

Hello, Shakespeare Ensemble-ers and their parents!

I have bunches of updates for you. Apologies in advance for the long email.

**SHAKESPEARE ENSEMBLE CHECK-IN:** You are all warmly invited to a **Campfire Party Saturday, May 23, 8-9 pm. Yes, parents, too.** You can ask questions, meet your amazing assistant directors, and see who is currently in Troupe. We can talk through any questions/suggestion you have. [Link](#): Meeting ID: 851 1319 2455 Password: 694384

**THE BIG ANNOUNCEMENT:** Traveling Players will be happening this summer, on the same dates, but now it will be completely digital – on Zoom. A lot transpired over the past two weeks, and it became clear that this was the only safe option.

Trust me when I tell you that I fought this hard. This outdoor theatre gal doesn't retreat to a screen without a fight. I'm the founder of great theatre into the great outdoors – the place where theatre began -- around a campfire -- and where I think it should remain. Cast parties should include fireside chats late into the night and s'mores.

But the realities of COVID-19 started crashing down. We lost access to Madeira, which closed their camps and has sealed up buildings until school opens again. If they had let us on property, they would have triple our rent, since the CDC cleaning protocols are intensive, and cleaning products tricky to get your hands on.

Instead of 4 purple bus routes, I was going to pull out all 6 buses to socially distance on them. I was going to figure out how to incorporate masks into all the costumes. I was going to figure out how to block the play with masks off and be further than 6 feet between folks. I had plans.

But we have students and staffers living with essential workers, and I worried that we would have to recast the play multiple times as actors went back into quarantine. My plan was to put 14 actors in a play that I knew I could do with 11, but I would take more to have understudies. That felt horrible, like overbooking an airplane. I was adding staff to be on stand-by for when directors went back into quarantine.

My initial plan of assuming we are small and nibble, so we could “figure out a way” started to look dangerous, and I feared you guys would have yet another fun, exciting thing that you were looking forward to taken away at the last minute. I didn't want to add another thing to that long list.

And none of this begins to examine the health risk, which is not yet fully known. Several of us live with or are immune-compromised. This virus is most often spread by the asymptomatic, so I know the cute purple no-touch thermometers that I bought for each bus won't actually keep the virus out. My conscience cannot cope with the idea I endangered someone's health in a serious way, and that is a very real possibility.

I know many of you were holding out hope that Traveling Players would be the place that would find a way to keep camp in person. Kids would leave their houses and join their peers, like usual. I was hoping for that, too. I'm sad, but I'm relieved, too.

**SPRING BREAK:** Knowing that an online future was a possibility, Traveling Players quickly pivoted to hosting three digital spring break camps (via Zoom), rolling out different curricula for each age group. (The middle school one was the best, and we learned valuable lessons that week of what to do and what NOT to do.) Here's what we learned:

- **Working on a play keeps kids connected.** Our greatest successes happened when our students were all working on the same project. Working on a single play gives students a shared challenge. Just like when we're in person, our students succeed when they work together.
- **Classical language is great for Zoom!** Some things are actually easier to teach online, and classical language is one of them. Our teaching artists can share a single passage and all students can work together to identify and mark the meter, meaning, and notable phrases in a much more direct and simultaneous way than when they are working in person.
- **Keep it kinesthetic!** Traveling Players has always trained young artists to use their whole bodies, and going digital will not change that. Digital classes are more effective and more fun when they are physical. Actors are expected to create space where they can participate in full body activity – after all, we still need to see a ship wreck in *The Tempest!* That can't happen if the actors are just on a boring conference call.
- **Dedicated community time is key to a successful digital camp.** Digital camp often moves much more quickly than in person camp because transitions are faster and students aren't able to have side conversations. But side conversations are how real friendships are built! If students can't build those relationships by chatting while they set up a tent or carry a set piece, then they need other time to do it. We found that a mixture of **longer breaks** (10 minutes minimum), **non-theatre games**, and **leaving the Zoom- room open over lunch** allowed our students to build friendships just like they would if they were in person!
- **Several blocks throughout the day work better than a single un-interrupted camp day.** There has been a lot written about Zoom-fatigue; maybe you have experienced it yourself? We found that even with a highly physical class, students had the most fun, and were most successful when they worked in several 2 - 2.5 hour-long blocks throughout the day, with breaks in between to get off the computer and give their brains and eyes a rest from screens.
- **Being digital means there are new possibilities for classes!** In addition to Zoom being a good tool for classical language, it also opens up the possibility for new classes! From design, to film to puppetry, there are lots of new and exciting opportunities that are perfect for digital camp!

**SUMMER 2020:** Now we have a new plan. I spent the last two weeks crafting it, rehiring so I had the right team to bring it into fruition, and I'm actually really excited about it! We would not be going forward unless I felt very good about this plan. Summers are important in a kid's life, and you only get so many of them. They need to count.

