Effective Dreaming in the Time of Zoom Theatre: Reflections on Directing *The Lathe of Heaven*

Isaiah Matthew Wooden

This essay details and examines several of the revelations that directing in new digital modes during the COVID-19 pandemic surfaced about the need for refreshing outmoded theatrical practices and paradigms. Using the production of Natsu Onoda Power's adaptation of *The Lathe of Heaven* that I helmed at Brandeis University in the spring of 2021 as a case study, I sharpen particular focus on how engaging the project with openness, curiosity, and generosity compelled me to rethink many of my artistic habits and assumptions and reconsider how I view my role as a theatre-maker in higher education. Stewarding the production yielded many important insights about ways to enhance the creative process for all involved, especially student participants. By outlining several of those insights in what follows, I aim to demonstrate how developing practices that center students' growth and care can enable more robust and enriching artistic experiences and pedagogical outcomes for them. I also aim to illustrate the ways in which such practices can engender more imaginative and meaningful approaches to show selection, rehearsal, and the collaborative process more broadly.

There was certainly much for theatre artists, scholars, and teachers to lament about the nearly two-year halt that the rapid spread of COVID-19 brought to live stage performances. Going several months without entering a rehearsal room would have been inconceivable to me before March 2020. That students who spent multiple semesters cultivating various creative and artistic fluencies would not have the chance to put what they were learning in the classroom into practice onstage would have been equally unthinkable. And yet, these were the circumstances that many of us were confronted with when the pandemic rendered gathering in person a potentially deadly health hazard.

A lot will surely be written in the years to come about the extraordinary lengths to which theatre-makers at all levels had to go to bring enriching performances to audiences around the globe during our long season of sequestering. There is already a growing body of literature exploring the expansion of those modes of theatrical storytelling that achieved fresh significance during the pandemic, Zoom theatre and streamed theatre among them. Like countless other stage directors, my inability to rely upon several of the key practices, techniques, and strategies that I have perfected over decades of theatre-making meant remaining open to discoveries and new ways of collaborating. With some critical distance from the sense of urgency and angst that marked much of my life during the darkest days of the theatre shutdown, I am now able to contemplate and appreciate the ways in which the pandemic forced me to interrogate vital questions about what theatre is and what it can be, thereby fundamentally transforming how I view my relationship to making theatre at colleges and universities.

A Pandemic, Many Conundrums

The process by which I came to choose *The Lathe of Heaven* to direct via Zoom supplied valuable insights about the benefits of thoughtful show selection. Season planning is often fraught in the best of times. Navigating this process during a global pandemic proved especially challenging.

Several weeks into the world-historical emergency, I was confronted with a choice about how to proceed with an upcoming directing assignment. In the preceding months, I had been in extensive dialogue with colleagues about spearheading a project for the 2020–21 mainstage season. After sharing and reading scripts with various community members, I settled on staging Branden Jacobs-Jenkins's *Everybody*, a play that students often responded very positively to when I taught it.[1] Thus even when the university announced that all course instruction would move online, I continued with the research process that I carry out in advance of every production I direct. It was unfathomable to me at the time that we would not be conducting campus activities in person in the months ahead.

I was not the only one who shared this optimism. Indeed, it would be some weeks before the department's season planning committee would begin having discussions in earnest about how to proceed with the production calendar. Some of the delays in exploring different avenues stemmed from a shared though unnamed anxiety about hastening what W. B. Worthen terms theatre's "terminal obsolescence" (190). Even as my colleagues and I had come to recognize the ways that modes like "Zoom theatre" had, in a very short time, become crucial instruments "for theatrical institutions to make performances they [could] sell, as a way to keep themselves, their staffs, and their performers alive during the pandemic," there were brewing concerns about what engaging with these technologies might mean for the future of the profession, our approaches to theatre education and pedagogy, and the vitality and viability of the art form (184). Ultimately, it became urgent for us to begin thinking outside the box about ways to reimagine and innovate the season, with the understanding that a live, in-person experience in one of the indoor spaces on campus was likely not feasible for the foreseeable future. We contemplated pausing all production activity until it was deemed safe for large groups to gather again. Foregoing a season altogether quickly revealed itself as the least desirable option, however. The havoc that physical distancing and social isolation were wreaking on students' mental health and well-being had already become a source of concern for us. In our discussions with them, students noted how important having exciting assignments, activities, and projects to look forward to was in boosting their spirits. They were eager to break up the monotony that the pandemic had imposed on their everyday lives. As such, we decided that it was necessary to offer as many opportunities as possible for them to flex creatively amid all the uncertainty they were negotiating. How to do that in a way that felt compelling was a question that we would grapple with for many months.

