

NO THEATER LEFT BEHIND: A CASE FOR DIGITAL PROGRAMMING

Thomas Breeden

Major paper submitted to the faculty of Goucher College in partial

Fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Arts Administration

2022

Readers' Committee:

Michael Crowley, Faculty Advisor, Chair

Ramona Baker

Gregory Charleston

Mary Margaret Schoenfeld

Janelle Spruill

NO THEATER LEFT BEHIND: A CASE FOR DIGITAL PROGRAMMING

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns, theaters were forced to make a choice: shut down until the health concerns passed, or shift to some form of digital programming to continue to serve audiences. While some theaters did go into “hibernation,” others moved online by uploading archived performances and experimenting with producing streaming events (McLennan; Brownlow-Calkin).

Theaters soon began to see the benefits of online platforms. Digital programs attracted larger audiences that would take the theater years to achieve in person. Many digital audiences were new to the organization, whether they were locals who had never attended a show, or national or international audiences. Theater became more accessible for patrons who have difficulty making it into a theater seat—for reasons including physical ability, health, transportation, or finances. Some theaters saw financial success from ticket sales for digital productions (Vincentelli; Gutierrez).

Though some companies have found financial success, many have struggled. Based on pandemic-era studies, patrons appear to be less willing to pay pre-pandemic level prices for digital productions (Brownlow-Calkin; JCA Marketing, “Growth Stage” 11; LaPlaca Cohen, “Wave 2” 16). Smaller-budget theaters have difficulty devoting the resources needed to sustain digital programming, and many have moved away from it as companies reopen their buildings (Redmond). Theaters also must learn to engage an audience that is not in the room with performers. Certain conventions of in-person theater—“darkness, say, or peer pressure”—help to focus the audience’s attention; at home, it is easy to “look or click away” (Soloski).

Audiences have had mixed reactions to online platforms for theater. Some were thrilled to keep attending theater, while others viewed digital programming as a “better-than-nothing alternative to no theatre at all” (Brownlow-Calkin). Theatermakers have asked: “If a theater does it, is it theater?” As companies moved online, some audiences, industry leaders, and critics perceived a loss of the magic of live theater. Surely, they argued, theater has to happen live in the room to count; it is about audience-to-actor connection and the intangible energy of live performance (Smith; Brownlow-Calkin). Another, pro-digital camp argued back: the liveness of theater can be maintained through technology; not to mention the added benefits of reach and access inherent to digital platforms (Mezzocchi; Soloski). Despite these ongoing debates, theater companies were all in the position of needing to continue with digital programming, at least until COVID restrictions were lifted and buildings could reopen.

Today, digital programming is no longer a COVID-mandated choice, but it will continue to be an essential part of a theater’s ongoing strategy. It is not a question of whether to adopt it, but how. By investing in digital programming, organizations will prepare themselves for the future: They will reach new audiences, improve access to their programs, and provide more touchpoints for their audiences to engage with and deepen connections to theater.

I. Reach and Revenue

The clearest benefit of digital programming is its ability to reach more audience members than in-person programming can. Since the beginning of the pandemic, theaters have doubled (as in the case of Irish Repertory Theatre), sextupled (La Jolla Playhouse), or otherwise exponentially increased their audience sizes (Paulson). Much of that growth can be attributed to increased available capacity since companies are not limited by physical space. Many theaters noticed that they could achieve viewing numbers online that would take them years to achieve using their in-person venues. The Public Theater's streaming production of *What Do We Need to Talk About* was seen by 80,000 people, the equivalent of 400 performances at The Public in New York City (Brantley et al.). One of Theater Mu's digital productions, a Facebook Live interview series called *Mu-tini Hour*, garnered more than 120,000 views for a program with actor George Takei. That is more people than would see the theater's work in five years in person (Tung Crystal). Geffen Playhouse attracted thousands of people to its digital productions, far more than it could accommodate in its 520-seat and 120-seat theaters on site (Gutierrez).

Beyond sheer numbers, digital programming is changing the makeup of theater audiences. Geffen Playhouse found that over 80% of digital audience members in 2020 and 2021 were new to the organization (Levinson). Theatre Horizon in Norristown, Pennsylvania, attracted over 1,000 audience members to its digital *Art House* performances between December 2020 and June 2021. A third of those were new ticket buyers to Theatre Horizon who had never been to its building (Vega). According to LaPlaca Cohen's *Culture Track* study, 55% of respondents had experienced online

offerings from theater organizations they had never visited in person (LaPlaca Cohen, “Wave 1” 19). A study from JCA Arts Marketing shows that 43% of digital audiences in 2020 were new to the six performing arts organizations surveyed (JCA Arts Marketing, “Infancy” 8).