**ADAPT & THRIVE:** It might seem like a Traveling Players summer without the great outdoors is against our core mission. But the reason why we perform outdoors and backpack isn't actually because the outdoors is awesome (and I want you to fall in love with it to protect it for future generations). No, that's just a brilliant byproduct!

The reason why we tour is so that you always have **to solve new problems** (the weather, the prop broke) and **connect/adapt to different people** (different audiences, stages, tent buddies). These life skills will allow you to thrive on and off the stage. Tour is a fun, exhausting, unforgettable adventure, and it makes you stronger. People who can solve problems and adapt to change will ultimately thrive. This summer, we will adapt and thrive – together, like an ensemble...and unlike ever before!

Because social isolation is antithetical to being a teen, I have done everything in my power to ensure that we will all make it to the finish line. Like a good story, we want this experience to have a beginning, middle and an end – not an abrupt one, but one that ends when it should, after the last show is over. I want all of us to be there for it.

**All the World's a Stage:** This is a plan makes lemonade – extracting the best of this ridiculous situation that we have found ourselves in and exploiting it as an opportunity to do something different, new and challenging. So, I began with the question:

What can you can well on a computer?

- Reader's theatre/Radio drama – focusing on the voice;
- Monologues/soliloquies – highlighting the intimacy of thought;
- Film/TV – working with a camera;
- Textual analysis – taught better on a screen than in our outdoor classroom;
- Special effects – embracing the technological advantage of film for Shakespeare's magical plays (*Tempest!*).

(drumroll, please!) **THE NEW PLAN!**

**THE SHOW:** Luckily – *The Tempest*, the play that we had already selected, is still perfect for you. We will do a live Zoom performance of it, as well as make film clips that will be inserted in the live show. The clips will likely be of the magical moment – the storm, the showdown with Ferdinand, and the other moments that you dream up. You will also get a costume! Keep a can of Lysol by the door, spray the costume bag and bring it in 10 minutes later. Or maybe some of you meet at one person's house and have a socially distanced picnic in their backyard? We'll figure that out.

**And the SET!** We are going to make a 3-D model of the set. Then we can take photos at different angles, which will be your virtual backdrop, changing for various scenes. This way you can share the same space visually and appear in different parts of the stage. (If your computer doesn't do virtual backdrops, never fear. We are buying a program that will let you assess a virtual backdrop for old computers, like mine.) We'll work with green screens, too.

**FILM:** We will all learn about film, some of us might edit, but we are talking to several professionals that will help us. We have bought an attachment for your phone that will pivot when you move, so the camera can move with you (like film!), that we might be dropping off between houses this summer. And maybe ring lights, too.

**THE FUN:** We are really leaning into the social and community aspects of Traveling Players. We will still have Revels (daily games), we'll leave the Zoom-room open before and after

rehearsals and during lunch to hang out. Some folks will need decompression time, so we'll have optional social time, too. We have a Fun Committee (is that an oxymoron?) that is planning scavenger hunts, song contests, and Houses (ala Harry Potter) that each of us will belong to. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of July we'll.... wait for it...live-stream ... *HAMILTON*!

**THE OUTDOORS:** You will be able to do rehearsals outside, if the internet is stable enough. Porches, parks, whatever. Breathe outdoor air! Test your internet and find a couple options. Heck, pitch a tent in your backyard and sleep in it every Thursday. (I'm seriously considering this...)

**THE TOUR:** We will have a couple more hours, and we'll still do our tour traditions –perform multiple times and have an outdoor adventure (usually a hike to a waterfall you can slide down – we're looking for a fun substitution, maybe in our own back yard).

Shenandoah National Park is still closed, so I don't have an update on them yet, but....[we're still listed!](#) What we hope to do is what we are doing with some of my Shakespeare Troupe shows – go on the Big Screen! Yes, we would perform on a movie screen as a livestream show! (This is what we are doing for Clifton Forge's Historic Theatre – August 4, 7:00 pm. They'll let 50 folks into the theatre, or however many are legal then, and livestream it to a movie screen, then sell additional tickets online to see at home.) We might get to book many of our favorite venues this way – like retirement homes, which are too dangerous to go to now and are starving for entertainment. (As always, all our donated shows get you guys community service credit.)

Got tour ideas? Please send them my way!

**THE ENSEMBLE:** We have always maintained an enviable **1:4 faculty to student ratio**. This summer, we're doing even better. Instead of putting 13 actors in *The Tempest*, we will limit it to 11, but keep on our trio of skilled and compassionate directors. Digital theatre is, by its nature, much more language focused. By reducing our cast size while maintaining our staff size, we will be able to ensure that each student gets the personalized individual attention they deserve.

