Solo theater gets a digital makeover at Court

Theatre for One aims for catharsis, one person at a time.

By Marissa De La Cerda

Before the pandemic, seeing a play often meant sitting in the dark and fading away amongst the crowd of other audience members, but with Court Theatre’s Chicago-land premiere of Theatre for One: Here We Are, “the audience is front and center,” according to Miranda González, director of Pandemic Fight and Thank You For Coming, Take Care.

Drawing from its pre-pandemic model, Theatre for One brings one actor and one audience member together in real time in a virtual room. Here, the audience member not only watches and listens to the actor but also essentially serves as the other character in the play (yes, their camera must be on for this digital experience)—and though they won’t have lines, their reactions will allow them to be an active participant in the dialogue.

This is because unlike in Zoom meetings where “eye contact” is seemingly nonexistent, the actor and audience member are able to look into each other’s eyes due to a platform designed specifically for Theatre for One by Marc Downie and Paul Kaiser of OpenEndedGroup. Using a computer, camera, and iPad, it creates the impression that the two individuals are making eye contact.

“It was designed to try to recreate the experiences of Theatre for One that we thought were really important and central,” said Angel Ysaguirre, executive director of Court Theatre. “(The online version of this show originated with different actors and directors with New York’s Octopus Theatricals last summer.) “One is the intimacy of the actor and the audience member, and so the platform that Marc [and Paul] designed allows the actor to look the audience member in the eye, which is not something we can do with other platforms, so that really spoke to the intimacy.”

Moreover, unlike Zoom meetings where individuals have access to their self view, the platform does not allow for either the audience or artist to see themselves, making the experience feel all the more intimate. “It’s interesting because neither party can see themselves so it’s similar in the fact that, you know, when you’re going to see a performance in person, you don’t perceive yourself,” said director of Here We Are and whitely negotiations Monet Felton.

Another aspect the platform seeks to bring back from pre-pandemic days is the communal waiting-in-line experience.

“There’s a waiting room at the start of the experience where people who are waiting to be put into one of the plays encounter one another but only via text, so you can’t see one another but you’re all in this waiting room together,” said Ysaguirre. “We’ll have a facilitator who is helping to generate a conversation among the people who are in the room waiting so that there is some sense of small talk before you enter your performance in the way that people tend to make small talk with strangers who are in front or behind them in line.”

After a brief waiting period, audience members will be randomly pulled into a private room to see one of the eight microplays in the program. The plays are written, directed, and performed by Black women, Indigenous women, and women of color and they cover several issues that are fitting to the moment—the pandemic, the 100th anniversary of the ratification of the 19th Amendment, Black Lives Matter, and other calls for racial justice.

For example, Thank You For Coming. Take Care., written by Stacey Rose, focuses on incarceration and childcare. It follows a woman serving a long-term prison sentence as she discusses the “hope that her daughter gives her while she is incarcerated,” said González.

In Lydia R. Diamond’s whitely negotiations, a Black writer vents to her sister about the microaggressions she regularly faces and how difficult it is being a Black writer. The play also explores the ways articulating these microaggressions often comes with its own difficulties. Other plays, such as Carmelita Tropicana’s Pandemic Fight, tackle spirituality and the role it does or doesn’t play in fights for social justice. Here We Are, directed by Felton and written by Nikkole Salter, follows a male-identifying individual as he navigates his way through a new galaxy after Earth has become uninhabitable.

Ysaguirre says it was important to bring these stories to Chicago because Court Theatre’s audiences often come to see plays that represent the voices and experiences of people of color. “They come to see those plays specifically because of the interest in the dialogue that happens in and around these plays because they convey a sense of their experience living in the world,” he said.

By conveying these experiences, Ysaguirre not only hopes audience members feel represented, but also that “delivering them through art, through the experience of art, might feel different than delivering them in a conversation,” he said. “Hopefully there’s a catharsis or sense of being understood experiencing it in the art.”

Felton hopes this virtual experience allows audiences to sit with the words of the performers. “I hope that they actually hear the intricacies and the work that these artists have been trying to put into trying to create art for this platform,” they said.

For them, the experience of directing in a virtual setting really amplified the dialogue. “It puts me in the headspace of a [stage] reading in so many ways because it’s bare bones really, just the words and the performance,” they said. “And the performance is literally from the chest up so it’s really about sitting with these words, sitting with this language.”

Body language is also important in these performances to allow audience members to feel connected, according to González, who focused on “how they’re leaning in or falling back to create that type of physical energy that is needed for the person on the other end to connect.”

Once the microplay is over, audience members are asked to describe their reaction. And though their feelings and reactions may vary because they will all see different plays, one thing remains certain: with Theatre for One, they will all have been seen.