Of course, the rapid increase of "Zoom theatre" during the pandemic revealed that not all projects were well-suited for translation to online or digital formats. While some praised theatre artists and companies for the ingenuity they displayed in bringing content to homebound audiences, others expressed reservations about the trend.[2] Restrictions on indoor gatherings would eventually force most theatre companies to postpone the in-person productions that they had optimistically announced and to try to keep audiences engaged with digital content instead. A notable and unexpected consequence of these adjustments was the reanimation of the "liveness debates" that Peggy Phelan and Philip Auslander helped stir in the 1990s.[3] The online platform *HowlRound* published one of the more compelling entries in these reactivated conversations in February 2021. In an essay written for the site's "Devising Our Future" series, which was launched in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis and the global protests against anti-Black racism and police violence spurred by the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, projection designer and director Jared Mezzocchi made a passionate case for theatre-makers to welcome the opportunities that working in new digital and virtual modes afforded them to experiment with different aesthetic strategies and practices. "Theatre's best ability is being able to adapt swiftly to the world around it, energized by liveness and immediacy," Mezzocchi wrote, recapitulating the idea that liveness is one of the distinguishing characteristics of the art form (n.p.). He notably argued that the term *virtual theatre* was not an oxymoron, offering that theatre-makers might reconsider their suspicion of working in digital or virtual spaces, approaching the process in much the same way they would when working in a site-specific venue or location.[4]

The ideas that Mezzocchi outlined in the essay were not wholly unfamiliar to me when *HowlRound* published the piece. In the fall of 2020, I directed a new play written for Zoom by the

inimitable playwright Kia Corthron called *Penitence*.[5] Starring Broadway veteran Keith Randolph Smith, the project allowed me to experience firsthand some of the innovative practices that Mezzocchi and his collaborators in the then newly formed Virtual Design Collective (VidCo) were developing to transform online theatre.[6] Early in our rehearsal process, they provided a demonstration of several of the new tools they had created to manipulate the Zoom interface, making it possible to place two participants in the same frame or to overlay a frame with video, for example. Through their creative resourcefulness, Mezzocchi and his team expanded my thinking about ways to make Zoom a more dynamic environment in which to direct theatrical productions. They also powerfully demonstrated the spirit of experimentation and risk-taking that would prove essential for telling complex theatrical stories in new digital modes—so much so that I recommended that my department consider collaborating with the VidCo team on our digital fall production.

Despite the positive experience I had working on *Penitence*, I still had some reservations about directing a full-length play online. With the university giving no indication that safety protocols would be relaxed, I needed to shift focus to considering the kind of project I thought would be advantageous to mount digitally. I knew that I did not want to proceed with *Everybody*. While other colleges and universities had figured out clever ways to adapt the play for Zoom (and other platforms), I feared too much of what I loved about the script—its metatheatricality especially—would be lost if I opted to do the same. Correspondingly, I directed my attention to selecting a new project. In doing so, it became important to consider what I thought made some projects better suited for rehearsing and performing online than others.

So much of what we teach and learn about plays, particularly those from the Western tradition, remains informed by and wedded to the Aristotelean notion that "good" drama centers on action. While many of us have moved away from a rigid insistence that dramatic action must be unified or progress linearly to be effective, we have yet to jettison discussion of action altogether. Indeed, a student making their way through a theatre program is likely to hear the maxim "show, don't tell" quite a few times. The phrase encapsulates a widespread belief that audiences are much more interested in action than they are in narration. Too much narration, or "telling," is thought to be deadly to the business of drama. And yet, among the things that helped make some projects work better online, at least to my mind, was a commitment to both showing *and* telling. With technologies like Zoom severely restricting the performer's "playing space" and, in many instances, what could be done with the body, *telling* became crucial for filling in the parts of the story that might normally be conveyed through gesture, movement, or other stage business. Projects that embraced the kind of thick narration often present in adaptations of literature for the stage or story theatre seemed to match better with the new approaches to creating theatrical experiences the pandemic necessitated.

