

The Potentials and Challenges of Zoom Live Theatre during Coronavirus Lockdown: *Pandemic Therapy* and *Corona Chicken (Part Two)*

This study discusses the potentials and challenges of Zoom theatre performances during the lockdown caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. It examines the utilization and applicability of videoconferencing software Zoom, and other streaming software compatible with it, in creating a viable performance option for theatre practitioners and audiences during mandatory social distancing. Such software can be a strategy for social inclusion, alleviating the adverse effects of extended quarantine. The article also discusses the technical and performative aspects of Zoom theatre, pointing out its pros and cons. It uses a critical and analytical approach to performances of two Zoom plays, *Pandemic Therapy* and *Corona Chicken (Part Two)*, revealing how the playwright, dramaturg, and actors manage to present a live theatrical experience capable of engaging audiences and promoting social interaction. Khaled Mostafa Karam is an Assistant Professor of English Literature at the Suez University in Egypt and a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Cognitive Science, Case Western Reserve University, USA. He has published eleven articles on the interdisciplinary field of cognitive science and drama. Galal Mohamed Naguib is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Suez University and author of several articles in the fields of demographic analysis and the sociology of art.

Key terms: videoconferencing, theatre technology, Covid-19 pandemic, social inclusion, cultural continuity.

IT IS ARGUED here that theatre art, as utilized in Zoom live performance, is flexible, organic, and adaptable as it manages to cope with the restraints imposed by the pandemic, adapting its form and content to embrace the current social obligations and issues ensuing from the pandemic. This article concerns the innovative contribution of Zoom live theatre practised by several academic institutions and theatre organizations during the lockdown, aiming at cultural continuity and social inclusion.

The contemporary technological advances and transformation in the current social and epistemological atmosphere have necessitated the emergence of literary forms coping with the cyberspace which increasingly pervades all aspects of contemporary life and offers viable alternatives for in-person communication, especially in the time of the

pandemic. 2020 became the year of massive videoconferencing and all sorts of online communication, and theatre was no exception. Theatre and literature are important forms of human communication, so they are subject to the alterations brought by the current prevalence of cyberspace, social media, and videoconferencing, leading to a growing tendency to process a version of everything we experience through the cyberspace which is more accessible all the time and everywhere: 'New technologies both enable technologically dependent theatre and facilitate new modes of performance outside of traditional venues. Understanding these connections is thus not just a matter of theatre and performance studies, but necessary for a broader comprehension of contemporary culture.'¹

Yet, while distance learning and videoconferencing are gaining more popularity, theatre

has to cope with this epistemological and cultural change as a tool for active education, social inclusion, cultural interaction, and entertainment. Practising theatre through the cyberspace is not a substitute for live theatre, however, but a viable performance alternative that suits specific conditions and meets the requirements of particular groups who love the theatre but cannot go to an actual theatre. Zoom theatre is not a broadcast of a pre-recorded show, for it offers live theatrical experience close to that of attending a real theatre. It manages to create a theatre-like experience during the unprecedented crisis of lockdown. It embraces the reality of our current situation and tries to make the best of it. This research adopts a critical analytical approach in the study of two Zoom plays, *Pandemic Therapy* and *Corona Chicken (Part Two)*, both performed in the LAUNCH PAD Zoom Festival as part of an ambitious project titled *Alone, Together*, launched by the University of California, Santa Barbara, during the first wave of the pandemic in 2020.

Art and Digital Inclusion as a Social Interventionist Approach during Lockdown

Drawing on Niklas Luhmann's approach to exclusion/inclusion, this study argues that digital inclusion achieved through Zoom theatre is a viable solution to the problem of maintaining the social integration and communication desperately required during the stressful period of lockdown. Exclusion and inclusion are pairs of a binary opposition, playing a fundamental role in understanding the relation between society and the individual, the structure and function of art, and the societal function of social work.

According to Niklas Luhmann's theory, the concept of inclusion means that human beings are held relevant in communication, so they are considered as communicative addressees, bearers of roles, and as accountable actors.² Although exclusion is operative in modern society, inclusion in some function systems and organizations is vital for a satisfactory social life. Exclusion designates the situation where people are not considered to be relevant participants in communication and

therefore are not given communicative address.³ Consequently, such human beings cannot benefit from the performances which the function systems in society offer, such as social services, health care, and culture. Luhmann argues that inclusion is fulfilled whenever a social system recognizes the particular relevance of organic and psychic systems in its environment and when it makes them participate in the system's communication.⁴ Zoom theatre mostly fulfils this social function as it tackles universal issues which involve and concern all people who suffer from the inevitable effects of the pandemic, engaging them as active participants in live performance.

In his social theory of art, Luhmann argues that the art system 'gains the advantage of making its mechanism of inclusion/exclusion largely independent of the inclusions and exclusions of other functional systems'.⁵ He explains that art depends on exclusion in its structure, which is deployed for the self-limitation of art; it is based on highlighting or foregrounding a specific human condition and excluding 'many previously possible choices – such as the depiction of situations belonging to different temporal frames'.⁶ Thus, art, as a form, enables the observation of something by the exclusion of something else. Luhmann calls this exclusion the 'autonomy of the art system'.⁷ However, concerning the function and social effect of art, Luhmann observes that art should be translated into technical instructions for producing aesthetics 'intelligible to anyone', thus accomplishing 'meaningful communication' and the 'comprehensive inclusion' of observers in the work of art.⁸ Consequently, 'the art system, in addressing the general public in a specific manner, had to leave room for the inclusion of everybody, just like any other functional system'.⁹

Zoom theatre in its composition and structure represents a state of exclusion as it is technically adapted to be streamed through a specific technological platform in an unprecedented time and circumstances, but it is dedicated to achieving a function system of art in which people can be engaged in either 'performance roles' or 'layman roles', which are two types of inclusion.¹⁰ The practitioners,

actors, and organizers of Zoom theatre adopt performance roles as they fulfil creative and communal functions required by the function system of art in order to keep an art form – theatre – going on. Audiences adopt laymen roles as they are the recipients of the systems' performances carried out by the performance roles. Through the effective communication between the two roles, inclusion, which is 'the key to an adequate life in modern society', takes place.¹¹ Zoom theatre is an embodiment of this social inclusion as it allows vital interaction between performers and audiences in 'the art system'.¹² Furthermore, this digital medium enables audiences to be active participants through the options of communication offered by Zoom software.

