

Hello, Troupies and their parents!

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

CASTING AUDITION: Was originally scheduled for this past weekend, but we are shifting that to Sat., June 6, 4-9 pm. Please let me know if you have a conflict. (Did I choose Prom?)

TROUPIE CHECK-IN: You are all warmly invited to a **Campfire Party Friday, May 22, 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. Here's [the link](#): Meeting ID: **861 7245 8575**; Password: **788245**.

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, in a pinch, 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.

Then the tour venues started to cancel, and some might close permanently. 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 fully known yet. Several of us live with or are immune-compromised. I happen to fall into both of those categories. I am immune-compromised and I live with my mother who is 81 and healthy, and I intend to keep her that way. I starting looking for another director so that I could keep you guys outside. But that wouldn't prevent others from falling ill, and this virus is most often spread by the asymptomatic. My conscience cannot cope with the idea I endangered someone's health in a serious way, and that is a very real possibility.

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 – and our movement classes will be way more active than the spring break ones.
- **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 bursting with excitement! 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 that is making 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;
- Puppet theatre – puppets are the right height for a screen;
- Bold artistic concepts – traversing between realism & heightened reality.

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

THE SHOW: Luckily – ***Cymbeline***, the play that I had already selected, is still perfect for us. We will do a live Zoom performance of it, as well as make film clips that will be inserted in the live show. As you know, there will be puppets. Each of you will get a miniature “puppet you” delivered to your house. You will also get a costume! Your puppet will get a costume! Keep a can of Lysol by the door, spray the bag and bring it in 10 minutes later. Or maybe you guys all meet at someone's house and have a socially distanced picnic in their backyard?

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 PUPPET CONCEPT: I will (not) humbly admit to you that I think this is one of my better concepts for a show. I will submit our final footage to the Folger and see if I can direct it for their professional stage.

THE FUN: We are really leaning into the social and community aspects of Traveling Players. We will still have Revels, 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 murder mystery dinner parties, scavenger hunts, Houses (ala Harry Potter) that each of us will belong to. On the 3rd 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 are still figuring this out, but we will have more hours, including over tour weekend (August 1-2), and we'll still do our tour traditions – limerick contests, “see” a professional show, perform multiple times and learn higher level acting technique. We hope to get you good footage of a monologue – what you could send to college as part of your BFA/scholarship/fellowship application.

Today I booked our first live-stream show! 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 live-stream 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 – Lime Kiln! – as well as venues that are too dangerous to go to now -- retirement homes and juvi – which 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 STAFF: COVID brought us good people! I've been wanting Jeffrey Robb back for years, and he can join this year – from Brooklyn – for his 10th Traveling Players summer! Jenay's national tour of *The Color Purple* was halted, and she's back home! Jenay had puppet training for *Avenue Q* and working on Disney cruise ships (lots of *Lion King*). They were in *Learned Ladies* together in 2006, including the Reston Multicultural Festival remount! I hope Matthew Pauli, Hades from *Dr. Dour & Peach's* web-series, will be our puppeteer. He rocks, too!

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 Ensemble – 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 Troupe the most, so I wanted you to have a chance to digest all this.

Please come to the **Troupe Check-in tomorrow night**. Jeffrey and Jenay will be there! 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 to hang-out, play improv games or chat to the staff.

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 exciting 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 Troupe likes that plan, we can change that. Maybe we should reduce Troupe to 6 weeks this summer? We have some ambitious artistic plans, but maybe we can do it? Got ideas for tour? I want to hear them!

I think you guys will have better instincts than I do for filming some scenes. This is your second language – the screen. I'm just a beginner here. It's going to be really fun to create this show with you!

NOT LOVING THIS PLAN? Send me an email or give me a call. This won't work for everyone, but it's the best, safest option we have. Maybe you should do *The Tempest* for 4 weeks instead? Maybe you should write the great American novel in your backyard and pass on 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.

I know you signed a contract to do Troupe, but I won't hold you to that. Everything has changed. Find joy. Adapt and thrive. All will be well. Repeat until you believe it. (I will miss you so, so much and would love for you to be with us, but I care about you more than a program.)

RSVP FOR THE SUMMER: [Fill this out](#). It will take 1 minute. (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.)

All IN? Here's a super simple [Health Form](#) you can do in 5 minutes. You're done! (No immunization records or health insurance card needed this year.)

Anyone who got to the end of this 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 see you tomorrow night