

The Education Beat  
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### Campus Theater Stages Plays with no Stage

By Annie Radillo ‘23

The new remake of Shakespeare’s “Troilus and Cressida,” called "Dominion," is set in the near future:

*The hungry Greek empire besieges a modern Troy, high-tech war rages, and the cosmopolitan Trojan protagonists reckon with what it means to lose their city-state. In one scene, Trojan soldiers joke about the Greeks taking control of the city’s Wi-Fi. A couple minutes later, the young Trojan soldier Paris is booted out of the Zoom call and out into virtual space. The rectangle that had previously held Paris’ face disappears, and the remaining rectangles rearrange to fill the black void.*

This was a carefully staged move by the Yale Dramatic Association (or Dramat) to self-consciously highlight the play's online nature. The writer and director of “Dominion,” Catherine Alam-Nist, stretched internet theater to its limits in her new play, using the platform's lack of physicality to full effect and even breaking the fourth wall in the process. Or so the audience thought.

In reality, the Wi-Fi of the actor playing Paris had simply cut out. When Paris disappeared from the screen, the other actors panicked. They ad-libbed, crying out for Paris until they realized the Trojan would not be returning, at which point they gave up and moved on to the next scene. For the audience, the scene was a delightful new twist on pandemic theater; for the cast it was but another glitch in a fickle medium.

As more than half of the nation's nearly 3,000 four-year colleges have gone either partly or completely online, the Yale Dramat is one of many campus theater organizations that have had to reimagine themselves since March.

Though students face new technological, social, and artistic challenges to creating theater, many are leaning into these hurdles as invitations to stretch creatively. Many students remain stubbornly involved with student theater groups, proceeding with virtual auditions, rehearsals, and productions. Others continue to devote themselves to their art, but in a more independent mode than would be typical, focusing on writing, for example, rather than staging a play.

Meanwhile, the celebrated Yale School of Drama, as well as Yale Repertory Theater, have cancelled all production for the 2020-21 season. School of Drama classes will continue, though the curriculum has been modified—what is usually a three-year program has been extended to a fourth year, so students are not deprived of the program's full experience. The Dean of the Yale School of Drama declined to comment.

As students emerge from a semester of remote learning and prepare to dive into yet another, they are reflecting on all the freedoms, constraints, and oddities of virtual theater.

Paris' disappearance was not the only one during the four "Dominion" showings. During another performance, inclement weather struck Clara Montgomery's neighborhood right as her character Pandarus was set to enter "on stage." Montgomery was forced to quickly rig her own lighting and log into Zoom from her phone as other actors stalled for her. In the end, Pandarus appeared illuminated by a perilously positioned flashlight.

But Alam-Nist said that, for her, the risk and thrill of live streaming made their decision not to prerecord the performance well worth it.

Unlike many shows that were forced to adapt to a remote world, "Dominion" was written after Yale announced that its sophomores would not be returning in the Fall, and thus was written specifically for an online platform. Prior to the announcement, Alam-Nist and the show's production and stage managers had been planning to put on a production of Caryl Churchill's "Top Girls." They abandoned the project soon after they received notice from the Yale president that many students wouldn't be allowed to return to campus in the fall—they realized they would have to acquire intellectual property rights specifically for internet showing.

They turned instead to works in the public domain. But as someone who is queer, bi-racial and non-binary, Alam-Nist found the works didn't relate to the experiences they wanted to explore as a theater maker. Soon choosing "Troilus and Cressida," the production team made three resolutions: 1. They would make the show less white, straight, and male, and allow actors of one gender to play characters traditionally of another (Paris, for example, was played by a female actor) 2. They would view Zoom not as a restriction but as a new medium of expression, and 3. They would incorporate into the script the isolation and frustration their community was feeling.



Students perform "Dominion," Catherine Alam-Nist's reimagining of "Troilus and Cressida" from their bedrooms, on a virtual Zoom stage.

Alam-Nist wrote the script in only a month, and soon the team was casting. They solicited audition tapes, making sure not to let video or audio quality affect their decision and thereby cast more equitably. The team asked auditionees if they anticipated technological problems throughout the production process so they could mail them Wi-Fi routers.

Actors received their costumes by mail, along with theater gels so they could set up stage lighting in their homes in accordance with the lighting designer's instructions. Some used t-shirts to make their bedroom lamps shine more diffusely. Others had to figure out how to black out their living room windows so that the matinee performance would appear as if it were taking place at night. The show's sound producer had to tinker with Zoom so that usually restricted functions — such as the ability to speak over another meeting attendee — were instead permitted.

In the end, "Dominion" showed from Nov. 13 through Nov. 15 and welcomed nearly 50 guests to each of its four showings. The stage manager, Jenan Cameranesi, believes this was a good turnout, considering "no one wants to go on Zoom."

Alam-Nist said they went into the production with serious doubts and wondered whether the show would be something they all looked back on years later as an utter disaster. In the end, they were proud of the result. "I'm very much of the mindset that challenges can be opportunities in disguise," said Alam-Nist. "I loved the piece of theatre we made, and the fact that it was online didn't make it less exciting, it just made it exciting in a different way."

Cameranesi is also optimistic about the medium of online theater in general: "I'm a firm believer that this is theater, and this is something that should be judged on its own merits," she said. "Just because it's not in-person doesn't mean it's a lesser form."

