

*A HOW-TO  
GUIDE FOR*  
**VIRTUAL**  
**THEATRE**

For when the  
show must go on... line!



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# KEEPING THEATRE ALIVE... VIRTUALLY

By Joshua Glassman

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A ghost light stands alone, center stage, its dim illumination casting deep shadows across rows of empty seats as dust gathers on the bare proscenium. Meanwhile, you're still grieving last season's cancelled rehearsals and postponed shows, with no clue what your upcoming production season will look like. Well, don't fret, Pioneer Drama Service is here to help you get your show on the road—or at least, online!

While social distancing guidelines and traditional theater may seem incompatible, that doesn't mean it is "curtains" for your production season. In fact, there are many tools at your disposal that not only make it possible to take your live performance virtual, but also offer new tools to express your creativity in a whole new light. As one teacher remarked, "If I knew virtual theatre was this much fun, I would have been doing it all along!"

Whether you are a community theater troupe looking to bring joy to your neighborhood in these unusual times or a drama teacher wondering how you'll be able to put on your next school play, we're here to help illuminate the ways in which you can use virtual formats to bring performers and audiences together, even if they can't share the same physical space.

In the following guide, we'll first explore the fun and creative ways you can use a video conferencing platform to enhance your play production, then we'll provide technical advice to help you execute your ideas and pull off your virtual performance!

## A NEW MEDIUM FOSTERS CREATIVE POSSIBILITIES

Here's the key to putting on a successful virtual theatre performance: you need a solid understanding of how to utilize the features of your video conferencing service to enhance your production and maximize the immersive experience for your viewers.

While virtual conferencing platforms like Zoom offer great ways for audience members to watch your production from the comfort of their own homes, it is important to remember that traditional theatre doesn't translate perfectly to virtual theatre. Think about the differences between performing theater in the round versus on a traditional proscenium stage. How does the alternative space affect blocking, entrances and exits, and set design? Much like adapting a play to be performed in the

round, when you take your performance into a virtual space, it's important to consider—and take advantage of—the unique qualities of the video streaming format to maximize engagement and enjoyment for your viewers.

How can you use the digital medium to enhance your play? Let's break it down into theatrical elements.

## ■ CHARACTER

Since each performer will have their own camera, you get a unique opportunity to play with the movement, angle, and composition of each frame to help develop the character or emphasize theme. In lieu of onstage blocking, how can you play with the relationship between camera and actor in a way that tells a story and establishes character? Does an actor's proximity to the camera influence their persona? Keeping an actor very far from the lens makes them small in frame, and can be used to signify timidity or vulnerability. An extreme closeup (a grinning mouth nearly engulfing the camera, for instance) can be used for comedic effect. Perhaps an emotionally stable character could switch from a static webcam to a hand-held camera phone after they go through a psychotic break. Or a character can be made to seem more intimidating by keeping the camera at a low angle, looking up at them. There are many ways to play with the camera, so don't be afraid to have fun and get inventive!



**Even though cameras are involved, we don't recommend directing your actors towards the more subdued "on-camera" performance that is standard in film and television. Performers should practice the same level of stage presence as if they were onstage playing to an auditorium. Don't be afraid to let your actors play to the back of the house, especially since streaming quality sometimes gets in the way of subtlety. Facial expressions, gestures, and posture are as important as ever to the expressiveness of the character.**



**Here's another hint to help your audience follow the show better: if your platform allows it, have your actors change their profile names to their character names so the audience can easily see who's who! To change your name in Zoom, click "Profile," and click "Edit" on the right side. This becomes twice as important if you've double cast any roles in the show.**

## ■ BLOCKING

It goes without saying that blocking is limited in virtual theatre, since each actor is restricted to their window. Still, if you make sure that only the actors who are in the scene are visible (more on this in the next section), you can incorporate blocking into your virtual performance by considering the overall layout of all the actors' frames.

In most video conferencing platforms, such as Zoom, you have the option to “pin” participant windows to certain positions. You can use this to create fun situations. For instance, if two actors’ windows are stacked vertically, the actor in the lower frame could look up to speak with the actor in the frame above. Similarly, two actors might have their frames pinned side by side, so it appears that they look at each other to speak. The intimacy of this arrangement is especially ideal if the script calls for the two characters to be together.

Alternatively, if you don’t want to pin windows to certain positions, you can use “Spotlight Mode” to highlight just one actor at a time. With this setting, the program will automatically switch to a full screen view of whoever is currently speaking, shrinking the size of everyone else’s frames and placing them off in a margin. One advantage of this view is that it gives the actor who is speaking either more space for actual movement or for the opportunity to have a “close-up” so that gestures and facial expressions are more apparent.