During the time of social distancing, variable function systems of society working in health, education, culture, and so on depend on digital inclusion to maintain their functions. Accordingly, the adaptation of technological services to achieve digital inclusion through online platforms such as Zoom videoconferencing has become a necessity for decreasing passive exclusion and reinforcing social inclusion in the function systems dedicated to mitigate the negative effects of the pandemic. Thus, the current pandemic crisis has revealed that people who are digitally and socially excluded have become more vulnerable due to the lack of accessibility. Therefore, the Covid pandemic and its general shift to digital life have created a critical need to increase the digital inclusion and literacy of specific social groups, especially older people, the handicapped, people suffering from anxiety disorder, and similar exclusionary characteristics.¹³

Moreover, these interactive media platforms have become crucial for enhancing socialization as well as maintaining emotional connection among adolescents.¹⁴ Prasun Chatterjee and Santosh Yatnatti argue that the interaction between different generations through videoconferencing does not only reinforce intergenerational solidarity but also promotes a positive psychological state of keeping older adults connected and cultivates the cultural and cognitive awareness of youth and children.¹⁵ Interactive media platforms

also allow adolescents to enhance individual and collective creativity and social inclusion through sharing artistic activities, podcasts, live performances, and videos.¹⁶ Accordingly, digital inclusion has become an indispensable tool of social interventionist effort at the centre of the response to the pandemic. Contemporary studies relate prolonged social isolation to passive social and psychological effects, including depression, anxiety disorder, and accelerated cognitive decline.¹⁷ Nowadays, Zoom videoconferencing and social media are fundamental strategies deployed to help people to overcome this stressful period and limit these adverse effects.

Zoom Theatre

Zoom Theatre provides live theatre entertainment in a context safe for all, abiding by the necessary rules of social distancing. Several academic institutions and theatre organizations have resorted to the Zoom platform as a viable alternative to live theatre during the pandemic lockdown. Vaughan Pilikian argues that in the time of lockdown, which abolished all cultural events, surely virtual space could simply supersede physical space: 'Production could thereby be re-initiated in a newly mediated form. This was a fundamental imperative since without it culture would simply cease to be.'¹⁸ Online theatre festivals introduced themselves as a response to a rapidly changing world at an unprecedented time in order to 'stay creative' and 'bind audiences and network with other practitioners'.¹⁹

The adaptation of this online videoconferencing software to theatre performance is an act of interdisciplinary creativity, merging technology and theatre in a virtual space. For contemporary playmakers, 'the technology is the show. As a reflection of the tech-savvy world in which we live, their productions are saturated with technology.'²⁰ Andy Lavender expected that the theatre of the twenty-first century would be 'hybrid' – a collage of arts, techniques, and media and an exciting, groundbreaking, all-inclusive experience closely engaged with the technological advances and quickening socio-economic pulse of our times.²¹ There are three basic

features of Zoom theatre.²² Performances are specifically selected and staged for webcam presentation, lending themselves to online media. Instead of watching the show through the auditorium, spectators can watch the live performance, moment by moment, through the screen of their computer or smartphone from their seats at home, making homes in quarantine an extension of live theatre. Every performance is live for a limited, pre-registered audience, so online registration replaces tickets. Those who exceed the limited number of Zoom attendees can follow its stream on YouTube or Facebook, but they will not be as interactive as live participants watching through Zoom. Registered audiences can participate in the show and notice the actors' response to their laughing and clapping.

Though Zoom theatre lacks some assets of live theatre, it includes dramatic and theatrical potentials that enable it to be an operational solution that maintains theatre from dying altogether in such hard times: 'Live streamed performance is not the same as live performance in a theatre, but properly presented, the essence of theatre remains.'²³ It also keeps theatre practitioners, theatre lovers, and students in cultural activity and social interaction during quarantine, acting as therapy for the psychological stress resulting from restrictions regarding in-person communication. Pilikian notes: 'Alienation has been defeated by restoring the individual to himself, virtually rather than actually . . . All of this takes place through the exchange mechanism that is online communication.'²⁴ Nadja Masura indicates that the technological tools like the videoconferencing used to create innovative digital multisite theatre are now being used by theatre practitioners to connect when real rehearsals or co-present performances are not allowed.²⁵ The pandemic alters the methods of communication so live streaming 'as a medium of communication and connection has become not just a fancy entertainment device but the only viable alternative'.²⁶

Audiences naturally do not expect to have a perfect performance because they are aware of the technological limitations of digital live theatre and the restrictions of pandemic time when almost all cultural and social activities

are transacted through cyberspace to conform to mandatory distancing. As Patrick Nims argues, 'The motto of Zoom Theatre has become "embrace the limitations of the medium".'²⁷ He also acknowledges that, based on audiences' feedback and comments, they have also embraced this effort and found this live experience satisfactory. Moreover, in the time of limited resources and confinement during the pandemic, it has been exciting and beyond the audiences' expectation to watch a live performance at home in which they can be interactive participants. For this reason, it is forgivable if there are some technical mishaps along the way. Zoom theatre manages to provide its own pleasures, challenges, and limitations: 'The indispensable fact about Zoom is that it combines, in uncanny ways, both the effects of intimacy (close-ups, close quarters, proximity between object and body) with the possibilities of distancing (we are both here and there, but not exactly).'²⁸ Audiences can adjust to this new medium as long as the employed theatrical craft can engage them with the story, action, and performance, regardless of the technology used in its broadcast.

Technical and Theatrical Features of Zoom Live Performance

Technically speaking, it is important to understand how Zoom functions, and what options it offers, in order to understand its compatibility to host live performances. In Zoom, there are two available operating systems – meeting and webinar. In meeting application, host, cohost, and participants can mute/unmute their microphones, share their screen, and participate in the show without the control or permission of the host. Its capacity ranges from 100 to 1,000, depending on plan and licence. Therefore, it is convenient for rehearsals. In webinar application, in addition to the host and cohost, there are two types of participants: panellists and attendees.²⁹ Panellists can be seen and heard, so this option is given to performers. Attendees can join the event and watch what is going on, but their microphones are muted, and they cannot unmute them by themselves. Their videos

are permanently off. They cannot share their screen. This option, then, is convenient for the role and requirements of audiences. Only the host can enable or turn on the attendees' microphone to allow their reactions and responses to be heard by actors. Then, each attendee will be able to click the mic button to choose whether to be mute or unmute.

Webinar is designed for larger kinds of broadcasts and audiences. Its capacity also ranges between 100 and 1,000 participants, according to licence. It also has the ability to stream to Facebook and YouTube live, and enables the host to act like a stage crew by controlling the video layout, allowing audiences to see the screen in different modes – great view, gallery view, or speaker mode. There is also a registration site for granting access email to audiences which acts like booking a performance ticket. Zoom live performance is addressed to pre-limited registered audiences. Therefore the host can easily go to the option 'Invite Attendee' and click on the option copy for the invitation and send it to the registered audiences. The invitation includes the meeting link and meeting ID.

Some technical devices can be installed to expand the performance potentials. Additional webcams can be attached to performers' computers to give a broader visual range, especially if the performance requires movement in the room. Wireless mics can be used to allow free movement away from the computer desk. Green screens are used as the background for actors, and they must fill the frame of the camera range to allow the effect to take place. Once inside Zoom on the virtual background setting window, ticking on the button 'I have a green screen' allows to change background colour or select and upload the required virtual background image from the personal computer. The space between the actor and the green screen must be estimated properly so that the virtual background image fills the whole window and avoids the appearance of the green screen in margins. The green-screen feature in Zoom allows using video and graphic elements to enhance the viewing experience. A remote-control software can be used to enable the stage manager to control

the screen of panellists/actors and manage turning on and off their windows to signal their entrance and exist. This option frees actors from the disturbance of keeping their hands on the mouse to control their windows.