Strikingly, even with the knowledge that I had accrued about how theatre artists like Mezzocchi and the VidCo team were continuing to push the boundaries of what was possible for theatrical design in digital formats, I still found performances steeped in the conventions of naturalism or realism difficult to appreciate inside the Zoom grid. Virtual backgrounds, no matter how well their execution, were no substitute for a performer being enveloped by a dynamic environment with dimensions easily discernible to the viewer. Any attempts at using such backgrounds (or other features offered by the various platforms used to mount digital performances) to signal location changes, for example, only served to highlight what a poor proxy they were for the real thing. Those performances that acknowledged the limitations of these platforms and exploited the challenges they posed tended to be the ones that netted something interesting—and at times thrilling.

Material that elevated viewers from the heaviness of the here and now, at least momentarily, was also often more fascinating to watch. While I had sought out and benefited from projects that granted me space to reckon with some of the big existential questions that working and living in isolation inevitably inspired, those that *only* did that rarely held my attention. Indeed, for a digital show to sustain my interest for its duration it needed to have whimsical, magical, or imaginative

elements that sparked fresh imaginings for different ways of being and relating in the world. I was eager to see projects that invited me to experience a taste of elsewhere. Surely, this was one of the reasons why, before the pandemic shuttered theatres, you could find me sitting in the audience of a performance two to three times a week. The theatre is for me an important site "to articulate and sometimes see realized my hopes for some otherwise intangible future," to echo Jill Dolan (3). As such, I was unwilling to wholly abandon my need for the performances that I viewed online to also stir new hopes.

Engaging in this process of clarifying the kinds of dramaturgical strategies and aesthetic attributes that managed to hold my attention and elicit strong affective responses while watching digital performances shifted my relationship to show selection and season planning. In addition to helping me tease out a clear set of criteria to use in searching for and choosing a new project, it also prompted me to reckon with some of the limiting beliefs I was maintaining about what constitutes "good" theatre. Finding a script that would help me achieve my goals for the production became a priority. Those goals included fashioning a show that would excite audiences and further expand ideas about what was possible in digital theatre, as well as creating rehearsal processes and production practices that centered grace and care.

Achieving this latter goal was especially important. Despite the emphasis on collaboration that pervades much of the rhetoric on theatre, I have had too many negative experiences working with people who approached the creative process antagonistically. Part of what made these such sour endeavors was the unwillingness of the offending person to express understanding or extend compassion when needed. Student performers, in particular, are often juggling competing imperatives and circumstances that might make, say, rescheduling a previously arranged costume fitting at the last minute a necessity. Ideas about "professionalism" and frustrations about a lack of time and resources too frequently become excuses for perpetuating harms in the artistic process. I always find it heartbreaking when I learn that a student who once expressed excitement about doing theatre has decided not to participate in future productions because of a negative experience. I empathize with them because my encounters with problematic collaborators have similarly made me question whether maintaining a theatre-making practice is worthwhile. I have come to believe strongly that the unhealthy ways of working that are far too prevalent throughout the field at both the educational and professional levels are ripe for jettisoning. Centering grace and care in the collaborative process is one of the ways that I have committed to hastening the process of shifting this paradigm.

To that end, it became important that in addition to aligning with the selection considerations detailed here, the script I ultimately chose also needed to reflect a spirit of generosity and collaboration dramaturgically. Projects generated communally were of particular interest. While the idea did cross my mind, I realized very quickly that the conditions and circumstances were not advantageous for me to engage others in a process of adapting or devising a text that we could shape into an ensemble-driven performance. Time was a major factor; so too was the fact that I wanted to be intentional about not overburdening already overwhelmed student performers and collaborators. Beautifully, my personal and professional networks include several theatre-makers with strong commitments to creating work in inventive and invigorating ways. I wrote to several of them to see if they had any suggestions for projects that might work especially well online. One of the first people to respond to my inquiry was the Washington, D.C.–based writer, director, designer, and professor Natsu Onoda Power.