Learn more about the differences between pinning and spotlight mode, as well as how to use them, here: <https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/115000505583-Pin-or-Spotlight-Video>

## ■ ENTRANCES AND EXITS

You can also emulate character entrances and exits by turning the actors’ cameras on and off. (Scripts specifically written for virtual theatre will even use directions such as CAMERA ON and CAMERA OFF instead of ENTERS or EXITS.) When an actor “enters” a scene, either they or the stage manager can turn on their camera. Likewise, actors “exiting” must turn off their camera or have the stage manager do it. (Read more on the role of stage manager in the technical section.)



**If you have ever been on a Zoom meeting where participants who didn’t have their cameras on still appeared on the screen with a window with their name and a profile picture, you might wonder how a character can actually “exit.” It’s actually quite easy! Your viewers will simply need to be instructed in advance to adjust their settings to “Hide non-video participants” for entrances and exits to fully work. When set up successfully, the audience will only be able to see the actors currently in the scene! More info on video layouts can be found here: <https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/201362323-How-Do-I-Change-The-Video-Layout->**

You can establish an even stronger entrance by starting with a CAMERA ON showing an empty screen, then having an actor move to APPEAR in it. Likewise, an actor can walk out of a screen before the camera turns off to convey a sense of movement.

## ■ LIGHTING

While it's important that your actors are well-lit so that their cameras pick up the best possible video quality, don't be afraid to play with the lighting for creative effect. Think about tools that your actors may have around their homes. A flashlight can be used to create an ominous under-lit effect. A red cloth can be draped over a lamp shade for a sultry glow. Light glowing through a curtain or lampshade is often softer and more flattering than when it's direct from a bare bulb. This is a great opportunity to collaborate with your actors and help them better define and understand their characters by finding the "right" lighting.

## ■ SETS AND BACKGROUNDS

Depending on how detailed you want to get, set design can be a complex undertaking since each of your actors is physically in a different location. But what about in the script itself? Are characters supposed to be together, meaning they should have similar backgrounds? Or are they separated in the storyline, so having different backgrounds makes sense? While this latter situation might seem easier, the number of "sets" you need to define just multiplied. And if it's a large cast show with twenty different actors, each in their own homes...

The simplest approach is simply to ask each of your actors to make sure they are in front of a plain white wall, so there are no sets or backgrounds. Or each character has a different color solid background, easily achieved by hanging a curtain or sheet behind the actor. If the background isn't part of the story, you don't want it distracting from the performance, like having someone sitting in their kitchen when they're supposed to be locked away in a castle tower.

But why not take advantage of the virtual platform to have some fun?!

Some "sets" can be as easy as determining what room in the home an actor should use. For instance, we watched a terrific Zoom performance where one of the characters worked at a coffee shop. Easy! She did her performance from her kitchen, with the coffee maker prominently in sight behind her. Similarly, if Wi-Fi is available, have your actors step outside for outdoor scenes. (Watch the lighting for shadows or sun that's too bright.) And keep in mind that an actor can appear with different backgrounds from one scene to another to indicate that the character has moved.

Some platforms, such as Zoom, have the option to select images to use as virtual backgrounds. These images can be taken from their selection of stock photos, or actors can find their own to upload. Use the same background for everyone in the scene to establish continuity if characters are supposed to be together. Of course, using different backgrounds will show actors are in separate locations.



Virtual backgrounds only work if your actor has a solid colored background behind them. If your actors have access to a green screen (or a bright green sheet), Zoom has a built-in option to take advantage of that. Some video platforms have filter adjustments if you have a different colored solid background instead of green. Ask your actors to try to set up in front of a solid background that contrasts well with their skin tone for maximum success. You can find out more about how to use the virtual background feature on zoom here:

<https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/210707503-Virtual-Background>



Unless the stage manager can control it, keep in mind that your actors will be responsible for setting their own backgrounds. Perhaps your stage manager could cue them to change backgrounds if that is part of your “set design.”

## ■ PROPS AND COSTUMES

This is where you really get to start having fun, especially if your actors are a creative bunch that likes to get crafty! The extent of what you can pull off is only limited by imagination and what’s on hand. Household props are easy, sure, but what if the script calls for other props? We all know a hairbrush makes a perfect microphone, and we can pretend that a laundry basket is a barrel. And that dried-out red clay in the craft drawer? Wrapped in wire it becomes a ticking bomb! The possibilities are endless.



**Don’t be afraid to make bold or unusual choices here. A surprising or unexpected prop can be a great way to get a laugh.**

Take the same “make do” approach with costumes. Since most actors will only be seen from the waist up, you might be surprised how effective the results can be! And the costumes don’t necessarily have to be clothing since there’s little movement in your production. Period costumes? A mop can quickly become a powdered wig, and something as simple as a purple sheet draped across a young man’s front can instantly create a regal king!