Theaters’ digital programming brings attention and attendance from out-of-state and international patrons. Joanna Sheehan Bell of TheatreSquared says that the reach of her theater’s digital programming has “gotten us audience and recognition outside of our market for the first time.” TheatreSquared’s online productions received a *New York Times* feature by Michael Paulson and a review in the *Wall Street Journal* that never would have happened otherwise (Bell). Theatre Horizon drew audiences from “as far as Canada and Australia,” which has led the theater to rethink how it can maintain a connection with those audiences (Vega). Geffen Playhouse saw local audience members inviting their friends and family from around the country to experience their local theater with them online (Gutierrez).

Digital programming also allows theaters to attract audiences who crave flexibility and online experiences, including younger, digital-native audiences. This is increasingly important as tech-raised generations become today’s and tomorrow’s adults, looking for entertainment and cultural experiences of their own. Many theater companies have reported “a promising increase in viewership from younger virtual audiences” (Brownlow-Calkin).

This expanded capacity for reach and the changing makeup of theater audiences allows theaters that invest in digital programming to rethink how they can serve their communities. Theaters can get their work in front of more people, and different people,

from those they served before. That brings not only artistic-, community-, and mission-focused benefits, but potentially a financial one as well.

Thus far, organizations have had mixed results when trying to monetize digital programming, as theaters navigate their audiences' willingness and ability to pay. An *American Theatre* survey of 64 theater directors found that companies that charged pre-pandemic prices experienced a drop in the number of tickets sold and in box office revenue, compared with previous seasons. A "small number" of companies met or exceeded prior levels, either by lowering typical prices, as did WAM Theatre in Lenox, Massachusetts, or by attracting new international audiences, as in the case of Cherry Arts in Ithaca, New York (Brownlow-Calkin). JCA Arts Marketing found that digital ticket buyers pay approximately 60% of the price paid for an in-person ticket (JCA Arts Marketing, "Growth Stage" 11). Even more striking, LaPlaca Cohen found that 68% of respondents to the April 2021 *Culture Track* study believe "it's important that digital activities are free (no cost to access online)" (LaPlaca Cohen, "Wave 2" 16).

These pricing concerns are significant barriers to financial success. However, there are reasons to offer digital programming other than revenue. Some theaters have made money from digital programming, but others have chosen to make their digital programming available for free. For contrasting, Los Angeles-based examples, take Geffen Playhouse and Center Theatre Group. Geffen Playhouse produced creative and enormously popular interactive Zoom-based programs and made over \$2.5 million in sales across multiple productions. Center Theatre Group (CTG) earned \$154,000 in sales by a point in the season when it would have brought in \$23.5 million pre-pandemic. Geffen capitalized on a successful artistic moment, while CTG offered much

of its digital programming for free, viewing it as an avenue to maintain audience connection and provide work for artists (Paulson). Each organization—which both historically have had multimillion-dollar budgets—made a different decision about how to handle pricing for digital offerings. These examples illustrate two ideas when it comes to digital programming: 1) monetization is possible, just as it is with in-person performance, but 2) monetization does not have to be the sole motivator for a nonprofit theater’s digital programming (or in-person programming, for that matter).

Across other organizations of varying sizes, theaters are still searching for a financially viable path forward. Cherry Arts, which has an annual budget of approximately \$150,000, has found some success. Its first streaming shows “sold surprisingly well,” including to audiences outside of Ithaca. Streaming tickets for a December 2021 hybrid digital/in-person production accounted for 28% of the box office revenue and 33% of the overall number of tickets sold. Artistic Director Samuel Buggeln told *American Theatre* he was “surprised” at seeing the names of some of the patrons who had purchased streaming tickets, making him realize that the theater was “still filling a real need” through its digital programming (Pierce, “If You Live-Stream It”).