Effective Dreams, Alternate Realities

I first met Onoda Power in 2005, the year she joined the faculty at Georgetown University, where she is currently a professor of theatre and performance studies. I have had myriad opportunities to witness and experience firsthand her singular and innovative approach to theatrical storytelling

in the years since. While she has directed and designed a broad array of new and canonical works over the years—from David Henry Hwang's *Yellow Face* to Mike Lew's *Tiger Style*—Onoda Power's particular specialty is in adapting nondramatic texts for the stage, transforming unexpected source material into what *Washington Post* critic Peter Marks once called "breathtakingly imaginative, eye-delighting performance piece[s]" (n.p.).[7] Striking about Onoda Power's creative approach are the ways she emboldens her interlocutors, who often include college and university students, to participate in a process of rigorous play and improvisation, thereby creating space for the collective generation of performance material. Rarely does she begin a rehearsal process for her adaptations with a finished script. This necessarily means that she and her collaborators must develop different ways of working—ways that depart significantly from the very rigid production models replicated at most regional theatres in the United States. As she remarked in an interview with Natalie Gallagher and Kelley Kidd, "[I] enjoy the process of building shows with a close-knit ensemble. Most of my projects are just excuses for me to be in the room [with an] inspired, talented group of people and learning from them" (n.p.). That the dramaturgy of her adaptations tends to reflect this ethos of communal play-making made me excited that Onoda Power had responded to my call.

Further intensifying my excitement was the knowledge that Onoda Power often integrates various modes of visual storytelling into her work. Audiences can expect to experience puppetry, projections, animation, live-action cartooning, and interactive video, among other things, when attending one of her shows. As *Washington City Paper* critic Chris Klimek remarked about the 2012 Studio Theatre production of her signature piece *Astro Boy and the God of Comics*, Onoda Power "expertly wields a staggering array of high- and low-tech storytelling tools—video and laser projection, puppetry, choreography, and live cartooning—to weave a kinetic but never assaultive metatextual tapestry" (n.p.). It is precisely this embrace of the high- and low-tech that made me eager to learn which of her projects Onoda Power thought might be suited for the Zoom environment.

Onoda Power forwarded a few scripts to me. Included among them was her award-winning adaptation of acclaimed writer Ursula Le Guin's 1971 science fiction novel *The Lathe of Heaven*. Onoda Power premiered the project in 2018 as a part of the second Women's Voices Theater Festival in Washington, D.C., a citywide initiative "designed to highlight both the scope of plays being written by women and the range of professional theatre being produced in and around the area" (Peterson n.p.). The production would become a highlight of the festival, with Onoda Power garnering several accolades at the 2019 Helen Hayes Awards ceremony, including wins for "Outstanding Original Play or Musical Adaptation" and "Outstanding Set Design"[8] (fig. 1).

Several things immediately intrigued me about Onoda Power's script. First, I found the idea of a theatrical adaptation of a work of speculative fiction deeply compelling and remarkably timely. Science fiction is not a genre that theatre-makers take up very often. And yet, in reading her adaptation, I was struck by the many resonances between the two forms. Both, for example, reflect an investment in imagining new worlds to offer up vital critiques of the present, inviting audiences to time travel while doing so. Among the things I had come to miss greatly about attending shows in person were the opportunities that doing so often afforded me to shuttle between clock time, the time of the play, and the time of my body. Then there was the content. Onoda Power's adaptation draws on an eclectic mix of styles, forms, and pop-cultural references to refashion Le Guin's narrative into a theatrical fantasia replete with alien encounters and altered realities. Like the novel, the adaptation centers on the struggles of George Orr, a somewhat hapless everyman from Portland, Oregon, whose "effective dreams" can change the world around him. Orr confronts several dilemmas once he realizes that Dr. William Haber, the psychiatrist and self-proclaimed "dream specialist" he turns to for help, is manipulating his dreams to achieve his own ends. These dilemmas become catalysts to explore a range of complex themes, including climate change, racism, and mental health, in the adaptation; they also provide rich opportunities to reimagine the theatre, and the world, otherwise.

Fig. 1 Anderson Stinson III (Dr. William Haber) in *The Lathe of Heaven*, adapted by Natsu Onoda Power from *The Lathe of Heaven* by Ursula K. Le Guin. (Photo: Isaiah Matthew Wooden.)

I concluded that *The Lathe of Heaven* was the right project to pursue not long after reading the script for the third time. I was drawn to its episodic form and provocative content. I was also excited by the many opportunities it would give me, the creative team, and the cast to discover fresh ways to accomplish some of the seemingly impossible devices Onoda Power embeds in her dramaturgy. For example, in the prologue, she calls for a live camera, a clear Plexiglas box filled with water, an upside-down paper cityscape, and a container of milk to be manipulated to simulate a mushroom-cloud explosion. Her stage directions for a later alien-attack sequence dictate that flat-surface puppets move through sixty-nine different actions that are perfectly choreographed to music and sound effects. Even as I recognized that it would not be possible to execute many of these stage directions in the ways that they had been scripted, I was confident we could explore other choices to realize the ideas and, in so doing, open new dramatic and theatrical storytelling possibilities.