**You might also explore if your video platform allows you to project uploaded pictures onto the person in the screen instead of onto the background. Imagine the possibilities of putting fur on the Big Bad Wolf or leaves on a talking tree!**

## ■ SOUND AND MUSIC

Due to the way most video conferencing platforms like Zoom handle audio, effectively incorporating music into your live performance is one of the more technically challenging endeavors we are going to review. Just like “Spotlight Mode” automatically highlights the video of the current speaker, Zoom tries to “spotlight” whichever audio channel is currently loudest. This means that if you’re playing background music on one video feed and then an actor begins to speak over it, the volume of the music will quickly drop, which can often be jarring for the audience.



**The same issue of Zoom choosing whichever audio channel is loudest will occur if actors interrupt or speak over one another. One thing to emphasize in rehearsals is to make sure that actors only speak one at a time, whether you’re in Spotlight or Gallery Mode.**

Unlike the video feed, where Spotlight can be deactivated by switching to Gallery Mode, Zoom does not have a way to turn this feature off with sound. But don’t despair! There are still a few ways to incorporate music—either to underscore a monologue or to indicate a scene break—and enhance your production.

To underscore a monologue, make the actor delivering the monologue the one responsible for playing music on a separate speaker (perhaps their phone, right next to their laptop). That way the microphone on their laptop picks up their dialogue and the music on the same channel. (Note that this does not work well for a dialogue between two or more characters.) During rehearsals, the actor will have to experiment to balance the volume of the underscoring with the volume of their voice. Explore changing the proximity of the device playing the music to the device running the video conference to gain an additional element of control.

Sound effects can be fun but face the same challenges as music. If a sound effect (such as a knock on the door) interrupts someone who is speaking, the Spotlight Mode will instantly switch from the person speaking to whoever is creating the sound effect. This can be avoided by using Gallery Mode. It gets harder, though, if the person is supposed to continue speaking over the sound effect. In this case, much like underscoring a monologue, the actor speaking should also be the one creating the sound.

Some video conferencing platforms allow you to put your “music director” on their own device, then use a “share audio” feature similar to the “share screen” function. With this, music from the music director’s computer will stream directly to the audience. Since the music director has their camera off, this is the ideal way to play music indicating a scene break or intermission.

<https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/201362643-Sharing-Computer-Sound-During-Screen-Sharing>



If you are bold enough to attempt a virtual performance of a musical, you may want to consider playing Pioneer Drama’s pre-recorded vocal track with lyrics and having your actors turn off their audio and lip-sync, at least for the ensemble numbers. Due to streaming latency and video lag, it is nearly impossible to get multiple performers in sync with each other, so having a master track for everyone to sing along with can be a lifesaver.



**Make sure your actors and stage manager are mindful of when they should be muted. In the situation above with the full cast lip-syncing, you’ll definitely want to make sure that everyone is muted besides the music director. Even more importantly, make sure they know when to turn their audio back on!**

## ■ PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

This is where it all comes together! Your ultimate goal is to create the illusion of shared space to generate a sense of immersion for your audience. So think about how you can incorporate all the ideas we’ve discussed so far into a singular, cohesive experience. What tricks can you pull off to create the illusion that the characters are all inhabiting a shared world? It could as simple as using the same virtual background for all characters to provide a sense of setting. Or it might be as elaborate as making it look like actors are passing props back and forth by cleverly using identical duplicates. Does the lighting match between each actor? Does the pinned gallery layout contribute to the blocking and geography of the scene? Use your rehearsal time to fine-tune all of these theatrical elements for your virtual theatre production.

## LET’S GET TECHNICAL

We’ve got to be honest. Not all content is ideal for virtual theatre. As we mentioned above, for instance, musicals can be quite challenging to pull off virtually. Between the lack of choreography and audio syncing issues, it’s quite an undertaking to attempt one. Likewise, nothing can take a viewer out of a dramatic moment like an ill-timed video or audio glitch.



**We recommend that you choose comedies or lighthearted pieces for the most successful virtual theatre productions. They not only give a bit more leeway tonally, but also offer the opportunity to “break the fourth wall” and laugh off those frustrating glitches as jokes.**

Because, yes, chances are there will be glitches. And the longer the show and the larger the cast, the higher the odds go. Still, through ample rehearsals, time on your virtual conferencing platform to learn some tricks, and the creation of some emergency contingency plans, your virtual theatre production can be a huge success!

## ■ WHAT SHOULD YOUR PRODUCTION LOOK LIKE?

First and foremost, you need to decide what you want to do online in terms of a performance. You have more choices than you might realize. Remember, there is no right or wrong, and there are advantages and disadvantages to each option, so you must do what's right for you. **(Note: Rights for going online, recording and posting a video, or livestreaming are all easily arranged through Pioneer Drama Service for every single one of our shows with the payment of the proper royalty fees. However, if you are doing a show from a different publisher, it is critical you check with them and review your licensing agreement.)**

### HERE ARE FOUR DIFFERENT STYLES OF VIRTUAL THEATRE PRODUCTIONS:

- Record scenes individually, then use video editing software to piece it altogether into one long “performance” that can then be posted on a website or shared with cast members.