For DC-area theaters, the financial rewards from digital programming have been mixed. Signature Theatre, which has an \$8.9 million annual budget, sold subscriptions to its five-production digital season to 1,200 households for \$200 each. Managing Director Maggie Boland was “unbelievably thrilled” at those results. However, she says, those tickets equate to \$35 per show, per household compared to the theater’s in-person tickets, which can cost up to \$125 per person (Marks). At first glance, this is a huge financial loss when comparing pre-pandemic to pandemic-level prices. However, if

one compares it to selling no subscriptions at all, 1,200 subscriptions and \$240,000 in income is a success. Rorschach Theatre built its \$200,000 budget upon selling 60 subscriptions but has been able to attract more than 400 subscribers to the organization, in part from a new show called *Distance Frequencies*. The interactive show, in which clues describing DC destinations to explore were mailed to attendees, is the theater's "highest-grossing project in 22 years," according to co-founder Jenny McConnell Frederick (Marks).

Across the pond, UK researcher Richard Misek found that 56% of theaters that had at least one online production during the 2020-2021 season had none scheduled for fall 2021, citing the funding structure for digital theater that has "no clear route to monetising yet." Of those, smaller theaters were more likely to abandon digital formats: 80% of small-to-midsize theaters dropped digital performances, compared with 43% of larger theaters (Redmond).

These early findings from the US and UK show potential for monetization, but also uncertainty. There remain questions about how a sustainable business model for digital programming will be reached. However, theaters have found some financial upsides while rethinking their reach and revenue through digital programming. For one: reduced production expenses. Theaters that produced live or pre-recorded digital productions generally spent less than they would have on a traditional mainstage show. This is typically due to salary savings from needing fewer people to produce a digital production than one on stage, in addition to having reduced venue, material, and operating costs (Brownlow-Calkin). Speaking to another upside, Jason Minadakis, Artistic Director of Marin Theatre Company in Mill Valley, California, is optimistic about

the potential for digital programming as physical venues reopen: “If we can start selling out the live seats, and then the rest digitally around the world, that changes the income stream for the organization” (Janiak and Kosman).

Some theater leaders worry whether digital programming might diminish the audience for in-person theater. TheatreSquared, for one, has found that this is not the case. The company now presents in-person and digital versions of a show as equivalent options when an audience member goes to book tickets. Now that the company is back to full capacity in the theater, its streaming-only audience is smaller, but “similarly dedicated” to its in-person one, Bell says. “The [overall] audience is the same size, but we are seeing where people are choosing to consume their theater changes depending on their personal attitudes and the circumstances of their life” (Bell).

One way that a theater can mitigate this concern is by using digital platforms to create programming that is distinct from what it would produce as a mainstage production. Not only does this give audiences more points of access to the work of the organization (see Part III), it makes for engaging programming that does not overlap with in-person work at all. Theater Mu’s *Mu-tini Hour* interview series is a good example, as is that theater’s other digital work: its *TwentyPho Hour PlayFest* of new works, and an educational series called *Family Explorations* that introduces children to theater concepts (Tung Crystal). These theater-focused productions can augment what is happening on the mainstage (either the digital or physical one) or provide more insight into the company and/or to the practice of theater. Geffen Playhouse views its digital platforms as an opportunity to create works that could not exist on stage. Its interactive magic show *The Present* was successful, in part, because it was something unique that

was built specifically for the Zoom space. It created a different value for audiences. It was so compelling, in fact, that digital audiences returning to Geffen's theater spaces are asking when the next Zoom production will be (Gutierrez).

What those who fear losing in-person audiences to digital programming misunderstand is that digital theater and in-person theater are not either/or options for an organization. Instead of viewing the digital and the in-person as competing platforms, they should be understood as two sides of the same theatrical coin. By offering work on both platforms, a theater creates new entryways for patrons. This allows more people into the room, be it digital or physical, to experience the work of the organization.

II. Access and Accessibility

If reach is about getting greater numbers of people into the room, access and accessibility are about getting more types of people into the room. There can be overlap between the two concepts, but the latter is increasingly important as theaters better understand equity and social justice within the theater industry. It is not enough for theaters to stage a play, set a price, and invite audiences in; they must rethink how each decision they make—from venue to pricing to organizational culture—includes or excludes groups of people.

Digital programming helps to remove some barriers to access both on- and off-stage. By removing physical barriers to entry, members of the community who are not able to travel to a theater—for reasons of transportation or disability or health concerns, among others—are more able to access that theater's programming. Over a third of *American Theatre* respondents said that digital programming improved accessibility for their audiences by helping to overcome these types of barriers (Brownlow-Calkin).

