



Linda Pisano looking out over the Ruth N. Halls Theatre at Indiana University. | Photo courtesy of the *Indiana Daily Student* (IDS).

The rigor and discipline of art and scholarship cannot be bound to a physical space

BY LINDA PISANO

A Place We Create, Not a Place We Go

Unprecedented. Indefinitely. Online. Evolving. Postponed. Suspended. Cancelled. Heartbroken.

This is the vocabulary of our triage. Nine-hour days of normalcy become 17-hour days of crisis management, planning, and sleepless nights contemplating the complex web of tasks. Migrating thousands of students online with faculty and graduate students, many who've never taught or learned online. Maintaining the quality of a thriving department at an R1 university. Curbing hiring mid-search. Hours with staff running numbers to organize pay for hourly employees and

production costs without ticket revenue. Renegotiating licensing to explore video streaming. Phone calls with donors, letters and emails to patrons, authorizing ticket refunds. Cancelling orders of lumber, supplies, and rentals. Faculty cancelling hundreds of flights, hotel nights, and conferences to try and recoup any of their sacred research funds while managing the loss of activities required for tenure.

The smell of hand sanitizer reminds

you to stop and protect yourself. You look up and see the email from a student who is the first college graduate in their family and will not have a graduation but expresses gratitude for the last four years. You comfort the graduate student who won't have a performance of their thesis production, send an optimistic message to the senior in their last semester who moves home with parents who discouraged a degree in theatre. These students look at their career options in our industry that are on hold indefinitely. You hear from the student who is moving home where both parents have lost their income and tuition payment is unlikely.

The 20 seconds of washing your hands becomes 45 seconds and then 60 seconds as you start to contemplate an industry gone dark and the uncertainty of the next 18 months. The elusive vaccine date becomes a production deadline on your calendar. NPR and CNN drone on, citing numbers and statistics as you take a moment to appreciate the Hogwarts background on a student's Zoom image as they speak to you from their home somewhere in mainland China.

Yet those last few days when we were together as a department were intense, filled with high-stakes work—light-over rehearsal for *Servant of Two Masters* with a carefully monitored audience of under 50. Construction of design continued with every person working, exuding an energy and mastery rivaling that of a polished opening night. A dance rehearsal for the musical *Crazy for You* moved onto the stage where it was to be performed. Video captured by the director's phone evidences the vitality and technique of expert training and discipline. Senior dance majors rehearse their choreographic works, continue striving for nuance and perfection in something that may never have an audience. Faculty and staff work in their offices late into the night, in meetings and in studios. Everyone is creating and preparing as if this is their last week in theatre and dance.

That last week together epitomizes who we are as a community. We thrive on working together as artists, engaging with one another. Now our performance has moved to multiple online platforms and is created in the solitude of apartments and backyards, sharing work that will hopefully one day be collected by MoMA or Tate Modern for exhibition of performance during a time of pandemic. Students whose lives had been props and costumes are now dedicated to creating PPE. Instructors meet with their students scattered around the world to create, observe, and discuss performance. The rigor and discipline of art and scholarship cannot be bound to a physical space. It is who we are as humans. The theatre is not a place we go; it is a place we create, wherever we are.



Rehearsal of the spring 2020 suspended production of *The Servant of Two Masters* at Indiana University Department of Theatre, Drama, and Contemporary Dance. | Photo by Daniel Meeks.



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