

# Theater in Lockdown, or a Performance-Studies Paradox

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BARBARA FUCHS

*Abstract* This essay discusses the challenges and opportunities of scholarly research during the pandemic, focusing on the author's experience of researching and writing *Theater of Lockdown: Digital and Distanced Performance in a Time of Pandemic* (2021).

*Keywords* performance studies, distanced performance, theater

The end of February 2020 found me in New York for a meeting of the Executive Council of the Modern Language Association (MLA)—an occasion I valued for the opportunity to work closely with colleagues normally scattered at institutions across the United States and beyond. Little did I know that this would be our last in-person meeting for over a year and that even the MLA convention—then months and months away—would take place online.

During the trip, I attended my last live theatrical performance in New York—*Lucy Barton*, animated by the marvelous Laura Linney. In a full house, I wondered uneasily whether the seemingly routine coughing behind me was related to the reports we had all received by that time of a new, highly infectious virus that had started to spread from China to other parts of the world. I flew back to Los Angeles with my scarf over my face, trying my best to stay optimistic. I managed one more performance, outdoors: The Industry's magnificent debut of the opera *Sweet Land* at the Los Angeles State Historic Park. March 11, my last day on UCLA's campus, included a doctoral exam, with the candidate heroically summoning her concentration as colleagues eyed each other uneasily from opposite ends of a very long table. On March 12, two days before I was due to fly back to New York for Red Bull Theater's staged reading of Ana Caro's *Courage to Right a Woman's Wrongs*, in a translation by UCLA's collaborative Diversifying the Classics group, Broadway pulled the plug.<sup>1</sup>

And then, lockdown. The MLA shifted into high gear to respond to members' concerns and figure out how to operate remotely, as so many of our members' institutions were doing. Meanwhile, at home in Los Angeles, recorded theater became a balm of sorts, with the United Kingdom's National Theater Live recordings (in all their contradictions) purposively offering to bring solace. Our erstwhile partners at

Red Bull soon proved to be pathbreakers, quickly launching live Zoom readings of Jacobean plays and negotiating with performers' unions about how to conceptualize the new form they were pioneering. *Sweet Land* cut short its run and offered a filmed version online, which emboldened me to undertake a review of a piece I had found all too fleeting when I was lucky enough to see it in person.

In recent years, my research has focused on early modern theater, performance studies, and, as part of *Diversifying the Classics*, translation for performance. As the weeks dragged on, I began to worry about LA Escena, our festival of Hispanic classical theater in Los Angeles. Scheduled for November 2020, it had seemed so incredibly far away as to be safe from all the cancellations and postponements. Yet soon the airborne transmission of COVID-19 was confirmed, so that even as we stopped washing our hands raw and disinfecting our groceries my heart sank for theater. It felt almost unethical to be concerned for an art form, when so many were dying in those terrifying first months. At the same time, artists everywhere were losing their livelihoods.

Before long, there were glimmers of hope, as theater makers with strong government support were encouraged to create at home and online. My colleagues in Spain, with whom I'd been struggling to reimagine the LA Escena festival, pointed me to some of the earliest work created specifically for digital stages, and I began to find a sense of possibility among so much sadness. The Compañía Nacional de Teatro Clásico quickly launched *En Compañía de los Clásicos*, an initiative designed to bring classical theater to people in their homes, and commissioned a number of exciting experimental works.<sup>2</sup> Actors, directors, dramaturgs, and designers made up new forms as they went along, creating formally inventive works as they attempted to solve the immediate problem of mounting a collective art practice while in strict isolation. The moving *En otro reino extraño*, for example, explored Lope de Vega's take on love as it related to the actors' own experiences of eros. The piece combined surprisingly open conversations on Zoom with love scenes that actors recorded separately in their own homes, later to be assembled into one digital file by the piece's resourceful videographer, Álvaro Luna.<sup>3</sup> UK-based Forced Entertainment's *End Meeting for All*, a three-part work recorded in single live takes, was perhaps the first piece I saw that transformed the restrictions of Zoom into the occasion for formal play and experimentation, from its very wink of a title. It was soon followed by *Game Over*, by the Madrid-based company grumelot, which mobilized WhatsApp, Instagram, and other platforms, in conjunction with live and recorded segments, to extraordinary emotional effect. I found myself both intrigued and excited by work unlike anything I had seen before, and, in that strange time of almost complete isolation, wrote short essays about it for the online theater commons *Howl-Round*.<sup>4</sup> "I think you're going to write a book on this," my research assistant, Rhonda Sharrah, offered as she helped me copyedit them. But how? I thought to myself. What is this form? What will my archive possibly look like? If the barriers to entry for writing on these new works were certainly lowered, it was not immediately evident how such work might be contextualized.