For example, Pittsburgh Public Theater in Pennsylvania was able to reach a senior community center population that it was unable to reach before through its digital programming. "This has been a truly fascinating time to really think about who we are, what is our mission, and to have a lot of important conversations about access and accessibility," said Artistic Director Marya Sea Kaminski (Paulson). For TheatreSquared, digital programming is "becoming more about reach and accessibility" than about delivery, now that the theater's focus is returning to its local community and in-person performance. "We continue to offer that stream because it's important for that segment of our audience who are still dedicated streamers, who aren't feeling confident about

coming back to in-person performance, and who are, for some reason, unable to access the theater” (Bell).

During one of Theatre Horizon’s *Art House* series digital programs, a longtime patron who “lives in a body with cerebral palsy” staged a performance from her home in which she showed how the pandemic has impacted her life and how she lives with “a lot of the accessibility issues that come from in-person opportunities” (Vega). She was able to participate in the theater in a new way—and help to illustrate important issues for the theater. That is what can happen when people from different backgrounds and with different experiences are in the room.

Digital programming can also help to overcome affordability barriers, as organizations continue to experiment with pricing models that work for the digital realm. Some organizations have used digital programming to provide additional opportunities for reduced or pay-what-you-can pricing. As Geffen Playhouse finished the run of *The Present*, the staff needed the grand finale to be “as accessible as possible” (Gutierrez). Geffen drew over 1,000 people to the performance and incorporated three tiers of pricing to create more affordable options for viewers. The success of that performance led the theater to rethink its pricing and its marketing, which now emphasizes that there are tickets available starting at \$30 for any in-person performance (Gutierrez).

The pandemic period has given Theatre Horizon a chance to reevaluate the initiatives it offers to its community, including a \$2 ticket program for Norristown residents. In addition, the theater has received a grant to engage an anti-racist consultant, a virtual access consultant, and a community advisory board to evaluate how the theater can better become a “third space” for the Norristown community, which

will include further discussions about access and other issues (Vega). This illustrates one of the benefits of investing in digital platforms: It provides a moment to rethink and restructure. It creates a moment of reset for the organization; a chance to do things differently from before, which includes improving access.

During discussions of pricing and revenue, theaters are having to make cost-benefit analyses to determine whether digital programming is feasible. Liz Lisle of Shotgun Players in San Francisco says it is “not an economic question—it is an accessibility and engagement question.” Measuring the success of digital programming by revenue alone is “the wrong frame.” By contrast, David Jenkins of Jobsite Theater in Tampa, Florida—which has a \$350,000 budget compared with Shotgun’s \$1.8 million—says that the “extensive amount of time and money that goes into creating [digital programming] is in no way well spent on a tiny handful of views...[and is] in no way significant enough to justify the heavy investment for a theatre of our size” (Brownlow-Calkin).

Digital programming creates opportunities for new artistic and cross-cultural collaborations, providing access for people from identities and communities that historically have been excluded. Shotgun Players’ production of *Feel the Spirit* featured multiple trans and gender-nonconforming performers and drew audience members from their communities (Janiak and Kosman). Digital programming also expands access to creators outside the theater’s geographic region. One TheatreSquared production involved seven collaborators across seven states (Bell). A Theater Mu production featured six actors across three states (Tung Crystal).

While it can remove barriers to access, digital programming creates new ones, including the need for a computer and a robust broadband internet connection. A June 2021 survey from *Consumer Reports* shows that 23% of households are not connected to high-speed internet (Willcox). This represents a large swath of people who do not have access to any programming a theater puts online. Digital programming can also create technical barriers for some groups of people, including senior citizens or those in low-income communities, who may have difficulty engaging online or accessing computers (Brownlow-Calkin). This creates a disparity that is “especially pervasive in communities of color” (Alick 30).

The availability of digital programming does not guarantee access for any groups of people, but especially those with disabilities. For some, like the Theatre Horizon patron, it enables a theater experience that might better accommodate their needs. For others, a digital platform might create more barriers than it dismantles. As Ellen Ellcessor explains in her book *Restricted Access: Media, Disability, and the Politics of Participation*: “One cannot declare that a technology ‘is accessible.’ Instead, one might say that a technology ‘is accessible to some degree, for some people, in particular circumstances” (Ellcessor 12). The general public uses “access” and “accessibility” interchangeably to refer to a wide variety of benefits, such as those explored in this paper, but it is important to consider how disability might impact the assumed accessibility of any platform (6-7). Theater leaders must challenge their assumptions to understand how digital programming will enable access, and not hinder it.