Some students are working on projects independently. Diza Hendrawan, a Yale first-year taking a leave of absence, is one such artist. Hendrawan's piece, called "A Faint Recollection," follows a group of friends who wake up with no memory of their previous night together. Using their cellphone histories, including Venmo transactions and social media, they struggle to piece together what happened.

The show will likely be pre-recorded and uploaded on YouTube Premieres—a mix of a live stream and a traditional YouTube video—so as to allow audience members to view the performance at the same time when it's first released. After the video premieres, it will remain on the website like any other YouTube video.

Hendrawan has been toying with the concept of having graphics showing Venmo requests, iMessages, and Snapchats appear on the screen as pop-ups. Though she feels these are an interesting new way to take advantage of online theater, she worries they might detract from what she sees as Zoom theater's merits.

"When you have a play that is done over Zoom that takes place in a Zoom room, you're kind of blessed with a certain suspension of disbelief," said Hendrawan. "Because it's kind of like found footage or, you know, like 'Paranormal Activity,' or 'The Blair Witch Project.'" Hendrawan added that pop-ups remind the audience that they're actually watching a pre-recorded video.

At Smith College, an upcoming performance plays into its online platform much in the way De Leon prescribed. The play, a new cut of Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar," will air sometime in the Spring and will be pre-recorded and uploaded onto YouTube.

The play is written and directed by Smith theater professor Ellen Kaplan. In "Julius Caesar," oligarchs vie for power in the vacuum left by the fallen Roman Republic, and Kaplan sees it as an allegory for our current situation. "It's set in the year "2020-plus-one," she said.

"Julius Caesar" is still in its early production stages, but the show's stage manager, Nikki Beck, said that the production team has detailed plans regarding how the show will play with its online nature. Actor's faces will appear against marbled virtual backgrounds of different colors, with each actor's color chosen according to the character and their setting. The video's editors will then cut each actor's video into a geometric shape also based on their character and paste these videos onto a background resembling a "black void."

"In a theater production, you're often setting it in a black box or some kind of a black void with your curtain-framing of the theater," said Beck. "We wanted to reflect and play with that." She said this callback to the experience of in-person theater is one strategy the "Julius Caesar" team is employing to establish their project as theater, and not film.

"Julius Caesar's" technical director has devised laser-printed contraptions to hold actors' iPhone cameras alongside their laptop webcams when filming the show. Actors will record their performance on their cell phones—which have better audio and visual quality than Zoom recordings—while still engaging with the other actors on their laptop screens. The Zoom call on their laptops will be to help emulate the experience of acting in the same physical space, and only the footage from their phones will be used in the final production.

Some actors will perform in front of green screens featuring animations, which are meant to enhance the fight scenes and avoid what Wren Gilbert, who plays Brutus, called "the cheesiness of one person punching the camera and another reacting," each in their own Zoom rectangle.

This year, Smith theater's Fall Mainstage Production was a student-built website called "The Amplifier," which featured 20 short films written and directed by students. The site launched Dec. 3, and because it was meant to be viewed synchronously, it has since been taken off the web. The films were meditations upon the last six months, and what they have meant for students, whether in terms of quarantine's isolation, the pandemic, police brutality, or political upheaval. One film was a performance of a poetry series written by a student in quarantine. Another was a series of questions about what it means to be a Chinese American girl in the midst of the pandemic.

Though many students have jumped headlong into remote theater work, others are more hesitant. A junior at the University of California, Davis, JP De Leon is very skeptical about Zoom theater. He is a double major in Cinema and Digital Media and in Theater and has been focusing on film rather than theater this semester because he dislikes virtual theater and says online theater feels like film anyway.

De Leon said he often finds himself dissecting online theater productions as if they were movies, looking critically at the choice of camera angle or the way an actor's Zoom is framed. For him, "the essence of theater is very much in-person."

One student organization at Davis, Catalyst, finds plays by artists around the country that are still in development and works with the artists to bring their works to fruition. Next semester, the group plans to do a virtual production of a musical called "Juliet and Romeo." De Leon said the project reminds him of movie remakes of plays—like the movie version of "Grease"—which are performed live and recorded. "They're almost theater," he said, but a Zoom musical is further from theater still, because you can't film people in the same physical space.

De Leon finds it admirable that students are persisting in their theater-making efforts and thinks there's artistic potential in deliberately drawing attention to the fact that a show is on Zoom.

Nevertheless, when he thinks about life after the pandemic, he can't help but ask himself: "Would anyone still want to do theater like this?"

Gilbert, who is a senior at Smith, said she too was very skeptical of Zoom theater at first. Then, during quarantine, she attended Zoom meetings populated by women from the Boston area. They did readings of unpublished works of theater. These readings weren't in preparation for any specific performance, but to bolster Boston's theater community. They helped Gilbert warm to the idea of online theater, which she was skeptical of at first. Now, she's decided there's no reason to put her involvement in theater on hold.

As her graduation draws ever nearer and the pandemic marches on, Gilbert—who hopes to make a career of theater work—faces an uncertain future. "Film is starting again but theater really has

a long way to go before its opening its doors," she said. "It's terrifying to have your whole life based on the anticipation of this and be months away from it." But Gilbert thinks positive permanent changes to theater could result from the discipline's current tumult. Going online will "give a facelift to theater," she said, and has already made the discipline more accessible for some college students, particularly first-years.

"I think it's been really good to get so many people involved and not having them feel like they're having to step into this hierarchy," said Gilbert. "They can just fully direct a piece if they want to as a first year, which is really exciting."