Concerning production staffing, it is basically the same team you would have for a conventional theatre performance. The production staffing includes two main sets, a design team, and a performance team. The former includes the director, background designer, costumer, sound designer, and lighting designer. The latter includes the house manager, stage manager, and stage crew. The stage manager operates rehearsals. She/he is also responsible for entrances and exits of actors and the management of the order of panellists/actors' appearance on the screen. The order of turning on the actors' video in the main screen is very important, especially if there are two characters facing each other in a dialogue. Mismanagement may make actors look in opposite directions instead of looking at each other. Every actor should know their turn and the right time when to join the show by turning on their video.

The background designer, who has sufficient experience in graphic design, can choose virtual backgrounds to enhance the visual effect. To create virtual integration between adjacent windows or panels, she/he can take an image which spans both screens, split it in half, and use each half as a background for each actor's computer. The virtual background images are downloaded in each actor's individual computer; they can then be selected and switched instantaneously, according to the succession of scenes. These graphic effects and shared background can help to solidify the setting and virtually conceal the frames between the separate windows, giving a virtual impression that characters exist in the same place.

The lighting designer checks the light sources in the variable locations of actors. She/he may recommend using window blinds to conceal external light, decide the light direction, and add lighting devices such as an LED panel or studio light to illuminate the actors' faces. She/he can also use the video setting in the Zoom panel to adjust lighting by

clicking on the manual button. The sound designer controls the sound cues and inserts them directly into the stream to avoid delay between image and sound, improving the quality of sound effects. Stage props can be utilized within the Zoom stage and camera range to add dramatic significance to the show. Costumes can be selected by a director or a costumer, and shipped to actors in their different locations.

Zoom live theatre-makers always use live streaming software to add engaging audio-visual effects to their performance and enhance the interaction between actors and audiences. This live streaming software can insert multiple media into Zoom video boxes, alleviating and evading the fixity of its frames and the limited scope of panellists' movement. It adds an extra layer of visual enhancement through inserting virtual props, scenery, costumes, and such. Open Broadcaster Software (or OBS) Studio is an open-source software used to make multiple media sources and stream it live through any videoconference platform. The main user interface includes five sections: scenes, sources, audio mixer, transitions, and controls. It composes a variety of scenes and enables the scenic designer and stage manager to switch between real-time video/audio capturing, different camera angles, multiple inputs, backgrounds, and foregrounds, seamlessly mixing with unlimited scenes.³⁰

Scene option includes groups of sources, such as live and recorded video, text, and audio. The mixer panel allows the operator to mute/unmute the audio, adjust the volume, and apply variable effects. It also allows for a live video preview, used to examine and edit the current scene. Actors can easily control the flow of the pre-designed background scenes by clicking on a sequence of buttons, or the stage manager can do this job using remote-control. OBS virtual cameras can be easily connected to the Zoom platform by going to the video-setting button and scrolling up; the option of 'select a camera' includes the choice of OBS virtual camera.

Accordingly, the intersection between performance, media, and technology can be utilized to enhance the theatrical experience rather than replace it. To create a virtual

theatre means to borrow from non-traditional modes of storytelling such as videoconference and audio-visual software, which can offer a large variety of effects and scene design. In other words, 'despite these challenges, understanding the connections among media, technology, and performance has never been more vital'.³¹ Incorporating new forms of technology and media into theatre has become a necessity and not a luxury, especially in the time of lockdown.

The technological and dramaturgical aspects of Zoom theatre reflect its ability to host a live performance including all the prerequisites of real theatre. Robert Scanlan argues that the existence of a central action developing in a certain form, and connecting functional characters drawn into its sphere, is the basic prerequisite of theatre.³² Since Zoom theatre fulfils these dramatic requirements of action and interaction between characters, and manages to engage audiences, it represents a form of theatre, even if actors and audience do not physically exist in the same place.

Cons and Challenges in Zoom Live Theatre

In 'Digital Theatre isn't Theatre. It's a Way to Mourn its Absence', Laura Collins-Hughes argues that virtual theatre fails to achieve the same interactive effect of live theatre, so there is no substitute for the live interaction between performers and audiences.³³ She explains that, in real live theatre, audiences are bodily immersed in an experience, sharing a single space, so that they emerge at the finish of those performances imprinted with sense memories. Technology, in her view, strips theatre of its original vitality and human interaction, reducing the theatrical experience to a mechanical composition and interaction between audiences and flat screens.

Negative reviews about the practitioners of digital theatre criticize 'their collusion with a future of new technology that leaves the tradition of theatre behind'.³⁴ Shannon Jackson and Marianne Weems explain that anti-technological discourse argues that the 'digital age' mesmerizes audiences and draws them away from the finer forms of the drama,

thus depriving spectators of the communal, even mystical, powers of theatrical presence.³⁵ Thus, 'in this alarmed discourse, technology is always the enemy of the theatre, an all-consuming colonizer of the superior art form'.³⁶ Digital live theatre is demeaned mainly because it fails to achieve effective engagement with all variables of the performance. Oppositional views further argue that many plays, including canonical ones, will not work well, particularly those that need big stage machinery or extensive effects and movements.

Technically speaking, there are many difficulties that disturb and distract both practitioners and audiences in running and enjoying virtual live theatre. Lagging connection can cause interruption and distortion in the Zoom live show. Sometimes you have to reduce the quality of video to keep performance from lagging and lower pressure on wi-fi service. It requires high upload speed and access to a reliable internet in order to have smooth performance flow. Fast computer and stable internet connection are not easy to handle for all actors and audiences, specifically with unexpected technical troubles and weather conditions, which may affect connection. The event requires complex, costly technological equipment such as, for instance, external webcams, wireless mics, and software for remote control.

Moreover, limitations in camera range, angle of vision, and resolution influence the quality of display, and restrain the actors' movements. Sudden and quick gestures appear hazy, and confuse communication with audiences. In Zoom, there is no cross-fading, which makes a picture or sound appear gradually as another disappears or becomes silent. Loud sounds under dialogues must be avoided; otherwise the actors' voices are distorted. When sound cues become loud and overlap, Zoom faces difficulties in mixing conflicting audio sources, and the result can consequently sound cluttered or unclear. When several people speak across Zoom simultaneously, the software fails to handle synchronized voice sources, leading to sound distortion. When live underscoring is played in the audio background of the scene, even in

moderate volume, actors always fail to hear themselves or the other actors. This restrains the use of sound effects, which are significant in many performances.

There are also some passive performative and operating issues. Actors may get distracted because they are sometimes required to keep their hands on the mouse to switch a background image or control their entrance and exit. Instead of focusing on performance and their roles, actors are required to practise some technical skills in order to manage the utilized software. The master host cannot control the actors' video and audio settings unless they use a remote control software that allows them to log into each actor's personal computer. Some actors may refuse this option because it leads to the loss of confidentiality of their devices. There is no inbuilt control panel in Zoom to enable the host or co-host to manage and change panellists' video display, virtual backgrounds, or audio settings.

The host or stage manager does not have the ability to pin or change the actor's window positions to specific locations or direction in accordance with the scene design. The control of the scene integration between several windows requires a complex and confusing arrangement of actors' entrances and exits. Mismanagement of this order can confuse actors and distort scene display. Another challenge is that each actor must separately prepare a convenient performance space with proper lighting and window covers to avoid direct sunlight. The space should also be devoid of loud noise, so housemates must be informed about these considerations. These facilities and requirements must be prepared simultaneously in the multiple locations where actors reside. In real theatre, all these facilities are naturally available in one location.