III. Engagement and Enrichment

Digital programming changes the way that organizations connect with audiences. It can enhance audience engagement, from enabling a positive digital experience to creating additional organizational touchpoints for patrons.

Digital theater can be an isolating experience, depending on how it is presented. Audience members do not necessarily have the same built-in communal atmosphere that they would have sitting in a darkened theater with a crowd. A theater must work to create that sense of community and connection in the digital space. Forty-five percent of *Culture Track* respondents said that it is important that online activities include a social component to connect with other participants (LaPlaca Cohen, “Wave 2” 16). Some theaters are finding ways to address this concern by integrating social connection within their digital programming.

Theater Mu has implemented a live chat feature during its recent digital productions. This enables audiences to “communicate with each other and comment on the work and applaud the work,” making the experience more live and immediate (Tung Crystal). TheatreSquared records the opening night of each production, which is the first performance with a live audience, and makes that recording available for streaming on demand. This is a step beyond the audience-less streaming productions that the theater had produced earlier in the pandemic. The theater has found that this approach—with the audience experience miked in—makes a filmed production more engaging to its audiences. Additionally, these stream-on-demand events are sold in 24-hour viewing windows. This allows TheatreSquared to guide attendees through the digital experience by gathering information about which of its streaming ticket buyers have watched the

production. Staff members are then able to send follow-up emails to ensure that those struggling with the process can access the show. These steps help TheatreSquared to “create connection to audience where there wasn’t one otherwise” (Bell).

Cherry Arts has chosen to keep its digital shows live. “We thought that it was an important limitation to make it still feel like we were theatermakers,” said Buggeln. “There were even, at the time, people saying, ‘You all are crazy, it’s so much harder’—which it is. You have to work really hard to find ways to make the audience feel the liveness of the event” (Pierce, “If You Live-Stream It”). Geffen Playhouse created more connection to audiences by incorporating its box office staff into waiting rooms in Zoom to assist patrons as they log on and get ready for the show. In addition to aiding the digital production process, this has created stronger relationships between audience members and staff that have continued as patrons return to in-person performance and the physical box office (Gutierrez).

Digital programming can create additional ways for an audience member to engage with a theater, deepening their relationship with the organization and its work. In some cases, a theatergoer can use digital programming to experience a show multiple times through more than one platform. Vivien Sin, a longtime patron of American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco, saw the theater’s production of *Gloria* in person before it closed in March 2020, then again online. “There are certain lines that the first time around I missed,” Sin said. “The first time, it’s more of an experience. The second time, there’s more room for cognition and analysis of the play” (Janiak and Kosman).

Digital programming provides flexibility in consumer choice. As Joanna Sheehan Bell says, a patron can choose how to consume theater based on “personal attitudes

and circumstances of their life” (Bell). Different patrons will prefer different audience experiences, and thus different viewing methods for theater. As Jared Mezzocchi writes for *American Theatre*:

Digital performance allows some viewers to be verbal and active, others to be silent, some to watch in groups and others alone. This allows the work to meet the viewers in individualized ways simultaneously, without compromising the experience of other audience members. The audience member who likes to actively talk back to the stage with their lights on won't disrupt the experience of the audience member who seeks silence and darkness when consuming live theatre. And while some in-person theatres offer sensory-friendly performances, ASL, and closed-captioned performances, digital platforms allow these viewing preferences to be offered simultaneously, which diminishes the “othering” effect of specially set aside in-person performance dates. (Mezzocchi)

Digital programming allows for this kind of consumer control, to view the work of the theater on the audience member's own terms. It can not only provide new value for existing audiences, but by offering digital programming a theater can attract a new type of audience member: the digital-only patron. Steppenwolf Theater Company in Chicago began a \$75 digital-only membership and enrolled 2,500 new members. This audience is “a full decade younger” than Steppenwolf's traditional audience, which “thrilled” the theater (Paulson). This can also help to improve reach and access for the organization by allowing new groups of people into the organization.