Once you have your video shot and edited, we recommend sharing it on a more streamlined platform like Twitch TV, YouTube, or Facebook, rather than a conferencing platform with all the bells and whistles you don't need for simply playing a pre-recorded video.



**If you're posting your video on YouTube, consider making it a private post so you can “sell tickets” to the performance by providing the link only once somebody has paid for a ticket.**

Of course, much of the sense of community gets lost without a live performance, yet there are several advantages to this approach:

- the ability to work with just small groups of actors at one time so the entire cast never has to be available at the same time.
  - a much higher degree of control, including the opportunity to have several “takes” on a scene to get it right.
  - greater likelihood that your final recording won't have any technical issues.
  - the possibility that you can use a free version of a video conferencing platform since each scene will be relatively short with a small number of participants.
- Record a live production, where all your cast members are on the video conferencing platform at the same time doing the show straight through from beginning to end without any unscheduled breaks in action, but there is nobody else on the site.

Some platforms, like Zoom, allow the session to be recorded. (Note: To have a session longer than 40 minutes and to get cloud storage for your video, you'll need at least the Pro level of Zoom.) Alternatively, you can use third-party screen capture software if your platform of choice does not have built-in recording functionality.

Recording a live production gives your cast members a strong sense of being in a production, just without the thrill of an audience. The advantages here include:

- avoiding the complexity and technical issues of having an audience that is unseen and unheard, but able to see the actors.
  - the adrenalin buzz for your actors that comes with doing a live performance and realizing they are a part of something much bigger than themselves.
  - the improvising and thinking-on-your-feet skills that comes with the inevitable glitches of any live performance.
  - the reserved opportunity to edit the video after the fact... just in case something major goes wrong!
- Livestream a performance with all your cast members on the video conferencing platform at the same time doing the show straight through from beginning to end.

This option best simulates an actual staged performance, creating an amazing sense of community and connection between the performers and the audience. Audience members can even share experiences through the comment features available on some platforms! And of course, it invites the opportunity and reason to create multiple performances, which is especially nice if you're raising funds through ticket sales to watch the online performance. (More on this later.)

Like with any live performance, a disadvantage of this approach is that the actors themselves will never get to see or look back at their production. On the other hand, friends and family far and wide can see it, which is a huge plus over actual staged productions.

- Livestream a performance AND record it simultaneously. This is the whole kit-and-caboodle for virtual theatre, capturing the magic of a live performance while creating a lasting record of it to share with a larger community.



**You might want to record multiple livestreamed performances, giving you the freedom to choose the best performance to post on other websites... and to erase all the rest!**

## ■ CHOOSING THE RIGHT PLATFORM FOR YOU

While Zoom is currently the most fully-featured video conferencing platform on the market, there are many different services that may work for your needs. We recommend exploring all the options at the bottom of this section to find the platform that is right for you. No doubt this industry is changing quickly, with better and increased functionality being added constantly, so keep in mind

that whatever we say here (and the links we provide) might be different by next week. Hopefully, this competition will also drive down prices, because the reality is that you'll need to enable more than the basic free services to best produce your show.

**PRICING:** Take a look at what features are available at the free level and where the restrictions are. On Zoom, for instance, you are limited to a meeting length of 40 minutes and a limited number of participants unless you upgrade to one of their paid tiers, whereas Facebook or Instagram Live are fully free, but don't have the same suite of features as Zoom.



Even within a certain pricing structure of Zoom, there's an additional option to sign up for a Webinar, which gives you the most ideal set of features for a live performance. Based on your needs, it might be worth the higher cost.

<https://zoom.us/webinar>

**AUDIENCE SIZE AND INTERACTION:** Some platforms like Zoom have restrictions on audience size, while services like Facebook Live, Instagram Live, and Twitch do not. Likewise, if audience interaction is important to you, make sure you choose a platform with a built-in chat feature.



Zoom Webinar even has a “Live Q&A” feature so attendees can ask questions of the actors in real-time. This can take the level of your production to a whole new level with audience participation, whether in a children's show or a murder mystery.

Using a platform that includes a chat feature can also be very useful in terms of audience feedback for your performers. Since live laughter and applause will not be possible in this format, viewers can instead give cheers and LOLs in the chat section. You may even consider ending the show with a traditional curtain call, allowing each player a moment to bow and for viewers to shout “Bravo!” and applaud via the chat feature.

**FEATURES:** Think about all the features we've discussed so far. Which ones are important to you? Which can you live without? For instance, if you choose to do a pre-recorded and edited show rather than a livestreamed performance, you can forego the live services Zoom offers and have a much simpler experience using YouTube or Twitch instead.