**THE STAFF:** COVID brought us good people! Kristen Pilgrim was my assistant for years, and she has a great understanding of Shakespeare, storytelling, blocking and violence! (She's also a professional fight choreographer and props master.) Allison Lehman began her Traveling Players career in our Shakespeare Ensemble performing in...wait for it...*The Tempest*! She's coming full circle with you guys. And she's been doing lots of research on what works and doesn't work for digital performance for her other job with Woolly Mammoth.

**THE SCHEDULE:**

- **11:00-11:10** — Morning Revels: Fun and games with your ensemble
  - **11:10-11:30** — Warm-Ups: Physical and Vocal Training
  - **11:30-1:00** — Morning Rehearsals: Developing character and relationship, choreographing fight scenes, practicing acting techniques, exploring blocking, and running scenes and lines.
  - **1:00-2:00** — Lunch: The Zoom-room stays open so students can hang out with friends.
  - **2:00-2:50** — Classes: A different class each day taught by [our talented faculty!](#)
- A typical week:

- **Mon:** Movement (Commedia or Laban)
- **Tues:** Voice (Breathing, Resonance, Articulation, Projection)
- **Wed:** Improvisation- taught with the Shakespeare Troupe – a bigger group! (Imagination, Group Mind, Impulses)
- **Thurs:** Stage Combat (Unarmed, Swordplay, Slapstick)
- **Fri:** Technical Theatre (Dive into the world of design and production!)
- **3:00-4:30** — Afternoon Rehearsals: More rehearsal time
- **4:30-5:00** — Office hours. *(Optional session)*
  
- **7:00-8:00 (MONDAYS ONLY) — Monday Night Revels:** Juggling, singing, landing a punch-line, and more! *(Optional Session)*
  
- **8:00-9:30 (MONDAYS ONLY) — Monday Night Revels:** Evening Rehearsal & Cast Bonding!
  
- **7:00-10:00 (THURSDAYS ONLY) — Evening Fun & Bonding:** Play games, explore character, perfect a scene! The best work always happens on overnights.

*Students will receive several 10-minute breaks throughout the day, as well as participate in activities that will take them away from their screens to work on artistic projects (e.g. taking photographs to create a design reference journal, working to build props, or working on script analysis activities).*

**NEXT STEPS:** Apologies again for the length of this email. This shift to online effects Traveling Players more than most, so I wanted you to have a chance to digest all this.

Please come to the **Shakespeare Ensemble Check-in tomorrow night**. Your directors will be there, too. Have your parents join, too, if they want. If you don't have any questions, I can just make a break-out room for you and directors to hang-out or play improv games.

Also, know that I'm happy to email or talk to each and every one of you on the phone. We are a small community and this is a big change. We will get through it together.

**SEND ME YOUR IDEAS!** I have a handle on the big picture (show, on Zoom, amazing artistic staff and concept), but lots of the details can shift. Want to meet in the evening instead of afternoons, taking full advantage of the nocturnal nature of being a teen? If the whole Ensemble likes that plan, we can change that.

I think you guys will have great instincts on filming. This is your second language – the screen. It's going to be really fun to see what you create!

### **BEEN ACCEPTED BY HAVEN'T REGISTERED?**

There is only one spot left in our first session. If you have been on the fence about registering, once you feel good about this plan, **register right away** and take the spot on the waiting list if offered. Your registration will be held in the order received, and as things shift, then you will hopefully get a spot.

**RSVP FOR THE SUMMER:** [Fill this out](#). It will take 30 seconds. (You don't have to do this today, but I need to know by next Wednesday, or at least we need to have starting talking.)

Maybe all your other plans have cancelled and you have MORE time in your summer? I still have a spot or three (not sure) in [Shakespeare Troupe](#) this summer. We have another round of auditions on May 30 – you can join us then – but please reach out to me for all the shifts in the program first. It will be awesome, but it is not fully represented on the web site yet.

**NOT LOVING THIS PLAN?** Send me an email, give me a call, or [fill out this form](#).

This won't work for everyone, but it's the best, safest option we have. Maybe you should write the great American novel in your backyard this summer? You can use your summer tuition this winter, when maybe (?) we will be able to see each other again? Or next summer. We have options.

We will miss you so much if you don't join us, but Traveling Players is all about finding joy, discovering your talents, and having adventures with friends. You can do that other ways, too, and that might be the better choice for you. Find joy. Adapt and thrive. All will be well.

**All IN?** Here's a super simple [Health Form](#) you can do in 2 minutes. You're done! (No immunization records or health insurance card needed this year.)

**Got theatrical friends whose plans got cancelled?** Send them our way! Heck, they don't even have to be local anymore!

Anyone who got to the end of this letter deserves an award. Go eat a cookie and walk around the block. ☺ Thank you!

Not able to take all this in? No worries. Come to the campfire tomorrow and we'll go over stuff.

Congrats on getting through AP exams! Another hurdle down. You guys – all of you – parents and students – have been thrown so many curve balls this year. I salute you all!

Sending you health – and hope to see you tomorrow night!