Pros and Potentials of Zoom Live Theatre

This part points out the pros of Zoom live theatre and offers some solutions for the technical and performative issues indicated in the previous section. In this universal moment of pause, 'it is the digital half of Digital Theatre which remains. Technology, like videoconferencing which once seemed so cutting-edge

and optional, is now essential in not just creating but also sustaining family and community.³⁷ Thus, theatre can be empowered and revived by technology when all cultural activities requiring gathering are suspended because of the pandemic.

Zoom is an encrypted program, so all virtual webinars and videoconferences happen over secure connections. This secure quality prevents unauthorized access and protects licence rights. Easy access is a remarkable feature of Zoom. After the participants register in Zoom and download the application, they can instantly join the show just by clicking on the link sent to them by the performance host in the invitation.

Zoom is a flexible software which allows variable software programs to stream through its webcam, enhancing the audio-visual experience of the show. This advantage gives directors, designers, and stage managers viable options to work with. For example, the OBS virtual camera can be easily connected to the Zoom platform. This program gives variable media sources and graphic designs that can improve the visual effects of the show. Zoom also assigns to QLab, a software program used to control sound and video effects. Through QLab, you can insert background or lobby music. QLab can also handle discreet sound effects, such as a telephone ringing or a siren, which sound good when they are low and short.

Moreover, the house manager can share the management of the Zoom house or show with one or more co-hosts. This option is called an alternative host, which enables the main host or house manager to add co-hosts having the same capabilities and functions within the performance. The role of alternative host can be given to the stage manager, sound designer, or technician to help run the show. The Zoom host or co-host can use a remote-control software to free actors from distraction, which may happen when actors themselves handle some technical issues during performance, like switching the background image, or managing their entrance and exit. The use of a remote-control software allows a member of the technical crew to log into the actors' personal computers and control them.

This remote control allows actors to move freely within the range of the camera without having to keep their hands on the mouse. Furthermore, an external additional camera can be attached to the computer to give a wider range of viewing. Although Zoom theatre requires a lot of technological equipment, it has production costs lower than real live theatre.

Zoom theatre can provide access to theatre shows for a wider range of audiences, including those who cannot go to the theatre because of geographic or physical impediments such as distance, disability, old age, or sickness. Accordingly, 'Zoom offers the ability to communicate in real time with geographically dispersed individuals via computer, tablet, or mobile device'.³⁸ Thus, a significant privilege of Zoom live theatre is accessibility and availability, because any device that can contact the internet can use Zoom. Actors, crews, and audiences from different countries and across variable time zones can participate in one live performance. They can also rehearse entirely live on Zoom, avoiding the burden and cost of long travel. Thus, in terms of participation, Zoom admits no geographical or temporal barriers. This advantage has engaged many people simultaneously in a cultural activity, generating social inclusion desperately needed during the stressful time of mandatory social isolation.

Zoom includes some features that enhance audience engagement in the performance. These features allow interaction between audiences and the cast before, during, and after the performance. There are variable features that can be activated to stimulate audience interaction and receive their feedback, such as chat, messaging, polling, and emoji. David Owen argues that digital performance can be as effective as traditional live theatre as long as it can engage the audiences affectively and urge them to be interactive.³⁹ Thus, 'the experience is not dependent on being real or virtual, but on what affect it creates in the participant/audience'.⁴⁰ Before or after the show, the host can launch a quick polling and gather responses from audiences. She/he also has the ability to download a polling report after the meeting. Moreover, audiences

can participate in a show by unmuting their microphones and responding verbally, or by texting through the chat feature available on Zoom, allowing for the existence of both live performance and live audiences. Playmakers and cast can receive feedback on their work, creating a comprehensive theatrical experience for all. Patrick Nims confirms that Zoom theatre creates a sense of community and oneness as performers can instantaneously hear the responses of the audiences and interact with them, thereby creating a communicative bond which happens in the real theatre.⁴¹

The host or performance manager can enable the non-verbal feedback and meeting reactions features, so that audiences can express their feelings and place an icon in their video panel and beside their name in the participants panel to communicate with the host and other participants without interrupting the flow of the performance. They can, for example, select the icon of clapping. Icons include several emoji reactions, such as Thumbs Up, Face with Tears of Joy, Face with Open Mouth, Smiling Face, and Heart. All participants, including actors, can see the icons that everyone else has chosen, letting the performers know the audiences' thoughts and feelings. This feature can reinforce live interaction between audiences and performers, achieving a simulated experience of the real live theatre. Accordingly, Zoom theatre is effective in creating rapport with audiences. Videoconferencing tools allow audiences to see facial impressions and physical gestures through a closer perspective as the performer is brought to the close screens of the audiences' personal computers or smartphones. This proximity and close-up make the virtual performance truly intimate, immersive, and interactive.

Zoom live theatre can be utilized as a therapeutic and social interventionist approach that can promote social inclusion and alleviate stress and anxiety disorder through offering entertainment which can engage audiences and tackle their common problems during the pandemic. For example, Jami Brandli's *Pandemic Therapy* (2020), a Zoom play, offers suggestions about how people in quarantine can reduce psychological stress through

shared familial activities and mutual consideration.⁴² Before the outbreak of the current pandemic, Steven Taylor expected that, in the next pandemic, 'much of the assessment and treatment of mental health problems could be conducted by videoconferencing . . . available on the internet'.⁴³ He argues that a Screen-and-Treat Approach, conducted through online communication and based on engagement between people who suffer from stress, on the one hand, and therapists on the other, will be a viable tool in treating the negative psychological effects of pandemic anxiety. Zoom live theatre is capable of achieving this therapeutic and sociological function because of its inherent potential to engage audiences empathetically and treat common social issues. In this way, it can stimulate social inclusion and empathic communication through a process of sharing compatible emotions and thoughts between the source and recipient of empathy, cultivating reciprocity across space and time.⁴⁴

Unlike other videoconferencing technologies, Zoom possesses several additional advantages that enhance its potential theatrical utility. A significant advantage is its ability to organize and control performance through the capabilities and functions given to the house host and co-host and the distribution of roles, panellists, and attendees. The host can also control muting and unmuting of audience microphones, individually or generally. This enables the host to control noise which may interrupt the performance or distract actors. Even in real theatrical performance these troubles of noise or interruption sometimes happen, and the crew needs to know how to handle and make use of them. Through the option of chat and messaging, Zoom enables the director to send comments or directions to the crew members offstage.

Zoom Performance of *Corona Chicken* (Part Two)

Cheryl L. West's *Corona Chicken (Part Two)* (2020) is published in a collection titled *Alone, Together*. The thirty-nine plays in this anthology mainly illustrate many perspectives on life during the early days of lockdown.