Many of my colleagues shared my excitement about Onoda Power's adaptation, even if some expressed some skepticism about speculative fiction as a theatrical genre. With their endorsements secured, we were finally able to announce the project to the broader community, schedule audition dates, and begin assembling the artistic team. Of immediate importance for me at that point was beginning conversations with the creative team about ways to establish a design vocabulary that would augment the zany elements of the story and support them being told in Zoom. We decided early on to embrace some of the essential features of the platform—its two-dimensionality, for example—and use the designs to comment on the strangeness of the entire endeavor of living through and making theatre during a pandemic. The fact that we had gone months without seeing people sans face-coverings in public was notable and, I thought, added to a collective sense of disorientation and alienation. We committed to exploring these connections through the costumes for the aliens, the Alderberanians, that feature prominently in the show's plot. To realize the unearthly figures, we used a combination of neck-gaiter face masks, clear plastic face shields, and bright yellow swim caps, which served at once to obscure the mouths and exaggerate the eyes of the characters (Chelsea Kerl was the costume designer). Likewise, we settled on a visual vocabulary wherein a "title card" that included a drawing of the scripted location would precede each scene. These title cards would begin static but would eventually become animated in some way. In framing the scenes with visual information about the given circumstances, we hoped to avoid overwhelming the performer's Zoom frames with too many props or other "scenic" elements that would distract from the intimacy that the technology both produces and necessitates (Cameron Anderson designed the visual/scenic elements) (figs. 2–3).
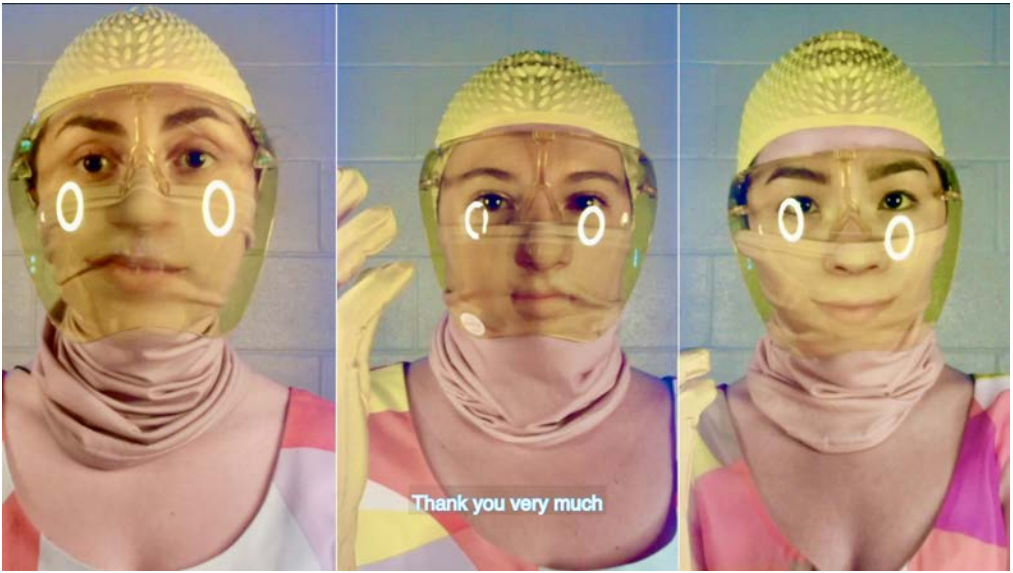
Fig. 2 Jaramie Cataldo (Aldebaranian), Abigail Roberts (Aldebaranian), and Sophie Lee (Aldebaranian) in *The Lathe of Heaven*. (Photo: Isaiah Matthew Wooden.)

Fig. 3 Jaramie Cataldo (Aldebaranian), Abigail Roberts (Aldebaranian), and Sophie Lee (Aldebaranian) in *The Lathe of Heaven*. (Photo: Isaiah Matthew Wooden.)

