

“Operator, Please Connect Me with Theatre” **Written by Alexi Chacon**

Theatres across the country are experimenting with form, trying to figure out which iteration of digital theatre will have the staying power to define a new era of performing arts. Many of these newly hatched pieces speak directly to audiences that haven't been traditionally represented on the stage. As a theatregoer this year I find myself being much more daring in my choices, braving the uncertainty of what I will encounter when I seek theatre from home.

The Woolly Mammoth, for instance, invited us to go analog and use our phones to (gasp!) make a phone call, by repurposing the Telephonic Literary Union's customer service hotline into the remote theatre work *Human Resources*.

Like other works produced after theaters across America were shut down, at the center of *Human Resources* lies the undeniable fact that traditional theatre without substantial modifications doesn't have the same effect remotely. To be clear, I'm not looking for the perfect digital equivalent to live stage performances, that would be futile. In response, *Human Resources* audaciously tries something new.

“Woolly always leans into the unconventional - we exist to be expansive in what the definition of theatre can be,” says Maria Manuela Goyanes, the Artistic Director. “Woolly wants to be making unexpected, challenging, and exciting work - and if artists want to do that through digital theatre, Woolly is *so* there.”

When I dialed in I was immediately offered a menu of rabbit holes that almost made being put on hold enjoyable. The piece seeks to comfort audiences in quarantine by taking the voice personifying dialed-in phones across the country to assure us we should “feel less shitty about the bed you didn't make this morning.” The coolness of an automated voice is unsettling at first, but the phone soon became my confidant as I prepared to “file a complaint for unhappiness.”

The key is getting this confidant to the ears of many. When theatre tickets become more affordable, audiences inevitably grow. The artists at Woolly understand this and are using digital theatre to extend the reach of their work to audiences that have been typically excluded from the theatre-going experience.

A focal point of this season is the lower price point, with ticket prices as low as \$7. I gladly welcome a cheaper ticket over having to stand multiple hours in a rush line any day of the week. The price makes the show more accessible to audience members from historically underrepresented communities and also appeals to the base of younger audience members that typically attend Woolly's shows.

When the audiences get bigger, they also become more diverse. *Play at Home*, a digital collection of short plays presented by Woolly featuring the work of Aleshea Harris and Michael R. Jackson, amongst others, was streamed in homes across all fifty states and also internationally, making American theatre part of a global conversation.

“That's an accessibility that I certainly had not counted on - that a theatre kid in Romania would download one of the *Plays at Home* pieces for their university class,” adds Goyanes contentedly.

As the demographics of the average theatregoer become harder to pinpoint because of digital access, playwrights now have the opportunity to reach the audiences they are writing about or writing for. Zeniba Now, one of the commissioned artists involved in *Human Resources*, wrote the piece's catchy jingle “Stay on the Line,” which reframes the often monotonous and unpleasant feeling of being put on hold when navigating different government bureaucracies.

While listeners were transferred from one department to the next, an upbeat bop that doubled as a pick me up anthem, reminded them “you’ve been doing you against the odds/they got you all up in their queue/but I know you are about to break through.”

When creating her piece, Now specifically wanted to reach out to the many individuals who have had to apply for unemployment or seek healthcare during the pandemic. “It’s so frustrating to be in one of those queues, if you’re waiting for unemployment or waiting for health insurance, if you’re dealing with any giant corporation, institution, conglomerate,” explains Now. “I know a lot of people have been dealing with hospitals and everything, so I just wanted to sprinkle in a fun time, or an uplifting moment, or a little bit of sweetness,” she adds.

In fact, I was one of those people, I have checked several of those boxes this year. During the pandemic, I’ve been subjected to the jingles of phone lines leading to unemployment benefits, Medicaid, and food stamps. During the long periods “on hold” my frenetic anxiety synced to the ups and downs of the same tired songs. Hearing Now’s jingle reminded me that I was not alone.

Realizing that “Stay on the Line” was speaking directly to me was disarming and empowering. I don’t think this would have happened had the jingle played on a stage. As I held my phone, I was the main character and my experiences were front and center. These are the possibilities that digital theatre brings, because when you extend theatre beyond a physical space, it can’t help but change. If Now’s jingle landed on the ears of the millions of Americans who have filed for unemployment, scrambled to find health insurance, or have had their life put “on hold” because of the pandemic, then theatre would celebrate listeners for their resilience, just as it did me.

Artists have created pieces that dive into the digital world in ways that confound and awe, creating a style of its own. If theatre is a conversation between the artist and audience, this new style is telling the new voices in the audience that they can share their opinions and disrupt the status quo. For example, *Human Resources* offered listeners the opportunity to leave a voicemail after filing their complaints for unhappiness. These voicemails allow theatre-goers to be theatre-makers, in their own way, as their thoughts become part of the piece.

“Audience members are in this very unique headspace after having interacted with the show. All the voicemails have this sort of strange lilt to them from having been in this weird telephonic limbo land,” comments Now.

Theatre artists are striving to preserve the collaborative nature of the artform, while overcoming the obstacle of being unable to gather in person. “That’s one of the things we all love about theatre, you really can’t ever do it alone,” explains Now. “Honestly, the whole thing was sort of perfectly timed,” she says about her process, adding “it taught me a lot about how I could work from home and it was just so joyful to get to work with people.”

“I have no idea what’s going to happen next in the theatre,” comments Now, adding “but my next hope is to accept the uncertainty and then maybe in the future learn to love it.” I don’t know what shapes this new style of theatre will take either, but I know that it will lead to more stories that make more of us feel seen and heard. I want more of this and I want others to join me in exploring this exciting new landscape.