They 'brilliantly offer moments of joy, pathos, insight, hope, and comfort knowing we are never really alone'.⁴⁵ *Corona Chicken* is presented as a part of a project launched by the University of California, Santa Barbara, Department of Theater and Dance, and LAUNCH PAD Zoom Festival (2020). The faculty commissioned playwrights to write monologues and plays specifically meant for Zoom performance. In this innovative project, thirty-nine plays were written, twenty-three directors engaged, sixty-one actors cast, and five stage managers, three designers, three dramaturgs, and ten staff assembled virtually, all creating together an all-day live Zoom festival.⁴⁶ The immediate goal was to create vibrant opportunities for theatre students when in-person productions at all schools and theatres across the world were cancelled, and everyone quickly pivoted to remote teaching. The playwrights in this collection combine writing and dramaturgy in composing their drama. They have managed to adapt their work for the Zoom stage, rendering an actable form and giving their performance a

structure that copes with both the limits and potentials of the Zoom platform.

This play is about a family squeezed between past and present sorrows.⁴⁷ They have lost a son in an accident, and they are currently struggling with the Covid-19 pandemic. The mother tries to keep her children's routine going by homeschooling them. She represses her past grief and present worries to run her familial affairs properly and keep their relations intact. The playwright wonders if this crisis could be 'an opportunity to reflect and reset our fractured souls and tenuous connections'.⁴⁸

The performance opens with four active panes, the one on the bottom left is occupied by the mother who sits at a table, the others are filled with 'three table settings with school supplies neatly stacked at each setting – pencils, workbooks, highlighters' (Figure 1).⁴⁹ Stage props are employed skilfully to create a virtually conceptual integration among the four panels. Three windows include similar school supplies with slight differences, and the mother's window includes some books on the left, used

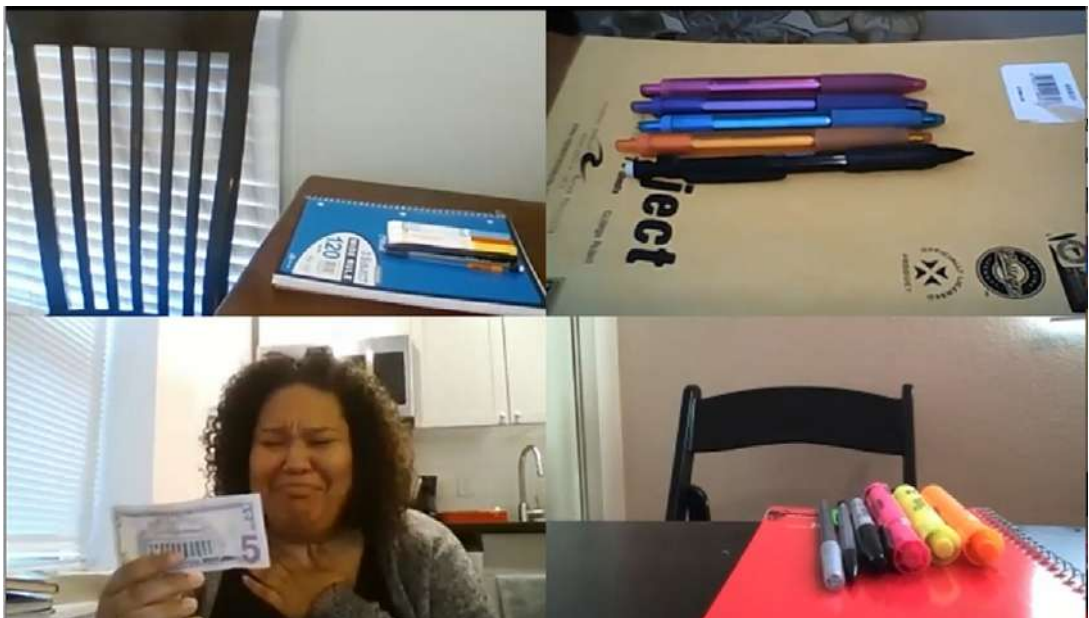


Figure 1. *Corona Chicken* (Part Two). The Zoom screen is divided in four active panes, but only one is occupied by an actor. All photographs: Risa Brainin, courtesy of University of California, Santa Barbara, Department of Theater and Dance LAUNCH PAD Zoom Festival.

as teaching aids. The four windows are spontaneously fused to form one virtual classroom at a home school adopted as an adaptive option to real schools shut down because of the pandemic.

The backgrounds look similar despite the slight difference in lighting, but this is typical of any setting in a real theatre as a result of difference in light direction and spotting. The four windows represent the four sitting sides of the table. After the mother calls her kids to come and sit for a new lesson, they enter the three empty panels simultaneously, creating an impression of co-existence in the same place: *'The news drones on in the background – something about the growth of more Covid-19 cases and hotspots.'*⁵⁰ The radio news in the background is used as a sound effect overwhelming the whole scene and acting as a unifying thread among all windows. The broadcaster declares that infection numbers are rapidly rising, and the situation in many states is dramatically aggravated.

The mother is much taken by her grief and the current economic crisis caused by lockdown. Her dramatic role embodies the common difficulties housewives undergo as a result of the social and psychological effects of the pandemic and quarantine. Studies show that women are among the groups most affected by the adverse health, economic, and other social effects of the Covid-19 epidemic.⁵¹ Social isolation and school closure place extra burdens on women, especially domestically because much of the responsibility for child-care falls on them. Here, the mother, Grace, organizes a homeschool and adopts the role of teaching to compensate for the suspension of regular school education. She tries to meet the educational and emotional needs of her children and to deal with the imposed economic difficulties, experiencing high levels of burn-out and loneliness. She sits alone contemplating the current situation: *'Grace sits at her kitchen table holding up a five-dollar bill while sobbing . . . The news drones on in the background – something about the growth of more Covid-19 cases and hotspots.'*⁵² She tries to compose herself and conceal her sorrows. *'Blows her nose, wipes her face with a cool rag . . . puts on her eyeglasses, then generously squirts on some hand*

*sanitizer.'*⁵³ She calls on her children to attend her home school.

Movement is also cleverly manipulated to virtually transcend and erase the separating frames between windows: *'In exasperation, Karen and Kirk both hit at Samantha.'*⁵⁴ Karen and Kirk simulate hitting Samantha, who, in response, screams and jerks back in anger. These simultaneous actions and reactions create a virtual enactment of presence in the same place. When the mother says, *'Sit as far apart as you can,'*⁵⁵ the kids move from the middle of the window towards the borders, creating a wider distance between them. Handing objects by actors across the zoom frames virtually reinforces the obliteration of frames between windows and achieves integration between actions done in different windows by actors sitting in distant geographical locations. Grace hands her kids activity books, and each receives a book in turn as soon as Grace initiates the action. The following two shots show the book handing between the mother and her son Kirk (Figures 2 and 3).

Kirk, an obstinate and indignant boy, always has a heated argument with his mother involving tense objections, short utterances, and immediate replies. He refuses to follow his mother's instruction or do the tasks she assigns, but she insists on making him participate in her home school. The performance of arguments, overtalking, actors' simultaneous speech, can cause troubles on Zoom because it fails to handle overlapping sounds well, leading to distortion or lag in performance. However, the actors overcome this problem without interrupting each other and without a lag in their dialogue. This requires practising slowing down the pace of their speech and avoiding voice overlap. Kirk's and his mother's heated argument is played out with increasingly louder voices, angry gestures, facial impressions, and tense verbal exchange, but the actors are attentive to avoid speaking or shouting simultaneously. Everyone accurately speaks in his turn. Moreover, Kirk expresses his objection to his mother's reproach and warning with indicative facial impressions and gestures, such as frowning, glaring, smiling mockingly, leaning back in his chair, or dropping his head. Thus, facial



Figure 2. *Corona Chicken (Part Two)*. Grace hands Kirk a book. Roz Cornejo as Grace, the mother (bottom left); Frances Domingos as Kirk, the son (bottom right); Carissa Stewart as Karen, the daughter (top right); and Magan Tran as Samantha, the second daughter (top left).



