

LiveScreen Theatre Collection

Director's Starter Guide

WHY PUT ON A PLAY VIA VIDEO CONFERENCE?

Even when artists and audiences can't be in the same room together, gathering in a virtual space can offer a community experience. Just as theatre in the round offers a different perspective than a proscenium stage, watching a live performance online is different, but it also offers some new aspects to explore. It's both an inclusive means to bring theatre into the homes of a broad audience, and the opportunity for theatre-makers to work together no matter what their locations are.

Of course, that's all easy to *say*. When you're leading a group on a new type of platform you're just learning yourself, the whole endeavor might seem daunting to say the least! But there are plenty of resources to help make the initial setup simple, and once you're over that hurdle, there's a space ready and waiting for you to do what you came to do: make theatre.

Cast Your Roles

Different users in video software can be assigned roles with different capabilities. Choosing which roles in the program correspond to jobs in your production will help you set up rehearsals and performances.

For example, in Zoom, the roles work like this:

- The DIRECTOR takes the role of HOST: Creates a meeting, assigns roles to other participants, begins and ends the broadcast, and controls the settings.
- The STAGE MANAGER acts as COHOST: Can be delegated controls by the HOST to assist in the administration of the meeting, Basically, they're in the booth.
- ACTORS take the role of PANELISTS: When their video and audio are un-muted, they can be seen and heard by everyone.
- AUDIENCES act as ATTENDEES: They are invited by the hosts to watch and listen to the PANELISTS in real time, but are not speaking or visible themselves.

More information on panelists vs. attendees:

<https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/115004834466-Managing-Participants-in-Webinar>

Set Up Your Rehearsals

- Once you have your team in place, you can start rehearsing. Just as rehearsal space doesn't always need to be the stage where the final performances take place, you can set up rehearsals on video conference without the capability for an audience.
- Check your platform's specifications to see what your options are for rehearsal space, dress rehearsal space, and performance space. Play around with what you can do with the free features vs. the paid features.

For example on Zoom, you pay to license a Webinar, which has the capability to invite attendees, and one practice session is included. However, Zoom's free Meeting has most of the same features without the capacity for attendees—so you can plan your rehearsals as Meetings, use your Webinar Practice Session as a dress rehearsal, and then you'd be inviting the audience to be Attendees of your Webinar.

Direct Your Show

Set the Stage:

- Build buffer time in your schedule for all users to log on before you begin.
- All notifications on the user's device should be set to silent to avoid interruption
- If possible, the optimal setup for each user's device is on a sturdy surface in a quiet, well-lit place with a strong internet connection.
- If available, an ethernet cable can help ensure an uninterrupted internet connection.
- Look at the platform's settings to see if you can have your actors rename their profiles to their characters' name(s) so the audience can follow along even more easily.

Entrances and Exits:

In a virtual performance, an actor most easily steps into a scene and becomes visible to the audience by turning their individual camera on or off.

- CAMERA ON acts as an ENTRANCE
- CAMERA OFF acts as an EXIT

Coordinate and practice these entrances and exits, the way you would in a "cue-to-cue" rehearsal onstage, for smooth transitions within the play.

Cues:

Come up with a system to coordinate cues. Can your SM use the chat feature to cue the panelists to turn their video on and off? Or can everyone to take their cues off one actor at the top of the scene?

Video Layout:

Explore the specific tools that your platform provides, as they all vary slightly, but you can often arrange the performer's video feeds – almost like blocking. For example, in Zoom, you can use a “spotlight video” to highlight a specific performer that is onstage. Do you want to see all the performers at once? Consider which side of the screen you want a performer to appear on and “pinning” their feed to that side for continuity.

Experiment with the platform's settings to see what all of your options are. Think about what you want your audience to see and how you can toggle between various views.

In Zoom, you can have the “Speaker” or the “Gallery” mode. Speaker mode allows you to have a single person speak, if they are “spotlighted”. Gallery mode allows you to see all the people on the call with their camera turned on. You can keep people “off-camera” by asking them to turn their camera off. Gallery mode will only show the people with their camera on.

<https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/201362323-How-Do-I-Change-The-Video-Layout->

<https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/201362653-Spotlight-A-Video>

Call script:

As the director, you will be in control of editing the performance. Creating a call script/shot list will help the stage manager during the performance.

Other tips:

We've found that while this is “on camera”, it's best not to think of this performance as a film or television performance. Actors really pop when they make big, fun choices and play to the back row.