Digital programming can deepen the theater experience for audience members and donors. Theaters can use digital platforms to host auxiliary content, from interviews to community conversations to play readings, that are critical to deepening audience engagement with the theater's work. The directors surveyed by *American Theatre* said that those types of events worked "as well as or even better" online than in person, and drew a "large, diverse group" of artists and audiences that in-person versions of the same events did not. Fundraisers, galas, special events, talkbacks, and educational programs all found success and "typically cost far less to produce." These digital offerings serve as "an important way to engage [the] core audience base and maintain donor interest" (Brownlow-Calkin).

Finally, hosting digital experiences—from full productions to readings and donor events—can more easily be incorporated into an organization's online marketing and social media engagement efforts. The more attention a company pays to its digital output, the more content a theater can draw from as it creates online materials. Increased digital engagement can help to embed the theater into the digital lives of its patrons and enables them to get more value from the work of the theater. This will only become more important as the digital era takes further hold.

IV. Rethinking, Relevance, and Resilience

While the benefits of digital programming are compelling, there remain barriers to entry to adopting any significant digital programming effort. For one, successful digital programming requires a theater that is willing to change. It requires the organization to take stock of its mission and business model and decide whether investment in digital programming is worth the costs to the organization. If there is not an organization-wide commitment, digital programming will not be successful. Some theaters, especially smaller theaters, might balk at becoming more of a media company than a theater, as it requires skills and resources that the theater may not have (Cox; Brownlow-Calkin). There must be a clear motivator for digital programming—whether it be artistic or related to reach, access, engagement, or another benefit—and that motivator needs to have a clear connection to the theater’s mission.

Once a theater decides to move forward with digital programming, it must be adaptable. Transitioning to digital programming for the long-term is not as simple as transferring existing offerings into the digital space; it requires artistic reimagining as well as the development of new marketing techniques, business models, and revenue sources (Sgourev; Grannemann). Any digital transformation of an organization requires “new skill-building from everyone involved, from the artist to the usher” to instill a digital-minded culture in an organization—even when the digital platform is just one piece of the organization (Alick 31).

This can be difficult for a nonprofit theater as technology implementation tends to lag behind the pace of innovation in other sectors (Ford and Mandviwalla 4297; McCarthy et al. iv). Compounding that difficulty are the greatest barriers to technology

adaptation in arts nonprofits: getting technology funding and training an organization's staff to use new technologies (Rainie et al. 5). Technologies frequently develop faster than any performing arts organization can adopt them, and by the time an organization does that technology may already be obsolete. But streaming and digital technologies are already impacting the general public, changing their expectations of what a theater company can or should offer. Increasingly, digital audiences have expectations of "arts attendance as an experience" aided by "engaging" new technologies (Rainie et al. 6, 51). Theaters must find ways to meet those expectations or risk losing audiences. Adopting digital programming makes the organization more attractive to tech-forward audience members—and more relevant and resilient in the long term.

Despite the promises of these digital technologies—new ways to distribute programming, promote events, and engage with audiences—technology adoption is only possible when there are resources available to invest. Theatre Horizon's Gilberto Vega, Manager of Institutional Giving and Communications, is grateful for the recent grant that the theater received that will allow it to make necessary technology upgrades for future digital programming. Vega calls such funding opportunities "rare to find" and "very competitive" (Vega). Even after raising or earning the money to purchase new technology, significant staff hours must be devoted to learning and mastering the technologies—cameras, streaming platforms, new apps—to put them to work for the organization. The new platforms and technology may also cause tensions, as they already have, with unions for stage and screen workers, as well as for rights organizations for playwrights and creators, as an organization and its partners adjust to new ways of working (Brownlow-Calkin; Pierce, "Is Streaming Theatre Here to Stay?").

V. A Case for Digital Programming

The COVID-19 pandemic created a moment of reset for theater companies; a chance to do things differently from before. It has fueled large-scale conversations about the future of theater: from social equality and equity to racial justice, climate change, and workers' rights. In this spirit, some theaters have invested in digital programming for the long haul: building infrastructure and purchasing streaming technology. Others are eager to move beyond COVID and leave this moment behind.

This is a major turning point for theater: Do theaters return to operating as an in-person-centered company, or do they explore what a hybrid model for theater will look like? Or even a digital-only model? It will, ultimately, be up to each organization to decide for itself. Different factors—from audience preference to financial feasibility to a theater's mission and culture—will impact that decision. But the benefits of digital programming are clear and profound.