Figure 3. *Corona Chicken (Part Two)*. Kirk receives the book in the following shot.

impressions and gestures are deployed cleverly here to replace immediate verbal response and avoid voice overlap.

Kirk is reluctant to participate in the home school, so his remarks are indignant. He challenges his mother's authority and talks imprudently, but she tries hard to calm him down. Their argument is suddenly interrupted by the loud music that always precedes news broadcasts playing in the background. The collective reaction to this sound stimulus reflects the simultaneity of their responses, reinforcing the impression of the actors being all in the same place. They all immediately look back at the source of the erupting sound (Figure 4).

Kirk wants to turn off the broadcast, since it says nothing new, but his mother refuses, claiming that 'very smart minds are working to corral this virus and keep us all safe'.⁵⁶ Kirk cynically replies: 'I thought parents were supposed to keep you safe.'⁵⁷ He alludes to his mother's past negligence and culpability in the accident that caused the loss of their young brother. 'The kids exchange apprehensive looks',⁵⁸ which are artfully connected through the frames of their panes, creating a virtual

common ground between actors who actually exist physically in different places.

Kirk expresses his pessimistic attitude, saying that they all will die like their brother Bertie. 'If the virus doesn't get us, then . . .' he begins,⁵⁹ but his mother interrupts him nervously and orders him to finish his assignment. The tense argument between her and Kirk is comprised of short utterances, interrupted with pauses and shouting. This play mirrors the common familial, social, and psychological troubles resulting from extended quarantine. People undergo terrible nervous pressure, feeling that their life is threatened by imminent danger. Studies suggest that children are more affected by quarantine restrictions during the pandemic because of boredom, restrictions on their social activities, and anxiety about losing a family member.⁶⁰ Moreover, 'greater aggressive, anxious, or rebellious behaviours exhibited by children may be results of spending too much time with adults at home and having to change their daily routines'.⁶¹ These negative effects are cleverly portrayed in Grace's and Kirk's interactions and mother-son relationship.



Figure 4. *Corona Chicken (Part Two)*. The characters' simultaneous response to the sudden break of a news broadcast.

The mother does her best to control her anger at Kirk's obstinacy and rude declaration that he hates her. She calmly says: 'Okay, in this family, we don't hate. How we get through this time will be a test of our character. Hard times makes for strong people. Right?'⁶² This play shows how parents should be more understanding in dealing with their children, who are exposed to unusual circumstances and deprived of their routine activities during lockdown.

When Kirk again refers to the mother's culpability in his brother's accident, she rips out a piece of paper, then draws a big head with a shower of tears. She holds up her drawing to the kids, who stare at the picture across the table. Grace's erratic laughter turns to sobs. The children's facial impression changes, showing their sympathy. The news report drones on in the background, accompanied by the sound of the ambulance siren declaring the latest statistics of the pandemic. Then a news reporter says: 'Hopefully, our schools will soon reopen, once again providing millions of children with order, a much-needed routine to their lives . . .'⁶³ Finally, Kirk relents and tries to reconcile with his mother. The play ends with a shared action done by all family members. They stretch their arms to embrace

each other (Figure 5). Their arms meet across the borders of the panes, creating conceptual integration between all Zoom windows.

This play raises an urgent issue: the necessity of finding solutions and substitutes to satisfy children's social needs and reduce parents' childcare burdens during the pandemic. Moreover, parents should find practical, substitutive strategies to adapt to the social and psychological obligations of the extended time of the quarantine. Here the playwright suggests that familial solidarity, mutual gratitude, and reconciliation are seriously needed to go through the hard time of the pandemic.

Zoom Performance of *Pandemic Therapy*

Jami Brandli's *Pandemic Therapy* (2020) belongs to the same collection, *Alone, Together*.⁶⁴ It reflects the hardships of lockdown and captures our longing for connection. Brandli introduces the play in these words: 'I wanted to explore how a young married couple could have *very* different reactions to sheltering-in-place for seventy days. I also wanted to add a touch of the absurd with the therapist, the person who is supposed to be the most centered . . . and it becomes clear she is not.'⁶⁵



Figure 5. *Corona Chicken (Part Two)*. The family members stretch out their hands to embrace.

The married couple Kim and Stephen cope with lockdown in very different ways. Stephen and their therapist, Lori, try to coax Kim out of her home-office quarantine.

Because the play is written specifically for Zoom, the setting and the stage design are composed to cope with the display of Zoom screen and its separate windows. The husband and wife live in the same house, but the wife locks herself in the office during the quarantine and refuses to leave for reasons that seem to be more related to her psychological state. The husband spends his quarantine time by trying baking recipes. The husband and wife communicate with each other through virtual means (Figure 6). The background gives the impression that they are in the same house, although they stay in different rooms. They use a videoconference platform to communicate with their therapist Lori, according to a predetermined schedule.

When Stephen appears in his Zoom pane, he is wearing a colourful kitchen apron over his shirt, 'with white powder on the side of his face'.⁶⁶ Stephen's funny costumes and appearance reflect the oddity of this time when the lockdown forces him to stay at home for a long time and practise baking and cooking with which he is unfamiliar. Sound effects are utilized effectively to add a significant dimension to the atmosphere of the quarantine. Every now and then, Stephen's phone dings, and he immediately attends to it to text back. The phone's pinging and notification sounds reflect an increasingly prevalent activity during the quarantine, when business and social

communications are turned to cyberspace. Accordingly, unlike his wife, Stephen represents the type of person who manages to adapt to the restrictions and obligations of quarantine.

Kim, however, is obsessed with worries and irritations because of the pandemic, and she futilely tries to control her fears: 'I am trying to control my worst-case scenario thoughts – as you all know.'⁶⁷ Her husband's different reaction to the quarantine and the pandemic causes her more irritation. She says: 'For the last ten days, he's been in that kitchen 24/7, baking muffins, scones, cookies.'⁶⁸ His indifference to the threats of the current situation annoys his anxious wife, who is amazed: '*Calmly baking*, as if you're not concerned that the whole world is falling apart—!'⁶⁹ Through videoconferencing, she complains to her therapist about her husband's indifference:

And my thought begins to snowball into this huge monster feeling of anxiety and worry because I am not doing well at all. Like, *not at all*. One minute I'm depressed then the next minute I'm close to a full-blown freakout and here comes my husband with yet another masterpiece he's just baked and says, 'Here, taste this orange-glazed scone!' And I taste it, and it's so delicious that all I can feel is inadequacy and shame because I can't be like him right now. All I can be is *me* – which feels very much like the WORST version of me.⁷⁰