It felt distinctly strange, even unseemly, to happen upon the rare area of research that had become more accessible due to the pandemic. Performance studies

had always appealed to me yet required the ability to frequent theater festivals and far-flung performances to an extent that I could not reconcile with other responsibilities. Pre-pandemic, my performance-studies research centered on what I had happened to see in Los Angeles, presented by REDCAT or the UCLA Center for the Arts of Performance. Even *Sweet Land*, which I had seen in the last days before lockdown, would not have been possible for me to write about, given its complexity, had it not been made available in a streaming version because of the lockdown.

Yet during COVID-19 such performances as did occur around the world were suddenly overwhelmingly accessible from my desk. In their isolation, practitioners were more than willing to grant Zoom interviews and talk through this new and disorienting time. I interviewed actors, directors, producers, and designers and, for the first time ever, found I needed a transcription service. Rhonda combed the web for interesting productions, while I read about earlier experiments in digital theater and intermediality (the term of art for theater that involves film) and watched digital productions at all hours.<sup>5</sup> I soon realized that I would need to delimit my scope and decided to focus on work that reflected on the pandemic, or that presented a formal innovation. Though I initially imagined a book evenly divided between the digital and the distanced, it quickly became apparent that the digital would be much more readily available, and that I would be able to write about distanced pieces only secondhand unless they occurred near me or were streamed in addition to being presented in person. Distanced theater shrank to a single chapter, while digital theater multiplied exponentially.

Beyond the vicissitudes of the archive, I recognize how fortunate I was in my freedom to undertake this work: though mine was a happily full house, my children are old enough that they did not need me to supervise their Zoom schooling, and they even occasionally joined me in my forays into new forms of theater. I was acutely aware of the contrast between my ability to track a new art form online and the situation of so many researchers, especially mothers to young children and other caregivers, whose ability to work at all was so severely curtailed by lockdown and seemingly endless school closures. One of the most sobering moments in my research came when I realized that the questions of form and genre that preoccupy a critic were in this case literally matters of life and death: as the unions argued over whether streamed theater counted as theater or film, the health insurance of hundreds of artists hung in the balance, given that they needed to work for a certain number of weeks per year in their respective modes to qualify for the benefits that Equity and the Screen Actors Guild provided exclusively to those working on their own turf.<sup>6</sup> The work I found so exciting for how it broke new ground and pushed the boundaries was the site of definitional battles that put people's lives at risk. Moreover, while some companies continued to work together on Zoom or other modes, much of the work produced focused on the dislocation and isolation of the moment. Theater in Quarantine, a company launched by Joshua William Gelb in his East Village closet, began with short studies that dramatized the extremity of the situation: *Mask Work*, for example, featured the protagonist in a gas mask, musing on what happens when we lose our faces in order to preserve our health. By June his *Topside* featured two performers trapped in a bunker, as they warily eye each other

and one of them thinks about mounting a production of *Hamlet* with cans for characters: “In these unprecedented times . . . ,” it would doubtless begin.<sup>7</sup>

These are the opening paragraphs of the book that came of all this, *Theater of Lockdown: Digital and Distanced Theater in a Time of Pandemic*, as I attempted to honor the ambivalence of the moment:

Missing the theater is emphatically not like missing someone who has died from COVID-19, or the apartment you’ve been evicted from, or the business you built, or the job you loved—at least not unless that job was in theater. Yet missing theater became during the pandemic a shared condition for theater-makers, audiences, scholars, and critics alike. Artists, whose livelihoods were most seriously imperiled, led the way beyond nostalgia and despair with their commitment to making theater, however dire the circumstances.