**REHEARSALS:** Even if you decide to go with a premium paid webinar service for your final performance, you may want to consider using an alternative for rehearsals. Just as your rehearsals for staged shows don't all happen on the main stage, you don't need to hold all your virtual rehearsals in the same format as your final virtual performance. Zoom's free service has almost all the same features as the paid webinar—minus the ability to include attendees—providing a perfect way to rehearse for free. When you license a webinar, you also get a free practice session with all the features unlocked, which can be used as your dress rehearsal.

**CONTROLLING ADMISSION AND TICKETING:** No matter the platform, make sure you know how to screen who is allowed to join a live performance, generally through a waiting room, so you don't have to worry about who's watching your show. It will most likely be the stage manager's role to electronically admit people into the performance from the waiting room. (More on this in the next section.)

The other big advantage of using a waiting room like this is that it gives you the opportunity to charge an admission fee. It's quite possible to have sold tickets in advance, probably through Venmo or PayPal. When people appear in the waiting room, your stage manager can make sure they're on the list of who has bought tickets before allowing them access to the performance.



**Zoom Webinar has built-in pay-per-view ticketing with PayPal integration. You can learn more here: <https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/360018597111-Configuring-Zoom-Webinars-with-PayPal>**

Again, we encourage you to do your research to choose the best platform to meet your needs and your budget. Here are links to several websites for both video conferencing and livestreaming sites: ***DISCLAIMER: Pioneer Drama Service is neither endorsed by nor affiliated, associated, or connected with Zoom or any of these services in any manner.***

<https://zoom.us/>

<https://www.irisconnect.com/us/>

<https://www.younow.com/videos>

<https://www.pscp.tv/>

<https://www.facebook.com/facebookmedia/solutions/facebook-live>

<https://www.youtube.com/live>

<https://www.twitch.tv/>

<https://gsuite.google.com/products/meet/>

<https://www.skype.com/en/>

## ■ THE TECHNICAL SIDE REQUIRES SOME VERY IMPORTANT PEOPLE

Of course, the director is essential to putting on a successful show, as is the stage manager. Can you call a stage manager a stage manager when there is no stage? That might be the million-dollar question, but no doubt, these two people play critical parts in the “staging” of your show, whether on a stage or a video platform.

Luckily, when you set up a webinar on a video conferencing platform, the software has built-in roles that correspond analogously to the roles of a theatrical production. On Zoom, for instance, these roles are called HOST, COHOST, PANELISTS, and ATTENDEES.

The director is the Host, creating and scheduling the performance, assigning roles to performers and crew, and controlling settings during the broadcast.

Either the stage manager or the house manager is the Cohost, assisting in the administration of the show. This could involve anything from cuing actors to screening which guests are allowed to join, depending on who you have filling this role.

Your actors fill the role of Panelists. The stage manager can choose to un-mute or show video of any individual panelists, or you can delegate control of that to the actors themselves. Either way, whenever their video and audio are un-muted, the Panelists are “onstage” for all to see.

Lastly, your audience are the Attendees. They can watch your show in real time and even comment live if you wish, though their audio and video are hidden to everyone.

Read more info on managing roles and participants in Zoom here:

<https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/115004834466-Managing-Participants-in-Webinar>

## ■ FINAL TIPS FOR A SMOOTHER VIEWING EXPERIENCE



For optimal quality, each performer should be set up on a stable surface in a well-lit area with high-speed internet. If available, an ethernet cable can be used for a more reliable connection.



Consider having an extra cast member online who isn't assigned any role but is following along with a script with their camera off. That way, if an actor experiences technical difficulty or loses their internet connection, this cast member can immediately turn on their camera and step in for that performer so the show can still go on! It's best if this person sets their profile name to “Understudy” to avoid confusion.



Just as you'd open the house doors early to allow time for your guests to find seating, make sure you allow ample time (maybe 10-15 minutes) before the show to get users logged in and set up.



Since most attendees will be signing up via email for your performance, you may want to put together a bulletin to send out to your audience ahead of time with viewing guidelines, such as: “For the best experience, please make sure your microphone is muted, your view is set to gallery mode, and you are hiding non-video participants.” It would be a good idea to include instructions or links on how to do each of these items.



As long as you're emailing your audience members in advance, consider creating an entire online play program. This could be an especially helpful tool if you include the setting for each scene and perhaps even a brief play synopsis. Of course, no program is complete unless it includes who's playing each role and perhaps a short bio for each member of the cast and crew. Each and every one of them deserves the shout out!