Thus, the play shows the inevitable psychological and social changes imposed by the pandemic. Studies point out that this wife's traumatic stress and anxiety disorder are widespread symptoms shared by people compelled to stay at home during the extended

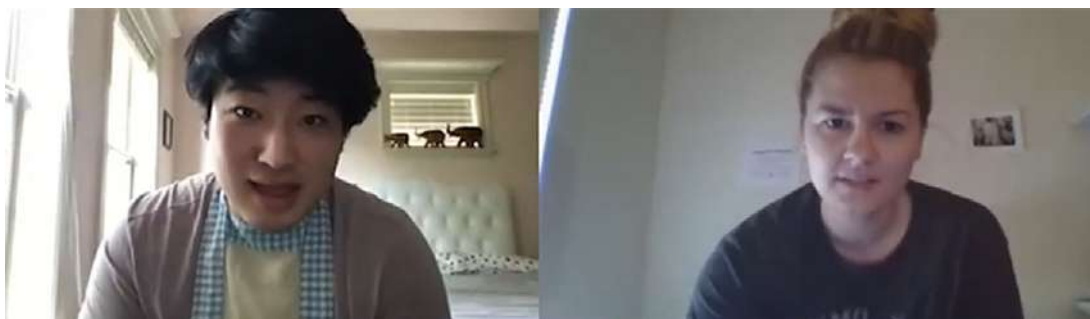


Figure 6. *Pandemic Therapy*. The first scene of two panes separately occupied by the husband and wife. All photographs: Risa Brainin, courtesy of University of California, Santa Barbara, Department of Theater and Dance LAUNCH PAD Zoom Festival.

time of the quarantine.⁷¹ Kim's speech reveals that her husband's conduct makes him seem strange. Similarly, the husband cannot understand the reason for his wife's insistence to lock herself into a separate room. She does not want him to see her overwhelmed in a mood of depression and uncontrollable anxiety. As she confesses to her therapist: 'I've been trying to hide the worst version of myself. And I don't want to be seen.'⁷²

Although the newly married couple love each other, the pandemic alienates them from one another. This emerging feeling of estrangement and isolation is well simulated by the separate panels each actor occupies on the Zoom screen, which make their existence natural in a time of social distancing. Kim's complaints about her husband's conduct seem vacuous. She complains that he bakes delicious scones and describes them as 'masterpiece'⁷³ – but she is also angry because of her inability to be as calm as him. Her anger at her husband seems to be a kind of psychological displacement to give an outlet to her feelings of anxiety and suffocation. The panel layout on the screen reinforces the dramatic interaction between the three characters. The panels

of the married couples are adjacent, but when the therapist appears, her panel takes a middle position above each of their panels (Figure 7).

Their position reflects their dramatic roles. The therapist, Lori, acts as a *superior* arbitrator or *mediator* who interferes in their marital affairs. The close-up of the therapist and her large glasses indicate her inspection and investigation of the family troubles. Lori talks with Kim to examine her nervous feelings. Stephen's interference in the videoconference session between Kim and Lori is performed tactically to indicate his presence in the same house and his involvement in the same difficulties. The exchange and interruptions in the following dialogue give an air of verisimilitude and immediacy of being virtually in the same place listening to and interacting with the same interviewer, the therapist, Lori:

LORI: Does Stephen's baking make you feel threatened?

STEPHEN: Obviously. I find a little joy and she's—

LORI: Stephen. Please let Kim speak. Kim, where is all this anger coming from?

KIM: I'm angry because . . .

STEPHEN: (*genuinely confused*) Because . . . why?⁷⁴



Figure 7. *Pandemic Therapy.* The screen division positions the therapist in the top middle pane and the married couple at the bottom. Xochitl Clare as Lori, the therapist (top); Martin Wong as Stephen, the husband (bottom left); and Violet Hansen as Kim, the wife (bottom right).

Despite the limitation of movement, cast, and physical contact between characters imposed by the technological software, the playwright, dramaturg, and director manage to utilize other theatrical potential effectively so as to engage audiences and convey the intended significance of dramatic effects. A large part of the play is verbal communication, conducted in the form of a videoconference interview between the main characters and their therapist. Zoom close-up gives prominence to facial impressions, so the actors do not need to say what is expressed on their faces. Close-up allows the audience to be in more intimate contact with the nuances of the actors' emotions, revealing Kim's intense anxiety and nervousness, and Lori's exhaustion and depression. Hiding her face behind her hands projects Kim's feeling of shame regarding her uncontrollable anxiety.

The performance of the therapist indicates the dreadful severity of the current situation. Her verbal and non-verbal signs reveal much about the state of specialists, including therapists, who have been heavily involved in the burdens resulting from the pandemic. Studies have pointed out the prevalence of symptoms of burnout and depression during the Covid-19 pandemic among psychiatrists, health-care specialists, and social workers.⁷⁵ When Lori appears in her Zoom panel, '*She looks dishevelled, though she's trying not to*'.⁷⁶ Because of her heavy responsibilities during the pandemic, she fails to abide by her schedule, cancelling her previous appointment with Kim and starting this new session late. She refers to the endless quarantine days: 'And counting! Yes. Yes. Seventy days *and* counting.'⁷⁷ Then, in a long pause, her facial impression shows that she becomes lost in thought.

Lori's actions and gestures also mirror her inner psychological disturbance, which she tries to hide by pretending to be self-composed before her clients and patients. The stage direction says that she '*retrieves a bottle of whiskey and a shot glass in full sight. She pours herself a shot, throws it back*'.⁷⁸ She drinks beer and whisky excessively during her talk with people whom she is supposed to treat psychologically. Instead of calming Kim, she says to her, 'And honestly, I'm not sure if anything is

going to be okay,' and continues drinking.⁷⁹ Lori's reactions and suggestive expressions reflect a deep sense of uncertainty which afflicts all people, even specialists. The bottles of beer and whisky are used as indicative props by bringing them to the foreground of the screen. Lori seems to be engrossed into the burdens of her job as a therapist in the difficult time of the pandemic, so drink is shown to be a means of escapism and relief to alleviate her concealed anxiety, perplexity, and exhaustion.

Sound cues are skilfully utilized to connect the three panels of the actors, who are separated physically but connected virtually in a convincingly lifelike performance. The doorbell ringing in Lori's home is simultaneously heard in Stephen's and Kim's Zoom panels. Stephen tells Lori that he has baked her a surprise, and assures her that the delivery is 100 per cent sanitized. Lori exits her Zoom panel to open the door and get Stephen's baked surprise. Kim and Stephen are left alone, and they face and address each other through their panels. Stephen tries to reconcile with his wife, confirming that he tries to make her happy by baking what she likes for her: 'I want nothing more than for you and me – for us – to bake together.'⁸⁰ Stephen's tender treatment makes Kim relent, and a Zoom close-up subtly reveals how her nervous pose changes gradually to smiling. He asks her to come out of her isolation, and she responds: 'I will . . . But. I just need a little more—'.⁸¹ Stephen expresses his delight, declares that he appreciates her situation, and promises to let her take part in his 'awakening with baking'.⁸²

