



THEATRE'S 'NEW NORMAL'?

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COVID-19. Coronavirus. The global pandemic put a sudden hold on the world, and while different economies and industries are slowly firing up again trying to get back to normal business, most theatres remain closed.

In fact, theatre and other forms of live entertainment are among those industries that have suffered the most and stayed closed the longest.

But theatre is innovative, creative and eager to thrive. From prerecorded, online releases over live-streamed performances to drive-in theatre, the industry is desperate to find ways to survive until social distancing guidance allows venues to reopen to economically viable numbers of audience members.

With theatres closed from the West End to your local community venue, some artists have turned to digital or virtual platforms to continue to engage with audiences. Whether it's plays, readings or a look behind the scenes, more and more theatres, authors and museums are making their content available online. Some theatre companies, like the National Theatre or Andrew Lloyd Webber's Really Useful Group, have released recordings of past staged live productions made available online for free. The Old Vic recently staged a socially distanced adaptation of their recent play *Lungs* with Claire Foy and Matt Smith and live screened it via Zoom, with people buying tickets just as they would for a regular performance.

Artists and particularly musical theatre performers have taken to Instagram Live, Zoom or other means of online streaming to bring home concerts to their fans - some for free like #RAHome, others for a small ticket price like the *Leave a Light*

On series organised by Lambert Jackson Productions. Inviting audiences into your home forms a new kind of relationship. It breaks down the barrier to some extent to see your favourite artists' home decor, pictures on the wall or kids or relatives streaming into the comfort of your home. While artists and audience are not in the same space together, there is a new form of association and intimacy to be found from these streams.

Smash hit musical *SIX* announced its inclusion with a line-up of major artists to perform in twelve drive-in venues to a live audience who, no doubt, enjoyed the full performances of the six-strong female cast from the safety of their cars. While this format was not an option for many shows due to the nature of traditional musical theatre performances, this particular adaptation does show the forward-thinking of some producers and adaptability of performers.

The current coronavirus crisis is set to change the performing arts. The support online for the struggling arts industry through tweets, posts and petitions clearly shows that people are longing for live performances. The industry and community have shown their commitment over the past few months, sharing petitions, organising protests and raising money online for charities like Acting for Others.

Ever-emerging online concerts and streams from homes or empty venues show the urge for artists to collaborate and create. In what form this will happen

in the future - who knows at this stage. Until it is safe for venues to properly reopen, the majority of performances will take place in an online scenario and audiences, as well performers, will have to adapt to a new situation. So does this mark the end of audience etiquette? There were repeated complaints from fellow audience members before lockdown of, for example, people chatting all the way through a show, people using their phones, audience members bringing in pizza during the interval... After months and months of consuming theatre in the comfort of your home, will people have forgotten how to behave in an auditorium altogether when they return? Or will the opposite happen and it will be even more special when members of the public are able to return to a live performance? Only time will tell.

While the current pandemic is a major threat to economies all over the world, theatre will have to continue to find ways to generate income. Donations can only go so far, and the (infamous) government support package came at a time when many venues had already made a lot of redundancies or closed for good. The variety of productions, from plays to musicals to immersive theatre, means there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Smaller play productions may be able to adapt to social distancing rules and reopen at a much-reduced capacity, such as *The Mousetrap* in London which announced its return to the stage in October. English National Opera's plans for a socially distanced season of stripped-back productions, with a reduced number of singers and musicians and sets... all