## LAST BUT NOT LEAST

As amazing as all this technology is, technical difficulties are bound to happen—that's just part of the experience. Try not to get hung up on those minor glitches, dropped audio, or distorted picture. If there's a minor hiccup, try to power through it and keep moving, though there's also no shame in restarting a scene or taking back a line of dialogue if need be. Your audience may actually appreciate it, especially if they missed a key part of the storyline due to technical issues. Have fun and don't sweat the small stuff! Don't be afraid to turn a frustrating situation into a humorous one, "breaking the fourth wall" and joking about the technical difficulties, especially if you're doing a comedy.

As you gain experience and technology continues to improve, this really will get easier, we promise. YouTube is already loaded with tons of tips from other directors, and as more people delve into this virtual world, you and your peers can swap ideas and share what works and what doesn't.

Believe it or not, even once social distancing rules relax and your cast can perform in an auditorium again, we have a hunch you'll still be contacting your publisher to arrange rights to post a recording of your show online, to livestream your performance, or both! After all, why wouldn't you want to reach an even larger audience? All the grandparents in Sarasota will thank you!

***NO MATTER WHAT, BE PROUD THAT YOU'RE VIRTUALLY KEEPING  
THEATRE ALIVE AND BRINGING ART TO YOUR COMMUNITY AND  
BEYOND. REMEMBER, THE SHOW MUST GO ON... LINE!***





# “STAGE MANAGING” A ZOOM PERFORMANCE

By Karen Vuranch

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Perhaps the most challenging—or at least intimidating—aspect of virtual theatre is the technical direction and video conference management. It might seem out of place to refer to this facet of the production as “stage management” considering there’s no stage in virtual theatre. But with a tip of my hat to traditional theatre, I think it’s still the most fitting term. After all, the stage manager is the individual who is in complete charge behind the scenes (including of the cast and crew), supervises the set up and running of the production, and calls all cues.

Just like with traditional theatre, I strongly suggest that if you are directing the show, you designate another individual to be the stage manager. I’ve outlined below the stage manager’s tasks, and it’s a daunting list to add on top of directorial duties. By tapping somebody else to be the stage manager, it will help you elevate your virtual production to a more professional level and increase your chances of avoiding those dreaded online glitches.

## 1. IN ADVANCE

- A. Sign up for Zoom Webinar. Zoom Webinar gives you more control over what the audience sees than the regular Zoom meeting room. Zoom Webinar also offers better protection from “Zoom bombers.” It is an additional \$40 a month, but there is no long-term contract and is easy to cancel after just one or two months, as soon as your production is done.

The roles in Zoom Webinar will be as follows:

Host = Stage Manager

Co-Host = Director (optional; would also have to have paid for Zoom Webinars)

Panelists = Actors and Crew

Attendees = Audience

Participants = Panelists and Attendees

- B. Make sure you have a cell phone number and email address for the director, each actor, and all crew members.



- C. Set up a Zoom Webinar for your rehearsals. Schedule rehearsals in recurring sessions so meeting IDs and passcodes stay the same for all rehearsals. Before you send this out to all your cast, you might want to send this information to your director to make sure all the dates and times are correct. Even if not using Zoom Webinar for most rehearsals, I strongly recommend one or two “dress rehearsals” on Webinar so you, your cast, and crew can all become familiar with it.
- D. Set up a Zoom Webinar for each performance. You will need separate meeting IDs and passcodes for each performance. For each performance, make sure you’ve checked Enable a Practice Session (more on this later).

There is a limit of 100 participants (devices) for the first webinar level of \$40/month. That means you can only sell tickets for 100 minus the number of actors, director, stage manager, or other crew who will be logged on to the performance. Keep in mind, however, that with audience members, multiple people will likely be watching from each device. (Hint: This also means you can set your ticket prices accordingly.)

- E. Register your Panelists—the actors—for all sessions. For this, you’ll need their email addresses.
- F. Set the Hosts’ and Panelists’ videos to On.
- G. The Waiting Room should not be enabled. Zoom requires either a Waiting Room or a passcode to avoid Zoom bombers. A passcode is much easier. Plus, you will want to have an opening slide on the screen before showtime to welcome your patrons, and you can’t let Attendees into the room from a Waiting Room once that slide is up, which is why I strongly suggest no Waiting Room.
- H. Prepare your opening and closing slides. You can use a program like InDesign, Canva, or Publisher to make it look fancy, or simply create something in Word. These slides are what the audience will see when they first come to the show, and then at the end.
- I. Create a program that you either email to the Attendees in advance or include as part of the opening slide.
- J. Choose what music you’ll want to play with the opening and closing slides.
- K. If you’re planning any audience interaction, you can create a Poll in advance to use in your Zoom performance. This could be especially fun for a whodunit!

## 2. THE DAY OF THE EVENT, BEFORE YOU OPEN THE ZOOM PLATFORM

- A. Open what slides you are going to show at the opening and closing of the show.
- B. Prepare the music to play while the audience arrives.