Kim raises her lowered head, and her facial impression changes from frowning and nervousness to a big smile. Here, the importance of social inclusion is emphasized as a solution to the adverse psychological effects of the pandemic. The participation of family members in shared activities acts as an antidote to the stress of social isolation. Kim goes to get the baked surprise her husband has left for her at the office door. After Kim exits her Zoom pane, Stephen, with a full grin on his face, retrieves a hot cross bun into full view. Both Kim and Lori return to their panes, each holding a hot cross bun. Lori is surprised to see that both Kim and Stephen have buns and that

they are now smiling. Lori smiles, too: *'The three each take a bite from their hot cross bun. It's just what they needed to feel human – at least for today – and it's beyond heavenly.'*⁸³ The prop of the hot baked buns is symbolically foregrounded to signify the warm social connections and communal activities which all people miss in the time of social distancing. The cross decoration on the bun metaphorically indicates the Christian practice of communion, connoting the necessity of solidarity and psychological reinforcement seriously required during the hard time of lockdown (Figure 8). The baked buns are what creates a bond and intimacy between them, and *'They continue to eat, relishing each bite'*.⁸⁴ The playwright here intends to imply that both baking and human relationships need taste, warmth, and craftsmanship. By the act of baking, the playwright here intends to imply that both baking and human relationships need taste, warmth and craftsmanship in order to be savoured. They all say with hope: *'Everything is going to be okay.'*⁸⁵ The last moments of the performance include silent acting as actors smile and show how much they enjoy eating the buns. Their simulation of communal activity virtually eliminates the barriers of their

windows panels. Their happiness is better expressed non-verbally through their smiles and healthy appetite.

The well-directed live performance of this play manages to engage the audiences affectively in the Zoom live show despite the limits of technology. Technical restrictions do not limit the empathetic responses of audiences because the show appeals to them through its content and performance. Thus, the theatrical experience is not dependent on being real or virtual but on how to engage audiences and cast in an interactive connection.⁸⁶ The ability of both the playwright and director to encompass the limitations of this technological medium for performance, and find creative solutions to use them in favour of the overall show, is truly worthy of appreciation.

Recommendations

There follow some suggested recommendations that may improve Zoom performance as a viable tool of cultural communication.

Because of the limits of the Zoom screen, performance allows a limited number of panellists/actors, and the increase of panellists reduces the size of their windows and the



Figure 8. *Pandemic Therapy.* The three characters share the same food in an act of communal solidarity.

quality of viewing for audiences. Therefore, Zoom becomes more valid for hosting live theatre when playwrights consider its limitations as well as capacities, so they write plays specifically for Zoom. Moreover, specialists can adapt other plays, which are not written for Zoom, to cope with the technical limitations of this platform. Zoom requires re-designing scenes that host many characters so as to reduce the number of actors who appear simultaneously.

Excessive sound effects, overlapping dialogue, simultaneous speech, or vocalization from actors – all this causes troubles on Zoom because it fails to handle mixed or competing sounds well, as noted above. Performers have to practise slowing down the pace of their speech and avoiding voice overlap. Although additional webcams can be attached to performers' computers to give a broader visual range and allow freer movement, the playwrights and directors should decrease the kinetic aspect, leaving a bigger space for other modes of dramatic significance to avoid video lagging and cope with the spatial boundaries of Zoom panels.

Windows appear as they are activated, so the actors or the crew member in charge of remote control must have a script showing the order of the actors' appearances and the right direction of their pose. Positioning windows in the proper order creates a fusion between adjacent windows with the same virtual background image, making actors seem to exist in one place and have face-to-face communication. The direction of the actor's pose when they address another actor in the adjacent window creates an impression of integration between the two windows, making the dividing frames virtually fade away. An error in the order of activation of actors' windows can ruin a scene, as when, for example, instead of facing each other, actors will look in reverse directions. The stage manager must therefore be careful about the order of windows activation to get the right positioning and achieve the required integrating effect. Actors have to change their display names to the characters' names for audiences to recognize the different roles of the play and realize who it is they are watching. It is easy to go to the setting of the panel and click on the rename option, then enter a new screen name.

Audiences must be informed to lower the mic volume in the unmute state so that their laughing, vocal response, and clapping do not cross with, or interrupt, performance voices. Their participation in the show is required in order to simulate live theatre, but their interaction should be managed within the limits of Zoom software, and not disrupt the performance. The crew and actors can hear the audiences' responses, thus allowing for a real live theatre experience in which interaction between performers and audiences is conducive to the achievement of a viable theatrical context. It is recommended that the Zoom house manager opens the event session at least fifteen minutes ahead of time so that the audiences can settle. She/he can then give a brief idea of how to reduce the volume of their microphones and how to use the permitted features or options, including chat, raising hands, and muting/unmuting the microphones. A crew member should monitor the audiences' noise and, if necessary, mute them. Zoom allows the host to recognize the source of interruption, so a warning message can be sent through the chat feature. If interruption does not stop, they can mute or eject this source completely.

The whole cast and crew should check all technical devices before live performance, including cameras, mics, and internet speed. Latency happens because the transformation of data via network service is not instantaneous – resulting in that awkward pause we notice between a speaker and the expected response from another person at the other end of the line. Since theatre depends on instantaneous acting and reacting, latency may negatively interfere with performance. In order to minimize latency for widely distributed service, Zoom theatre practitioners must check the internet speed and upgrade it before the show. They can also get their computers wired directly to the internet instead of using wireless wi-fi. During the show, they must inform other users who share their internet service to avoid excessive load on the network. It is also recommended to maintain consistency in the webcam and microphones used by all actors to ensure the quality of audio and video.

It is further recommended to use available graphic and visual-effects programs that can

support all the major live streaming services, including Zoom; these programs can add pre-show and post-show graphics to wrap the performance with introductory and concluding titles, posters, or other visual and verbal aids.

Conclusion

It is still too early to judge whether Zoom live theatre is a successful experience or a failure. The available level of technology imposes limits on Zoom theatre, but who knows? Technical problems can be solved, depending on ongoing technological advancement and experiments. Software options and abilities will improve in the future, allowing for better performance on both audio and video levels. Zoom theatre still needs to go through a long line of experimentation and improvement to gain wider audiences' approval. It is a promising experiment to find a way to practise live theatre during unprecedented circumstances.

Zoom theatre manages to a considerable extent to present a professional product that can temporarily fill the gap when theatre houses are shut down and engage audiences and practitioners in an ongoing, communicative theatrical and cultural activity desperately needed to alleviate the passive psychological and social effects of quarantine and distancing. The shows discussed above reveal that to bring the cast together into one bubble, and to broadcast live from several locations to distant recipients locked in quarantine, is *per se* a viable communicative and therapeutic activity and an effective strategy for social inclusion. Despite being virtual, the magic of the rehearsal, practice, and watching of live theatre continues to inspire, entertain, and restore. It proves to be a safe, interactive performance alternative when we cannot bring audiences and actors under the same roof. General satisfaction with Zoom on the part of performers and audiences is a promising indication of its suitability as a platform for virtual live theatre. Moreover, watching plays that tackle the difficulties of life during the lockdown, and offer remedies to it, can be a worthwhile social interventionist approach and a beneficial type of entertainment during the tedium of home quarantine.

Notes and References

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82. *Ibid.*
83. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
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86. See Owen, 'Engaging Media in Performance'.