AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT, ATTENTION, & ACCESSIBILITY

THEATRE AFTER COVID
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IINTRODUCTION

In the physical theatre space, there is an unspoken agreement/contract between the audience and the playmakers that the audience will give their attention fully and considerately to the theatre makers for the entirety of the performance.There is no such law online. **There is nothing to physically or mentally keep an audience member focused and engaged, and nothing to stop them from stepping away from the screen.** There is no back and forth between the audience and live performers, and the screen creates a physical and mental barrier that does not exist in live theatre.

How do we solve this problem? **We must find new ways to capture an audience's attention swiftly and permanently for the duration of the virtual performance.** Here are some things to consider to do just that:

TIME

Time is valuable, and a viewer's time commitment feels even more valued online. With online streaming platforms like Netflix, people will often choose their entertainment based off the time frame they have available (ie, choosing to watch a few episodes of a TV show rather than a two hour movie)

- If a viewer does not know how long a performance lasts and how much time they are expected to commit to the virtual performance, they are more likely to be distracted throughout the performance and less likely to remain for the entirety of the performance.
    - **Putting online performances in digestible segments of time and perhaps making an audience member aware of the amount of time they are committing to spending with you will make the audience more fully engaged for the duration of the performance.**

ATTENTION

- A virtual medium makes concentration difficult, further limiting the average population's already short attention span.
- A study on Zoom learning showed the following: including an interactive activity in a virtual lecture made both the completion of the course and the amount of time the viewer watched the lecture video increase by 17%
    - **Content that is engaging and especially interactive increases viewer attention and retention**
    - **Shows that require an audience response will be more successful in engaging the viewer**

ACCESSIBILITY

There is a lot to consider in terms of audience accessibility. An online/digital format has the potential to make theatre much more accessible for the masses, especially when considering average ticket prices. However, there are some questions to consider:

- **Will the viewer have access to proper technology/equipment?**
- **Who has access to this production? How are we providing access?**
- **By creating a show/season that is entirely online, are we excluding an entire population of viewers?**

MORE QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

I recommend that all theatre makers ask themselves these questions and more when discussing the nature of online/virtual theatre.

- Who is the audience? What role is your audience playing? How are we casting our audience members? Do they play an active role or are they a passive viewer? How will this affect their attention and viewing experience?
  - **Creators of digital theatre are forced now more than ever to consider their audience and what the audience's experience will be like.**
- How can theatres create/alter their season to engage their audience?
  - For example, Sidney and Katy's "pretend" season included a new work contest in which the public can vote for the winner online. **Making the audience an active participant of season planning can also help engage the audience for the long run.**
  - Music can assist in retaining focus and attention, but it can also be a detriment.
    - How are we supposed to include music into shows digitally in a way that is organic and not obvious? Can we use music in digital performances to not only enhance the viewing experience but also create engagement with the audience?
  - With the rapidly decreasing attention span of the general population, many businesses are beginning to understand the importance of visual storytelling in increasing audience retention. In what ways can an online or virtual platform benefit from this? **What new technologies will theatre makers and artists have to explore?**
- **How can we keep diversity, equity, and inclusion a top priority while converting our season to a different format?** How are we affecting the community with the decisions we make in season planning?