Our primary aim was to create the conditions for student performers to have a positive experience participating in this still relatively new approach to theatre-making. To that end, we had to make important decisions early on about how to rehearse and perform the show. The goal was to support the student performers in such a way that their focus could remain on their acting work. Correspondingly, we decided to standardize the technology for the production, including the quality of the internet service, to make troubleshooting any problems that would arise more practicable for the production staff. We also contemplated ways to address students' general exhaustion with having to perform most of their activities—attending rehearsals, socializing, and sleeping,

for example—from the same perches in their respective living quarters. We discovered there were some relatively easy solutions we could implement to allay these concerns. Converting several of the dressing rooms in the large, though perennially underutilized performing arts facility into individual rehearsal rooms/recording studios for performers was one of them. These dressing rooms were built in the 1960s and had never been used in this way before. As such, the department's production staff had to spend considerable time figuring out ways to make them more conducive to rehearsing and capturing performances, including installing soundproofing tiles and building tables that could hold desktop computers and lighting instruments. Doing this meant that the department could provide both the hardware and software to capture the performances, allowing for consistency in video and sound quality; it also meant that the performers could all connect to the same Wi-Fi network. In setting up these rooms, we endeavored to supply student performers with everything they needed to do their best work, thereby further fulfilling our commitments to centering care in the process and demonstrating the importance of attending to matters of accessibility.

To say that our rehearsal and production processes were unconventional would be to understate just how unusual so much of what we did to prepare the show for audiences was. Surely, there was something thrilling and indeed liberating about not feeling tethered to ways of doing things that, even before the pandemic, needed to be refreshed significantly. Perhaps one of the greatest gifts of embracing new possibilities was the space it provided me and the larger team to experiment with dismantling the hierarchal dynamics that often define the production process. I worked to create an environment where each member of the team—performers, designers, stage management, and production staff—felt empowered to contribute to conversations on the overall vision for the project, even if that meant chiming in on things that were not in the areas that they oversaw traditionally. I did encounter some resistance to this initially. It required a shift in thinking about power dynamics that some, especially those wedded to certain ideas about expertise, found uncomfortable. The pandemic had notably turned many of us into novices in areas in which we had previously honed comprehensive knowledge and skills. Highlighting this helped assuage a lot of the fear that some of my collaborators felt about venturing into new territory.

Directors are given considerable space to generate and ask questions. It is one of the things about the role that I value most. There is an expectation that a director will approach the collaborative process inquisitively. Those expectations are not always extended to others on the artistic and production teams, however. Indeed, I have been involved in multiple projects where non-directors who dared to pose questions were treated as if they were wasting others' time. Again, given the newness of so much of what we were doing on the project, it felt crucial that everyone was able to ask as many questions as possible. This was particularly true for the students involved. I wanted this to be a vitalizing learning experience for them, one that would help them take major leaps forward artistically, educationally, and socio-emotionally. They were especially eager to learn more about the technology we were using to rehearse and capture the production. I was struck by how much they drew on what they learned to deepen their performance work. Knowing, for example, that it would be possible to do multiple takes of a beat—and that additional effects could be layered in later—empowered them to use their bodies in unexpected ways and to make bigger, bolder choices.

Among the things I came to appreciate about collaborating in these new ways were the opportunities it gave me to bring people into the rehearsal room that I might not ordinarily invite. A student could work on a production in the small department and not interact with most faculty members, for example. Correspondingly, I asked those colleagues who teach performance-based courses to visit and lead exercises during rehearsals. The purpose of this was to expose students to ways of working that stretched beyond what I had them doing, thereby enhancing their toolkits as performers. I also wanted the community to develop a fuller understanding and appreciation of the commitment that the entire faculty and staff had to the success of the production and the season more broadly. To be sure, they benefited greatly from seeing all the artists on the team embracing the challenges of the pandemic to expand their creative methods and practices. I too learned a lot from watching colleagues work, and as such have decided that extending these invitations is something I will continue to do on future projects (fig. 4).

Fig. 4 Sophie Lee (Aldebaranian) and Pierce Robinson (George Orr) in *The Lathe of Heaven*. (Photo: Isaiah Matthew Wooden.)

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Directing *The Lathe of Heaven* during the pandemic surfaced myriad revelations about the transformative power and possibilities of theatre. When I asked the student performers what marked the experience as a successful venture in theatre-making for them, they notably did not get bogged down in debates or concerns about liveness or intersubjective encounters and exchanges with audiences; instead, they pointed to how the process and production made them *feel*: connected, collaborative, alive. They were grateful that they were allowed to make art in ways previously unimaginable—and to do so while extending grace and care for themselves and one another. This was no doubt also a tremendous source of gratitude for me. The pandemic had taken so much from all of us (and continues to do so). And yet, it had also managed to remind us that another world was yet still possible. Directing Onoda Power's adaptation powerfully affirmed this while also demonstrating the importance of "effective dreaming" to cultivating more generous, generative, and vitalizing approaches to show selection, rehearsal, and the process of imagining and creating new worlds.

