assistants can adapt knowledge from upperclassmen in larger positions.

Questions to consider:

- Is this an isolated experience, or will these skills be applicable in the future?
- Could these skills be learned in a group setting? (i.e. integrated into courses)
- How can you best serve the team members who are taking on these learning curves?

Questions to consider:

- How can we adapt Equity rules to fit this experience?
- What is the best way to check in with the group's well-being?

Management must ensure that team members are not being overworked (including themselves). Mental and physical health remain a priority during this time.

As discussed in the previous section, more is being asked of our actors when creating remote theatre. Managers and directors can ensure these added responsibilities, while necessary, do not infringe upon their primary task of performing. Additionally,

the shift to an online platform from the comfort of our homes may muddle our perception of *how* much we are working. A digital collaboration would benefit from scheduled screen time breaks and full days off. Managers should also keep this in mind, as they could feel

like they have to be "on" 24/7 because of the ease of communication with messenger apps and texting, that may not have been utilized in the past. Ultimately, as we continue to live through a global pandemic, we must be extra sensitive to the needs of others.

Further Questions

- What is the best way to ensure collaborators are clear on their re-defined roles?
- How can one foster an environment in which collaborators feel comfortable asking for help as challenges increase?
- How does one maintain the integrity of traditional theatrical roles, while remaining flexible to change?

Further Reading and Works Mentioned

- [“What I Learned from Making Opera on Zoom” Howlround Article](#)
- [“End Meeting for All” Howlround Article](#)
- [The Seagull \(Auckland Theatre Company\)](#)
- [The Method Gun \(Wesleyan University\)](#)
- *Arlington2020* (Major Curda, Jackson Eick, Cameron King, Rachel Kolb)