Get Creative with Tech

Camera Work:

Explore using the webcam as a storytelling tool. If each actor is well-framed in the center of the shot, the focus will be on their face. But is there fun to be had with characters speaking from off-screen, being close up, being far away, or being partially obscured?

Alternatively, cell phones can give a different stylistic effect, and actors can switch between computers and cell phones for separate scenes. The camera's picture quality will vary depending on the device, but think of the camera as another tool to add movement to the piece and maintain the play's continuity throughout the different shots.

Music and Sound:

- If working with sound cues, experiment with playing them from different locations and devices to find what works best– for example, we found that if you're playing music from the same laptop that you're video conferencing from, Zoom will consider it background noise and ignore it.
- Performers not in the scene should be muted, as the program can pick up background noise and the sound of movement.
- Another thing to keep in mind is that these programs usually only allow for one speaker at a time, so overlapping dialogue or interrupted dialogue is a bit trickier.
- In Zoom, the active speaker has a highlight around their box/screen. It's a tool that can be used as a reference when working out the rhythm and pacing of dialogue.

Backgrounds:

Actors are their own set designers. They can scout out their space and play around with various options, depending on what the script calls for: a blank wall, a corner, a bathroom, any outside space. Empower the actor to set a frame that highlights their camera.

You can have fun using the limited background visible behind each performer to suggest a location. This can either be a physical backdrop that you create where the performer is, or (on some platforms) a virtual backdrop that you insert. Simple props can also go far in suggesting a location. Consider what each performer has available – you don't need more than a plain wall, but there's opportunity to DIY more if you have artists hungry for a project.

<https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/210707503-Virtual-Background>

Lighting

Play around with lighting to see what it looks like on screen. Using a flashlight can be a great effect, as could putting a lamp on the floor or using LED lamps. Playing with the brightness on a screen can also be a creative tool to help tell the story.

AUDIENCE INTERACTION

Virtual talkbacks:

Many video platforms allow for Q&A sessions. Consider using this feature as another way to extend the communal experience. The Q&A feature will allow the moderator to review the questions in an orderly manner and guide the talkback. This feature is preferable to using the Chat, which can be more of a tool for the cast/crew to communicate behind the scenes.

<https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/203686015-Getting-Started-with-Question-Answer>

Voting:

Some platforms allow for “voting” (see link below, for a feature that is available on a platform like Zoom). Does the piece you’re working on have an opportunity to use this feature ?

<https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/203749865-Polling-for-Webinars>

Another option is to use the chat feature in the platform and include a link to a Google poll and communicate to the audience when you would like for them to vote in real time.

TICKETING

Consider your platform for audience size and cast size. For example, Zoom allows for up to 25 panelists in a webinar and depending on the plan selected, Zoom allows for the number of participants to be anywhere from 100, 500, 1000, up to 3000.

Pay-per-view/how to ticket - some platforms, like Zoom, allow you to charge attendees:

<https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/360018597111-Configuring-Zoom-Webinars-with-PayPal>

Another option is to set up a Venmo account that people can send money. Venmo tells you who sent the money, so you can know who paid for tickets.

RECORDING

Some platforms allow the session to be recorded. Check your licensing agreement to see if you are able to record rehearsals or the actual performance itself, and how you are able to use that video.

OTHER RESOURCES

- How to set up a Zoom webinar:

<https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/sections/200324965-Video-Webinar>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gk3T-IVHCws>

- How to schedule a Zoom webinar with required registration; this can allow your organization or school to collect data on attendees:
<https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/204619915-Scheduling-a-Webinar-with-Registration>
- For an example of how a staged performance can look:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HjLofon7Xv0&t=13s>)
- Some tips from EdTa on online learning:
<https://learn.schooltheatre.org/resources-for-creating-online-learning>
- A list of some video conferencing programs:
 - Zoom Video Communications
 - Iris Connect
 - Younow- sign up through Facebook
 - Periscope- integrated to Twitter
 - Facebook Live
 - YouTube Live
 - Twitch TV
 - Google Meet
 - Skype

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<https://zoom.us/>

<https://www.irisconnect.com/us/>

<https://www.younow.com/videos>

<https://www.pscp.tv/>

<https://www.facebook.com/facebookmedia/solutions/facebook-live>

<https://www.youtube.com/live>

<https://www.twitch.tv/>

<https://gsuite.google.com/products/meet/>

<https://www.skype.com/en/>

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