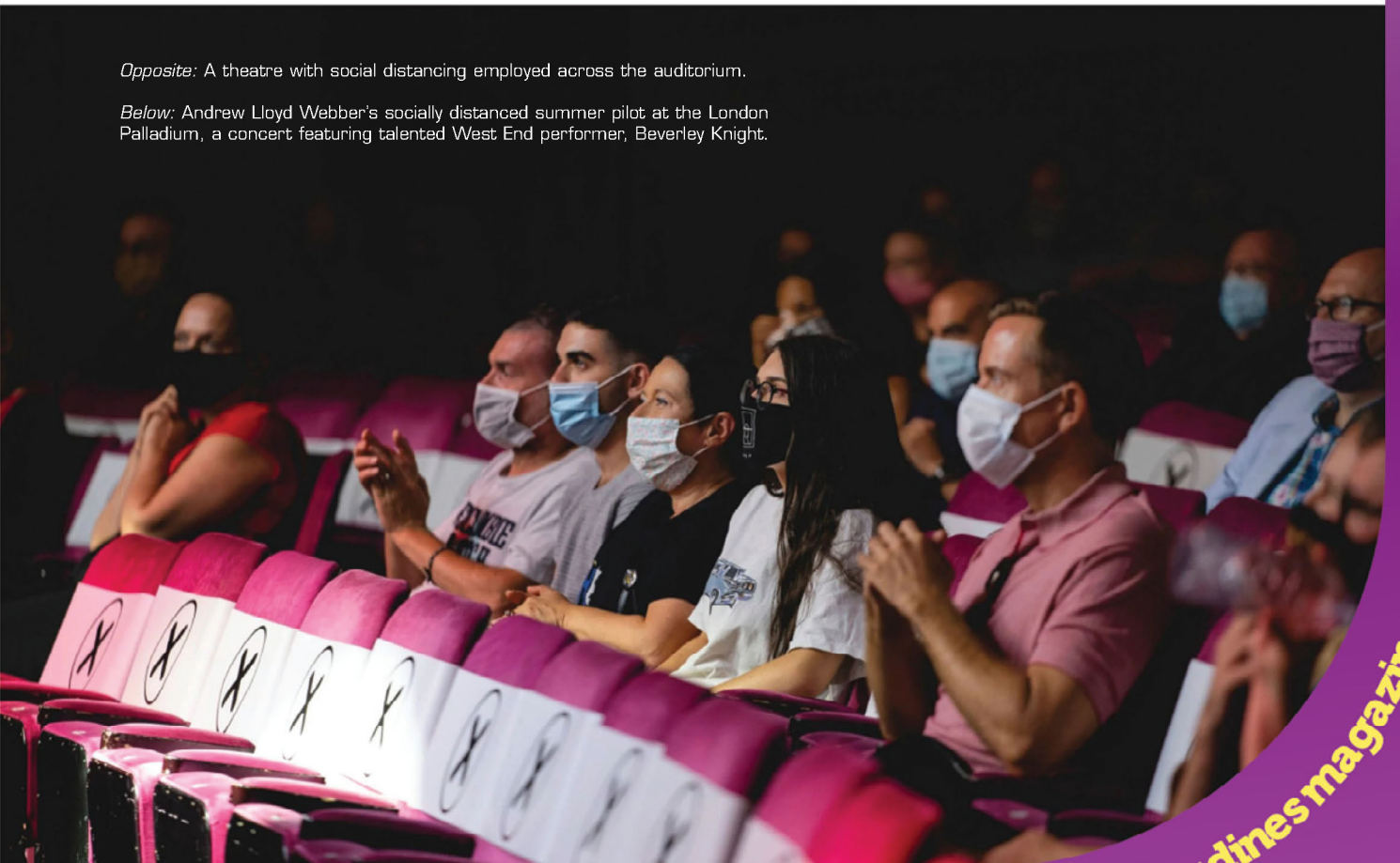
stripped back. For many venues, of course, social distancing is not financially feasible as they need 70-80% of full capacity to break even. Smaller shows (in terms of cast size) may be able to think about live-streamed performances from an empty auditorium, similar to *Lungs* at the Old Vic. The final two weeks of the *BBC Proms* season this year was also live streamed from an empty Royal Albert Hall auditorium. Does it all need to be visual? Of course not. Telling stories through podcasts, audio dramas or even written art are just as important (even if slightly less effective).

Whether we like it or not, online content, live streaming and virtual events will be with us for longer than we might think. Broadway has closed for the remainder of 2020 and some shows in the West End have also announced they will not resume until next year. Live streaming will provide performance opportunities for many artists and creatives during this time. The industry will have to adapt its thinking and work with communities and audiences on a different level. It will be music, arts and culture that are hit the hardest and... take the longest time to recover.

Being on the front foot in thinking about solutions is very important as the future of live entertainment is a key part of the sector's recovery. Music, arts and culture are more important and valued by society than ever in times of crisis, and never more so than during the current global pandemic.