I spent the lockdown at home in Los Angeles, sustained by theater and gradually coming to the realization that I was witnessing an important new development in the form. In my own household, a spring middle-school production of *The Lorax*, under the direction of the inestimable Zoey Zimmerman, quickly moved to Zoom, complete with matching green-screens. Yet none of us considered it anything but a remedial response, making the best of an awful situation in an attempt to honor the work already sunk into the production.

Gradually, what had at first seemed like a quick fix became instead hugely enabling—not just a life-raft but a flotilla of rapidly proliferating possibilities. As productions multiplied and it became clear that digital theater meant watching anything, anywhere, anytime, those possibilities became both inspiring and overwhelming—I am surely not the only one to have “attended” more productions than ever in 2020. This is my chronicle of an intense period of trial and transformation for theater-makers and audiences alike.<sup>8</sup>

Even as my archive grew with each passing week, I felt an increasing urgency to help practitioners learn of the exciting possibilities developing across the world. This is hardly the usual role for a critic, but the form I was examining was changing so fast that the possibilities seemed to multiply with each iteration. At the same time, though things were difficult for scholars and universities, to be sure, they were absolutely dire for theater artists. I thus hoped to help catalyze and promote what the most adventurous companies were doing, so others could learn from them or at least take heart. Many theater folk with faculty appointments were also trying to mobilize, as we recognized how we might put our own relative good fortune to use, both within and beyond the university. While colleagues who taught theater and performance guided students encountering the new digital stage, as in Erith Jaffe-Berg’s heroic move of the entire UC Riverside Playworks Festival of plays written and performed by students online in May 2020, others sought new ways to hire artists, while yet others turned to analyzing and describing the transformations occurring at a dizzying pace.

I was thrilled to encounter the work of Princeton director and theater professor Elena Araoz, who had recently launched her Innovations in Socially Distant

Performance project, including a website replete with information aimed at practitioners.<sup>9</sup> Together, we started Digital and Distanced Advances in the Theater Arts (DDATA), a database of productions, and announced it on *HowlRound*.<sup>10</sup> I also turned to *HowlRound* to publicize the work of director and media designer Jared Mezzocchi, a pioneer in adapting technology from analog to digital spaces, whose chilling *Russian Troll Farm* was one of the most inventive and powerful pieces in my archive.<sup>11</sup>

Though our DDATA list was soon rendered obsolete by the explosion in digital performances, there was still room for convening artists and theater professionals to discuss the radical transformations theater was undergoing. Ironically, 2020–21 was to be my year serving as Clark professor at UCLA, directing a series of programs on Hispanic *comedia* in performance. With the institution's support, we pivoted to a series of online workshops that explored how COVID-19 had impacted the entire theatrical landscape—actors, directors, curators, producers, critics, and more. The Black Lives Matter protests in the wake of the killing of George Floyd added a new urgency to efforts to remake theater in fairer, more diverse ways, and to ensure access for all.<sup>12</sup> At UCLA, in addition to convening two Zoom roundtables, we commissioned a set of short pieces that explored the intersection between the classics and digital theater, offering artists a chance to explore the possibilities with the university's support.