## 3. BEGINNING YOUR ZOOM SESSION

- A. Open the day's session.
- B. Double-check to make sure video is On for Hosts and Panelists and that the Waiting Room is Off.
- C. Make sure you've selected Enable a Practice Session. This will allow the Panelists to join the meeting and get all set up before any Attendees (audience members) are allowed in.
- D. Set who you want Attendees to be able to chat with during the show: the actors, the actors and each other, or no one. Choose wisely based on the nature of your show! Lots of audience "chatter" can add to the fun or be quite distracting.
- E. Click Start Meeting.
- F. Here is the most important thing for you to realize as the Host—in a webinar, you can control what the audience sees with just two buttons. However, you cannot control what the Panelists see. You have to clearly instruct the actors and tell them what to do in order for it all to work.

## 4. PREPARING THE ACTORS FOR THE SHOW

- A. First, have the actors join the webinar, hopefully as Panelists since you already set them up that way. I recommend having them log on 30-45 minutes before "curtain" so that everything is in place and ready to go at least 10 minutes before the start of the show. If you had selected Enable a Practice Session, attendees will not be able to join until you click on Broadcast to "open the doors," hopefully about 10 minutes before your scheduled "curtain time."

If you did not set up the actors as Panelists previously, you cannot use Enable a Practice Session. Instead, 30-45 minutes before the start of your show, your actors will have to join the session as Attendees, then you promote them to be Panelists. To do so, open the Participants List and under More, click on Promote to Panelist.

- B. Change the actor or user name to match the character name. Go once again to the More button in the Participants List, then choose the Rename option. Using character names can better help you keep track of who has their audio on or off. You might also ask actors to do this themselves.

- C. Do you have your contact list with each actor's cell phone number? If an actor is kicked off for some reason, they should text you and tell you to let them back in if they're not already set up as a Panelist. Once the audience starts coming, the Attendees list will grow, making it difficult to see if an actor is mixed in with other Attendees and needs to be promoted to Panelist. It happened to us—an actor had a bad Wi-Fi connection and kept getting kicked off. So, be prepared!

This is also a good time to remind actors to silence their phones. You don't want any stray calls or texts to interrupt the performance, and you certainly don't want your audience to hear if you have to text your actor a message.

- D. Actors should log on early for multiple reasons, such as: 1) once the Attendees' list grows, it can be hard to pick actors out of the crowd to designate as Panelists; 2) you cannot display the opening slide that you want your audience to see until all Panelists are logged on; and 3) if there are any technical issues, you want time to troubleshoot them before curtain time.

Another important reason to have the actors log on early is to adjust their settings for best results. 1) Under the Up Arrow next to the video icon, actors can choose Video Settings to open their live video frame. At the bottom of that frame, they can scroll down to choose Spotlight My Video When Speaking. If they don't choose this, they won't see themselves when talking. Most actors like to see themselves! 2) Actors should click Hide Non-Video Participants so they're constantly aware of who is currently "onstage." 3) Actors should Rename themselves as their characters unless you have already done so. 4) In Settings, actors can choose whether to default to their mics being On or Off when they turn their video On.

- E. Actors turn their own audio On. As Host, you can turn mics Off, but only they can turn their own mics back On, so it's best to expect them to maintain full control of this function. It is up to the director during rehearsals to decide if actors on screen should turn audio Off whenever they're not speaking. This is something to consider because Zoom has what is called Spotlight Audio. This means that only one mic is active at a time. If an actor is talking and another actor's mic picks up a dog barking or an ambulance siren going by, that sound could override the speaker. So, if actors cannot assure a quiet location, they should definitely turn Off their audio, then turn it back On when ready to speak.

There are three places where actors can turn audio On and Off: 1) the mic icon in the lower left; 2) in the upper corner of the actor's video feed; or 3) in the Participants List. Alternatively, mics can be left Off then quickly and temporarily unmuted by holding down the space bar. This alternative, however, ties up an actor's hand, limiting gestures.