Digital programming is invaluable to a theater's ability to expand its reach, improve access, and provide more touchpoints into the organization. It can increase stakeholder investment in the theater and keep it top-of-mind with its audiences and donors. A strong digital presence keeps the theater's work in the digital lives of its patrons, even when they are not in its physical spaces. Digital programming allows for the creation of art that would not be possible on a physical stage. It makes room for collaborations that overcome geographic constraints. It offers a more neutral space for people who may not be comfortable, for myriad reasons, entering a theater's building. It even makes it possible for theaters to move beyond the requirement of having a

physical space, allowing them to rethink how to share theater with their communities: in new venues, in new ways, to create new outcomes.

Organization-wide investment in digital programming creates a more resilient and accessible organization. A digitally-minded organization that is built upon a culture of rethinking—that embraces moments of crisis as opportunities for growth—will be stronger in the long run. That theater will lead the industry in new technology, rather than playing catch-up. It will show that it understands both the moment and the needs of its audiences—and will be prepared for the next moment of crisis.

While it is easier to lean back into what has worked in the past, the world that existed pre-pandemic will not return. Theaters must adapt to a new reality. Over the next few years, audiences and donors will increasingly expect digital offerings from theaters. Funders will ask for a theater's digital plan when deciding whether to fund a project. Soon, an organization without digital programming will lose its social and financial capital; its funding and its relevance in the eyes of the public. Theaters must not allow themselves to be left behind.

Digital programming is still in its infancy. There is space for theaters to continue to experiment with types of programming, technologies, and business models. There is room for trial, error, and learning. Beyond that, there is plenty of room for growth; to reimagine what the future of theater will be. Now is the perfect opportunity to create a new model for theater companies. Organizations can—and should—seize this moment to invest in digital programming and ensure their place as the theaters of tomorrow.

WORKS CITED

- Alick, Jesse Cameron. *Emerging From the Cave*. Sundance Institute, Aug. 2021, drive.google.com/file/d/1AGGaIDFdh_pTT92RewhSLOfZWEYhSHo0/.
- Bell, Johanna Sheehan. Personal interview. 10 Dec. 2021.
- Brantley, Ben, et al. "This Is Theater in 2020. Will It Last? Should It?" *The New York Times*, 8 July 2020. *NYTimes.com*, www.nytimes.com/2020/07/08/theater/streaming-theater-experiments.html.
- Brownlow-Calkin, Rosie. "The Jury Is In on Virtual Theatre." *American Theatre*, 8 Nov. 2021, www.americantheatre.org/2021/11/08/the-jury-is-in-on-virtual-theatre/.
- Cox, Gordon. "'All Arts Organizations Are Media Companies Now': How the Pandemic Is Transforming Theater." *Variety*, 24 Nov. 2020, www.variety.com/2020/legit/news/digital-theater-pandemic-broadway-1234836759/.
- Ellicessor, Elizabeth. *Restricted Access: Media, Disability, and the Politics of Participation*. NYU Press, 2016.
- Ford, Vince, and Munir Mandviwalla. "Can Digital Engagement Transform the Performing Arts?" *Proceedings of the 53rd Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences* | 2020, Jan. 2020, pp. 4296–305.
- Grannemann, Hannah. "Long Tail/Long Game." *Row X*, 8 Oct. 2021, www.artsjournal.com/rowx/2021/10/08/long-tail-long-game/.

Gutierrez, Karen. Personal interview. 15 Dec. 2021.

Janiak, Lily, and Joshua Kosman. "Performing Arts Outfits, Once Analog's Champions, Realize That Digital Is Here to Stay." *Datebook | San Francisco Arts & Entertainment Guide*, 19 May 2021, datebook.sfchronicle.com/entertainment/performing-arts-outfits-once-analogs-champions-realize-that-digital-is-here-to-stay.

JCA Arts Marketing. *Trends in Audience Behavior: Digital Performances in the Growth Stage*. JCA Arts Marketing, 18 Mar. 2021, www.jcainc.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/TAB-Digital-Performances-ROUND-2.pdf.

---. *Trends in Audience Behavior: Digital Performances in Their Infancy*. JCA Arts Marketing, Oct. 2020, [ss-usa.s3.amazonaws.com/c/308466815/media/27045f9896be0c6a422016828626938/JCA%20Arts%20Marketing%20TAB%20%20Digital%20Performances_FINAL.pdf](https://s3.amazonaws.com/c/308466815/media/27045f9896be0c6a422016828626938/JCA%20Arts%20Marketing%20TAB%20%20Digital%20Performances_FINAL.pdf).