The LA Escena festival in November 2020 occurred mostly online and thus reached a much wider audience than our initial, in-person edition in Los Angeles in 2018. Featuring live and streamed work commissioned for the digital stage, as well as a distanced guided walk through the city, it brought together performers from Málaga to Mexico City and offered the participating companies the chance to reach viewers across the world. Its poetic emotional highlight was perhaps when grumelot, in a piece on Sor Juana's lyric poetry commissioned for the festival, asked the viewers on Zoom to join the actors by turning on their cameras, and to point them toward the nearest window, so that we could all look out on the sky we shared across the world.

I wrapped up my manuscript at the beginning of January 2021, in a rush of optimism at the imminence of vaccination and such hopeful, innovative work as Theater in Quarantine's *I Am Sending You the Sacred Face* and the crowdsourced *Ratatouille: The TikTok Musical*.<sup>13</sup> Yet the pandemic continued to ravage theater long after that point, and untold numbers of productions, companies, and performing spaces are no more. There are also real and pressing questions about how much of the change that theater underwent in this period will prove permanent. Will theaters be able to maintain the access that was such a valuable feature of the digital mode? Will the focus on uplifting people of color and their stories be a pressing concern for the industry next year, or was its urgency fleeting? Will digital theater return to being a niche experiment, or will it preserve some of the audience that delighted in a new form? It was my great privilege to chronicle and theorize what occurred in 2020, as the pandemic paradoxically freed me to pursue performance studies as I had never done before, to follow a form transforming before my eyes, in an interlude at once devastating and riveting.

BARBARA FUCHS is Distinguished Professor of Spanish and English at UCLA. She is founder and director of the Working Group on the *Comedia* in Translation and Performance and its Diversifying the Classics initiative, which has promoted Hispanic classical theater since 2014. In 2018 she founded LA Escena. She has published widely on early modern literature and culture and contemporary performance. She has also translated a range of early modern Hispanic classics. Her most recent book is *Theater of Lockdown: Digital and Distanced Performance in a Time of Pandemic* (2022). In 2021 her work to promote Hispanic language and culture was recognized with the inaugural Premio Ñ from Spain's Instituto Cervantes.

### Acknowledgments

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### Notes

- 1 See <https://diversifyingtheclassics.humanities.ucla.edu/>.
- 2 For an account of this initiative, see Fuchs, "Comedia Unbound."
- 3 Fernández, "En Otro Reino Extraño"; Fernández, "Classical Theatre."
- 4 See Fuchs, "Distanced Devotion"; and Fuchs, "End Meeting for All."
- 5 Key texts include Giannachi, *Virtual Theatres*; Dixon, *Digital Performance*; Parker-Starbuck, *Cyborg Theatre*; Auslander, "Digital Liveness"; and Lavender, "Internet, Theatre, and Time."
- 6 Paulson, "There's Not Much Work"; Paulson, "She Gave Up a Lot"; and Paulson, "Are Streamed Plays Theater or TV?"
- 7 This may also be a theatrical in-joke, given that Forced Entertainment's *Complete Works: Table Top Shakespeare* (2015) used cans and other such objects as the company "condensed versions of all of the Shakespeare plays, comically and intimately retelling them, using a collection of everyday objects as stand-ins for the characters on the one metre stage of an ordinary table top." Table Top Shakespeare was presented in a streamed version during the pandemic, including by the Center for the Art of Performance, UCLA. See <https://www.forcedentertainment.com/projects/complete-works-table-top-shakespeare/>.
- 8 Fuchs, *Theater of Lockdown*, 1.
- 9 See <https://www.sociallydistantperformance.com>.
- 10 Araoz, "Crowdsourcing Theatre Practice."
- 11 Gancher, *Russian Troll Farm*. See also Mezzocchi, "Reverse-Engineering Zoom with Isadora."
- 12 See the "We See You, White American Theater" manifesto at <https://www.weseeyouwat.com>.

- 13 Christian, *I Am Sending You the Sacred Face* (for more videos from the Theater in Quarantine series, see <https://www.joshuawilliamgelb.com/theater-in-quarantine>); Breslin and Foley, *Ratatouille: The TikTok Musical*.

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