- F. As with audio, the Host can turn Panelists' videos Off but the actors themselves will have to turn their videos back On when they are cued in. It is up to the director to determine for each "exit" if the actor should turn their own video Off or leave it to you as the stage manager. There's a subtle yet distinct difference in how the actor will appear to the audience if they are turning Off their own video feed, so it should be decided and noted on a case-by-case basis during rehearsals.
- G. If the director chooses Speaker View (more on this later), then the actor who is speaking has a much larger picture than everyone else. If this is the case and you have actors muting their audio when not speaking, they will have to wait until after another actor speaks to mute—again because of Spotlight Audio, in which Zoom will continue to show whomever spoke last. If the next actor hasn't spoken yet and the last actor turns Off their video, a black box with just their name appears. If not speaking right away, the next actor needs to trigger Spotlight Audio with some sound, such as a cough, a rustling of papers, or even a clearing of the throat, to switch the Speaker View to them.
- H. You control the view for the audience—Speaker View or Gallery View—but not for the Panelists. Instruct the actors how to change it so they can share the audience's point of view.
- I. During the show, you'll have to cue actors to get ready to turn their videos On. You can do this via text or using the Chat feature of Zoom, selecting just the individual(s) you need to cue. Actors, however, should not turn their video On until the moment they are supposed to appear. They will also need to be cognizant if their mic is On or Off when they appear.
- J. Maintain watch over the Panelists and make sure non-speaking Panelists have their mics muted. If needed, you can mute them, then text them to let them know their mic is now muted.
- K. To end with a virtual "curtain call," switch to Gallery View and have all actors wave and call out to the audience. Sure, it's chaotic, but the connection is a nice substitution for applause. And be sure to encourage the audience to use the chat function to show their support!

## 5. BOOSTING A PANELIST'S WI-FI

- A. Broadband is a continuing struggle. However, if Panelists have a smart phone and an unlimited or large data plan, they can likely use the more reliable hotspot capability. The usage is generally included in monthly cell phone plans, but after a phone reaches a specified data limit, internet speed can drop.
- B. To use any current Android or iOS phone as a hotspot, go to Settings and then Personal Hotspot, then follow the directions. If activated, you'll find your phone as an option under the internet icon.
- C. Using a phone as a hotspot drains the battery quickly, so the Panelist should make sure to have their phone plugged in.

## 6. PREPARING THE AUDIENCE FOR THE SHOW

- A. If you chose to have the audience be able to chat with the actors, before the performance begins, explain to the audience that though they cannot be seen or heard, they can react and provide feedback through the chat button in the taskbar at the bottom of their screen. Even without applause, the audience may write encouraging messages and give positive feedback!  
  
On the other hand, if you'd prefer your audience "hold their applause" until the end of the show so as not to distract the actors or the audience, make sure you've set the Attendees' chat function to "no one."
- B. The way to make sure the audience sees what you want them to see is to click the Participants List in the taskbar. When the list comes up on the right, select the More button, scroll down, and choose Follow Host View. This way, the audience sees whatever you see on your screen.
- C. Now that you have Follow Host View in place, you have a couple of settings you want to make sure are in place to control how the audience sees the show. Go to the taskbar and look for an Up Arrow next to the icon of the video camera. Click it to go to Video Settings. A window will open with your live camera. Under your picture, there is a list of options. You may need to scroll to read them all. Click on Hide Non-Video Participants. By doing this, the actor is not seen at all after they turn Off their video. Otherwise, your audience will see a black box with the actor (or character) name.
- D. At this time, also click Spotlight My Video When Speaking. This is more for the actors since you won't be speaking once the performance begins, but now you will know where it is and how to tell them to do this.

- E. You control Speaker View or Gallery View for the audience. Gallery View is when all active cameras are on the screen in little boxes and grids, like the Brady Bunch opening. Speaker View is when only one face is prominently featured. You can go back and forth between the two views—depending what your director wants for each scene—and your audience will see what you see. The button for “view” options will remain in the upper left corner of the screen. Practice with this because it’s confusing: whatever view you are in, the words will display the opposite view to indicate that you can change to that view. For example, if you are in Gallery View, it will say Speaker View, and you can click to change to that view at any time.
- F. At the bottom of the screen is a green Screen Share button accessible only by the Host. This is a way to show any participants your computer screen. So, once all your Panelists are logged on, click Broadcast if you have selected Enable a Practice Session. Minimize your Zoom screen and—voila!—your opening slide will show to the audience as they enter.
- If you’re also using pre-show music, in addition to Screen Share, you must also click Share Computer Sound in the lower left corner. Make sure you’ve tested the volume in advance.
- G. When it is time to start the show, click on Stop Share and you’ll be taken back to the frames of you, the Host, and the Panelists. From rehearsals, your director should have advised you whether to start the show in Speaker or Gallery View.
- H. At the end of the show, bring up your closing slide and choose Screen Share again. Don’t forget to also click on Share Computer Sound if you’re playing “exit music.”

I hope you’ve found this guide helpful. It’s more about what to do than how to do it, so I encourage you to take advantage of the many free Zoom live and prerecorded webinars to learn more details. You can find these at [www.zoom.com](http://www.zoom.com). Of course, this guide can also apply at least in a broad way to other video conferencing applications, since most offer somewhat similar features.

The most important thing is to stay alert and enjoy yourself! It can be a little nerve-wracking at first, but gets easier with practice.

*Interested in hiring Karen as a Zoom stage manager for your next virtual production? She'd love to talk with you! Please contact her at [Karen@wventerprises.com](mailto:Karen@wventerprises.com).*