LaPlaca Cohen. *Culture + Community in a Time of Crisis: Key Findings From Wave 1*. LaPlaca Cohen, 7 July 2020, s28475.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/CCTC-Key-Findings-from-Wave-1_9.29.pdf.

---. *Culture + Community in a Time of Transformation: Key Findings From Wave 2*. LaPlaca Cohen, 23 Nov. 2021, s28475.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/CCTT-Key-Findings-from-Wave-2.pdf.

Levinson, Amy. Personal interview. 17 Dec. 2021.

Marks, Peter. "Perspective | As Hopes Rise for a Return to the Stage Later This Year, D.C.-Area Theaters Sing: We're Still Here!" *Washington Post*,

www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/theater_dance/dc-theater-pandemic-shutdown/2021/04/15/d2a28296-9c79-11eb-8005-bffc3a39f6d3_story.html.

McCarthy, Kevin F., et al. *The Performing Arts in a New Era*. RAND Corporation, 2001.

McLennan, Douglas. "Five Post-COVID Arts Observations: #3. The Future Is Hybrid (or Not)." *Diacritical*, 6 Nov. 2021, www.artsjournal.com/diacritical/2021/11/five-observations-3-the-future-is-hybrid-or-not.html.

Mezzocchi, Jared. "All the Screen's a Stage: A Transmedia Manifesto." *American Theatre*, 22 Sept. 2021, www.americantheatre.org/2021/09/22/all-the-screens-a-stage-a-transmedia-manifesto/.

Paulson, Michael. "You're New Here, Aren't You? Digital Theater's Unexpected Upside." *The New York Times*, 24 Feb. 2021. *NYTimes.com*, www.nytimes.com/2021/02/24/theater/streaming-audience-numbers.html.

Pierce, Jerald Raymond. "If You Live-Stream It, Will They Watch?" *American Theatre*, 15 Dec. 2021, www.americantheatre.org/2021/12/15/if-you-live-stream-it-will-they-watch/.

---. "Is Streaming Theatre Here to Stay? The National Theatre Network Is Banking on It." *American Theatre*, Apr. 2021, www.americantheatre.org/2021/04/19/is-streaming-theatre-here-to-stay-the-national-theatre-network-is-banking-on-it/.

Rainie, Lee, et al. *Arts Organizations and Digital Technologies*. Pew Research Center, 4 Jan. 2013, www.giarts.org/sites/default/files/Arts-Organizations-Digital-Technologies.pdf.

Redmond, Adele. "Digital Pivot Reverses as Theatres Struggle to Monetise Online Shows." *ArtsProfessional*, 14 Oct. 2021,

www.artsprofessional.co.uk/news/digital-pivot-reverses-theatres-struggle-monetise-online-shows.

Sgourev, Stoyan V. "The Pandemic as a Factor of Transformation in Arts and Culture: The Ascendance of 'Digital Culture.'" *Arts Management*, 30 July 2020, www.artsmanagement.net/Articles/The-Pandemic-as-a-Factor-of-Transformation-in-Arts-and-Culture-The-Ascendance-of-Digital-Culture,4174.

Smith, Kelundra. "If a Theatre Company Does It, Is It Theatre?" *American Theatre*, 2 Mar. 2021, www.americantheatre.org/2021/03/02/if-a-theatre-company-does-it-is-it-theatre/

Soloski, Alexis. "All the World's a Screen? They're Used to It." *The New York Times*, 3 Feb. 2021. *NYTimes.com*, www.nytimes.com/2021/02/03/theater/video-screens-technology.html.

Tung Crystal, Lily. Personal interview. 11 Jan. 2022.

Vega, Gilberto. Personal interview. 5 Jan. 2022.

Vincentelli, Elisabeth. "As Venues Reopen, Will Streamed Theater Still Have a Place?" *The New York Times*, 18 Aug. 2021. *NYTimes.com*, www.nytimes.com/2021/08/18/theater/streaming-theater-future.html.

Willcox, James K. "Millions of Americans Lack Fast Internet Service, CR Survey Shows." *Consumer Reports*, 10 Aug. 2021, www.consumerreports.org/broadband/millions-of-americans-lack-fast-internet-service-cr-survey-a1099956385/.