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No Theater? No Problem. Plays and Musicals Switch to Streaming.

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The show “Sleuth” is filmed at the McCarter Theater Center in Princeton, N.J. Credit: Tom Miller

Susan Medak, the managing director of the Berkeley Repertory Theater in California, said the writing was on the wall over two weeks ago: Closings were coming.

“The sense of urgency around the potential for closings hit the West Coast before it hit the East Coast,” she said in a phone interview. So her company, along with the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco, began hatching a plan to make their most recent stage productions available to their patrons on the streaming platform [BroadwayHD](#).

Berkeley Rep will stream Jocelyn Bioh’s “School Girls; or, the African Mean Girls Play” and the Culture Clash group’s “Culture Clash (Still) in America.” And Jennifer Bielstein, who runs the A.C.T., said that the theater had made recordings of Lydia Diamond’s “Toni Stone” and Branden Jacobs-Jenkins’s “Gloria” “while they were still up and running.” (All shows will be available to ticketholders for about two weeks.)

“We didn’t have the time or resource to invest in a five-camera shoot that’s directed and designed,” Bielstein said. “So we recorded with one or two cameras in the

house. It's more about making sure the audience gets to see the work."

Suddenly, the Bay Area institutions' initiatives to use technology to bring theater to the people, instead of people to the theater, have begun to be emulated nationwide as bans on public gatherings proliferate. Organizations across the country are scrambling to find ways to stream productions, working through copyright issues and coming to agreements with unions, such as Actors' Equity and United Scenic Artists, to ensure the show goes on.



Dawn Ursula, center, in "Toni Stone," which was recorded at the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco. Credit. Kevin Berne

Experiencing [theater from home](#) is not a new phenomenon, of course. But now, in addition to the catalog long available on platforms such as [BroadwayHD](#) or more niche services like [On the Boards](#), which specializes in experimental performance (and offers free streaming through the end of April), companies are trying to preserve the shows that were playing, or about to start, when the industry shut down.

On Friday, for instance, New York Theater Workshop filmed a performance of Martyna Majok's "Sanctuary City" in front of a small audience of friends and family members. Later that day, in Princeton, N.J., the [McCarter Theater Center](#) — which records all of its productions for archival purposes — captured Anthony Shaffer's "Sleuth" with a three-camera setup in front of a few staff members and invited guests.

"It may be for archive only, but after we weather this storm, we will be discussing ways that we may be able to share this piece with those who did not get a chance to see it," Tom Miller, a spokesman for the McCarter, wrote in an email. "There are zero plans in place for this right now, mind you. For now, we are committing it to 'film' (digitally) before it is gone."

Shows and special programs are announcing streaming plans daily. The Alley Theater in Houston will make [its production of "1984"](#) available, for a limited time, to ticketholders and anybody interested in purchasing a viewing. In Chicago, [Theater Wit](#) will make its production of Mike Lew's "Teenage Dick" available starting on March 20; customers will be able to buy access to a Vimeo link for the desired date and time. [The Signature Theater](#) in Arlington, Va., is looking to make its production of Dani Stoller's "Easy Women Smoking Loose Cigarettes" available online to ticketholders.

In New York City, the experimental institution [La MaMa](#) live-streamed several events last weekend, including a festival copresented with CultureHub and HowlRound, and it is looking to do more in the near future. Mia Yoo, La MaMa's artistic director, pointed out that the organization has been building valuable experience since 2009, "because of the work we've done with live streaming and telematic performances where we've had audiences and artists in remote locations communicating or creating art together, or long-distance workshops with kids."

Also in New York, Rattlestick Playwrights Theater obtained special permission from Actors' Equity to record its production of ["The Siblings Play"](#) and should be able to stream it to ticket buyers starting this week.

We are also likely to see a booming number of individual initiatives like [Young Jean Lee](#) — who made a "low-fi" version of her show "We're Gonna Die" (closed prematurely at Second Stage Theater) [available on her website](#), and Broadway regulars Telly Leung and Alice Ripley, who teamed up for a live concert on the [Stageit](#) platform. On Friday, ACT of Connecticut and the Ridgefield Playhouse [will stream a live concert](#) that will include the composer Stephen Schwartz performing "Beautiful City," from his musical "Godspell."

But before a production can be live-streamed, it has to leap several hurdles.

Any group, professional or not, that wants to stream a play must get permission from its author — some of whom are more forthcoming with it than others. John Patrick Shanley — whose shows “Doubt” and “Welcome to the Moon” are popular licenses — said that he “just gave blanket permission for any and all request to live stream [my plays] to be granted, as opposed to case by case.”

Unions and professional associations are also hastily figuring out new legal and artistic goals when it comes to making theater accessible. And in the time of coronavirus, there’s the matter of public health.

“As for streaming/taping, we hope that shows that wish to do it find an accommodation with the unions that will permit it, and that, if they do proceed with it, they follow C.D.C. protocols and guidelines for the safety of their companies,” Ralph Sevush, the general counsel and executive director of business affairs for the Dramatists’ Guild of America, wrote in an email.

The coronavirus pandemic, beyond its obvious human and financial toll, could have long-term effects on theater. Sean Cercone, the chief executive and president of Broadway Licensing, said that streaming initiatives could contribute to a new organizational, technical and legal framework for the industry.

“Work begets work,” he said in a phone interview. “The best way for us to market a play is for people to see it.”

New avenues for fund-raising are also popping up: Seth Rudetsky and James Wesley are promoting the [Actors Fund’s](#) efforts by hosting “Stars in the House,” a daily streaming show that is slated to feature Broadway marquee names including Kristin Chenoweth, Sara Bareilles and Jeremy Jordan.

But theater is not just Broadway stars — just as important are efforts to share the thousands of high school productions that were scheduled to open nationwide this spring. [Broadway Licensing](#) is making at least 400 plays (the number is growing daily) available to protected live streaming; this will include shows by the likes of Don Zolidis, Ian McWethy and Laura Lundgren Smith, whose works are extremely popular among student theater programs.

Geneseo Central School, in New York State, was going to put on John Cariani’s high school megahit “Almost, Maine” ([available through Dramatists Play Service, another licensing agency](#)) on Friday and Saturday. Now, Cariani has agreed to let the production be streamed on YouTube; it will be taken down when the show is over.

“Our plan is to live stream our first full dress rehearsal,” said Bettina DeBell, the school’s drama director. “I know the show may have a few glitches, but I am hopeful that there won’t be too many. I’ve got great kids, cast and crew, and I think they will be up for it.”



Jon Burklund recording the play “Sanctuary City” at the Lucille Lortel Theater in New York last week. Credit: Sara Krulwich/The New York Times