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Notes

1. Jacobs-Jenkins's script appealed to me for several reasons. First, I was drawn to its formal inventiveness, heightened theatricality, and shrewd engagements with theatre history. Second, I appreciated that the script called for a diverse ensemble and would allow performers to take on a range of interesting roles. Third, as someone who has primarily taught courses in dramatic literature, theatre history, and dramaturgy in recent years, I was eager to see what exploring the play in rehearsals with students might further reveal about the richness and complexities of Jacobs-Jenkins's theatrical imagination.

2. Many of the theatre artists that I spoke to fell somewhere in the middle, much like critics Ben Brantley, Jesse Green, and Maya Phillips. In a conversation published in the *New York Times* in July 2020, all three writers conveyed ambivalence about the hybrid modes of theatre-making the pandemic engendered. See Brantley, et al., "This Is Theater in 2020."

3. In January 2021, for example, theatre critic Charles McNulty took to the pages of the *Los Angeles Times* to grapple with and invite reflection on questions about the ontology of theatre. He launched his commentary, titled "How to Define Theater in the Digital Era? I'll Know It When I See It," by rightly pointing out that such questions have long been a source of contention for scholars. McNulty went on to venture several ideas about what distinguishes theatre from film and television, before concluding that, when it comes to the abundance of digital theatre that began circulating during the pandemic, he would know whether it was theatre "when I see it." (n.p.). Months earlier, in July 2020, critic Laura Collins-Hughes suggested in the *New York Times* that we should avoid proclaiming that digital theatre is theatre at all and consider it as an interesting, temporary substitute instead. Collins-Hughes drew on many of the now axiomatic assertions that Peggy Phelan makes in the opening paragraphs of "The Ontology of Performance" in *Unmarked* to make her own case. Whereas McNulty would later leave open the idea that some digital performances might warrant being categorized as theatre, Collins-Hughes rebuffed that notion entirely. Philip Auslander would, of course, challenge the privileging of liveness in theatre and performance studies discourses, pushing the fields to reckon further with the consequences that an increasingly mediatized culture continues to bring to bear on how we embody, experience, understand, perceive, and receive performance.

4. "Virtual artmaking is grueling, full of challenges, and steeped in unexpected turns. It is making critics of us all, clawing to identify what 'is' and 'isn't' theatre," Mezzocchi wrote. "Instead of drawing lines in the sand, though, we should use all of these challenges as launchpads to discovery for the future," he went on to suggest, before adding: "The hurdles are no different than, for instance, entering into an empty warehouse and realizing there is only one outlet in the back stairwell. In those circumstances, the team is inspired to problem solve, demanding that the form can and will continue to exist" (n.p.).

5. *Penitence* was presented as a part of the bilingual, binational Flash Acts festival produced by the Forum for Cultural Engagement, in collaboration with Arena Stage, Georgetown University, the Lubimovka Young Russian Playwrights Festival, and the Center for Modern Drama in Yekaterinburg Russia. The twenty works commissioned for the festival, which each explored ideas of isolation in some way, notably received two productions: one spearheaded by artists based in the United States and the other stewarded by artists based in Russia. For more on the festival, see https://www.flashactsfestival.org/.

6. VidCo describes itself as "a collection of designers innovating new ways to tell stories and create communities online." For more on the collective, see https://www.vidco.tech/.

7. In 2010, for example, Onoda Power remade the influential French historian and philosopher Michel Foucault's formative 1961 book *Madness and Civilization* into an elaborate, multimedia, genre-bending theatrical spectacle. She would follow that production up a year later with a joyful adaptation of Michael Pollen's bestseller,

The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals (2006), which she transformed into an immersive performance that sent audience members on a scavenger hunt to various site-specific installations about food before inviting them to join in a communal meal.

8. *The Lathe of Heaven* was a co-production between Georgetown University and Spooky Action Theater, a small professional company with a performance space in Washington, D.C.'s U Street corridor. Composer Roc Lee would notably also garner a Helen Hayes award for "Outstanding Sound Design." Lee served as the sound designer for the production at Brandeis as well.

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