

The Creation of “Zoomtheater” in the Time of COVID-19

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Among the numerous disasters that COVID-19 has caused since the beginning of March 2020—the death of hundreds of thousands, the loss of jobs and businesses, the closing of schools and cancellation of artistic events—, we appreciate any signs of a silver lining in this pandemic.

In June 2020, the CUNY Academy for the Humanities and Sciences (*Enclave: Revista de Creación Literaria*) and The Latin American Writers Institute (LAWI) sponsored three workshops in Literary Creation in Spanish. These workshops, conducted in person in 2019 at one of the CUNY Colleges, were held this time via Zoom. The immediate advantage was that the criteria of selection for the candidates did not have to be restricted by geographic distance. While the criteria for admission were samples of previous creative writings, publishing experience, and potential, New York City ceased to be the central location, which meant that the choices could be more far-reaching and ambitious. Participants also included CUNY graduate students.

The outcome of the workshops on drama, narrative fiction, and TV script writing was both surprising and inspiring. Most striking was the solid bond that the workshops generated among the participants: Latin American and Latino residents, documented and undocumented, immigrants and refugees.

The participants completed assignments with COVID-19 as their center of reference. The workshops featured the discussion of challenging books and films, old and new, references to other artistic genres, and the creation of new strategies imposed by the pandemic. The real and the symbolic merged. Face masks, physical distancing, and hand sanitizing, all were dramatized and given fresh association.

I shall concentrate on the Drama Workshop, since its unforeseen result is a product of our current situation, a new genre that goes beyond conventional theatre and includes such media as film, telephone communication, and the

Internet. This way of making theatre “en vivo” allows us to witness the wide range of emotions that are revealed in original scenes, such as that of a man who is visiting Peru during COVID-19, unable to return to New York, and resists being “redomesticated” by his mother as if he had never left home. There is also the despairing Venezuelan grandmother, exiled in Spain, who loses everything, including her memory, but is virtually consoled by her granddaughter from her minuscule New York apartment. Another scene opens with an exchange of technical internet instructions between two office workers under the stress of the pandemic, a casual encounter that develops into a love affair. And finally, the woman who, confined in her suburban home, feels compelled to murder her husband.

Lupe Gehrenbeck, a distinguished Caracas-New York actress and dramatist, conducted her CUNY drama workshop from Caracas, her home during the pandemic, training and guiding the Latin American, North American, and European participants who conceived and wrote these dramatic scenes. While her first step consisted of completing scenes read by the participants, she subsequently presented the results to public viewers through GALTO (Group of Literary Action for an Organic Theatre), which offered its platform to stage the scenes written at the CUNY Creative Drama Workshop. This project, which lasted six weeks, involved professional actors and live performances, which, due to the pandemic, were presented in a virtual format. The YouTube “Galtoteatro” channel allowed Lupe to develop the dramatic writings conceived by the participants into practical stagings. After these performances took place, everyone’s work was discussed, in the same manner as in the Actor Studio of New York City.

Galto-Zoom productions are part of a larger, more ambitious project that Gehrenbeck has been directing for the four past years—an exploration of the various elements that promote theatrical creation in relation to our present condition. In her own words, “the teaching of dramaturgy is not about the propagation of formula on how to make a scene work or a dialogue flow—for that there are multiple manuals that one can access through Internet.” What she proposes instead is “to identify the truth hidden in the expressive needs of each creator with the intent of bringing out his/her own voice, because only honesty in art succeeds in transcending and moving other beings” [Personal Interview].

Through the course of the workshops—shaped, as they were by the confinement of the participants—Gehrenbeck helped them prepare their dramatic writings for staging. In the process, students learned to solve multiple

practical problems. They learned to manage tools like costumes, props, technical effects, and lighting, and devised ways of adapting their language to the constraints of psychological and geographic space. When two actors, for example, each in his own house, share a meal together, the right hand of the one passes a glass of wine on the screen to the left hand of the other. On another occasion, a facial gesture at the precise angle joins two mouths in a kiss despite the real distance separating them.

This workshop also provided a lesson for the professional actors, who interacted freely in the absence of physical contact, gazing directly into each other's eyes. The risks they ran were also new. Each key on the laptop could produce an image or a sound. Every actor was responsible for making sure that his/her cat did not walk through the screen while filming, for avoiding disturbing noises, for measuring the right intensity of the light, and for controlling their camera to determine that a close-up or a black-out took place. Gherenbeck helped each participant to become his/her own director.

The question and answer period that followed each GALTO Zoom performance was equally fruitful. The spectators, who numbered from 90 to 150, including a large number of theatre experts, exchanged observations with the writers, the director, and the actors. The dramatists were fascinated by the unexpected opportunity to have their digital scenes staged by professional actors. Playwrights who up until then had not had an opportunity to present themselves to a global public could demonstrate their training experience in every spectator's living room. The faithful public expressed its solidarity by following week after week the plays from their homes and participating in the Q & As. Their reliability became an inspiration to the participating creators.

Over the course of three months, the dramatic representations grew notably. They became more ambitious and sophisticated in the use of sound, music, costumes, masks, furnishings, and props. Consequently, in spite of some technical difficulties ("You have to light up the camera, dear. It's off" "Is your screen frozen?" "Are we connected?"), their problems became an integral part—literally and metaphorically—of the scenes they composed.

The professional actors who participated in the GALTO experience added originality to the scenes by inserting their own inventiveness into the written texts. Facing possible technical mishaps, they knew how to provide practical tips and how to transmit them to the new dramatists, thus preparing them for future ventures online.

These performances are now permanently available on YouTube, free of requests for funding and other interruptions. There does, however, remain the

need to find new ways of financing these projects after the pandemic, when the “new normal” begins.

In conclusion, this has been a unique experience in which numerous technical and aesthetic challenges converged. The project of digital theatre “en vivo” has permitted participants to see their work come to fruition and has reinforced artistic bonds between established and new creators, between spectators and participants. Unexpected opportunities and situations arose that would not have occurred under other circumstances. All this may have seemed provisional, an expedient during a crisis. Or, providentially, Zoomtheater may have become a new, independent genre.

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Work cited

Gehrenbeck, Lupe. Personal and Unpublished Interview by Nora Glickman. June 6, 2020.

8 Attachments



Preguntas de seguridad by María Cristina Gonzales with Maga Díaz and Egon Ilka. Image: Lupe Gehrenbeck.