Opposite: A theatre with social distancing employed across the auditorium.

Below: Andrew Lloyd Webber's socially distanced summer pilot at the London Palladium, a concert featuring talented West End performer, Beverley Knight.



Keeping in touch with your audience during a global pandemic

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The audience is the heart and soul of theatre. In the time of Shakespeare or even during the Roman Empire, if the audience didn't like the performance enough to show up, the curtain wouldn't rise. Today it wouldn't be as drastic, but the audience's power is still undeniable. Productions have shut down early because of poor ticket sales.

Without an audience, a production can't break even, let alone make a return on its investment. When creating new theatre, a key factor is audience response to plots, characters and - depending on the genre - songs. Are they relatable?

Is the audience going to care about them?

Will they keep the audience engaged?





In today's practice, social media and the Internet as a marketing platform are vital tools for success. Social media and online communities have become a big part of the theatre industry. Digital and social media marketing reach the generation that theatres are often missing in their audience demographics. Audiences, fans and performers take to their favourite channel to connect with other people and exchange opinions. From a marketing perspective, social media offers economical ways of enhancing the customer experience. Theatres and productions post behind-the-scenes content, additional production photos or short interviews with cast and crew, through which audience members could become more involved in the show. Producers and managers in the industry have acknowledged the importance of social media in the last couple of years and adapted their marketing activities to the changing needs.

There has been a recent rise in productions to allow patrons to take photographs and videos during specific songs or moments of a performance. However, this shift shows that despite the importance of copyright (such as costumes, make-up, music), social media marketing has been acknowledged as an important management tool and theatres need to be making good use of it. Allowing people to capture part of their experience and share it on social media not only allows patrons to communicate better about their visit, but gives the show more exposure, reach and views leading to more fans.

Before Covid-19 put the worldwide theatre industry on hold, online relationships through social media and online resources were one part of a wider marketing and customer relationship strategy. With (indoor) theatres shut for the foreseeable future, there is no income, ticket sales or performances. The way to stay in touch with the audience is online. Newsletters, websites, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube - online content is key. Theatergoers need and want the reassurance that their beloved theatre will still be there when they can return. During these unprecedented times, with many people furloughed or working from home, audiences still need their theatre fix in one form or another through behind the scenes photos from the archive, an Instagram home takeover from a cast or crew member or a YouTube stream of a past production. This doesn't only apply to venues or production companies but also to artists. Inviting audiences into your home forms a new kind of relationship. It breaks down the barrier for audiences to see your home furnishings, bookshelf or pet streamed into the comfort of their own home. While artists and audience are not in the same space together, there is a new form of connection to be created from these streams.

Storytelling and emotions are key elements in using online platforms to connect with your audience. In most cases, online content will be connected to some form of fundraiser, such as for a charity or a specific venue. To convert views into donations, the online experience should be mainly about the audience, not the cause. Creating value through a range of mini experiences on different channels, such as behind the scenes and camera interviews, artist Q&A sessions, blogs, and email communications, will build the overall experience the viewer has with the organisation. Online donation campaigns for exclusive screenings and adhoc appeals with 'Pay What You Decide' campaigns will form an integral stream of revenue for organisations moving forward towards reopening. The key issue is to put the community and the audience, not the technology, first. It is about experiencing art and theatre, of being together in the room where it happens, and exchanging stories.

Online platforms are easily accessible to almost everyone. Uploading to an Instagram feed is daily practice for many artists and even theatre companies and doesn't incur additional costs during a time when theatres are losing £000s every week. Your phone and Internet connection are all you need to start. YouTube and Facebook offer live-streaming options with generous time allowances - you can go live on YouTube for eight hours straight, and YouTube links can be shared across other channels. The key for all content, more so now than ever, is to create value for your audience. During these times it is important to appreciate how art accessed through the Internet can be therapy. Someone on the other side of the world, who in other circumstances would not be able to attend a show, can now view theatrical work, attend workshops and chat to the artists just as if they were there with them. Hopefully, we will come out of this having been exposed to a range of new and exciting ways to explore theatre that we can take forward into the future.