

ENTERTAINMENT

UA Theatre and Dance to produce in-the-process documentaries for all-virtual season

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Actors and dancers often train on stages with the belief that techniques, the basics of creating a character or performance, will translate to film when needed.

This pandemic year has urged changes on the University of Alabama Department of Theatre and Dance, with more focus turning to performance for cameras, as its 2020-2021 season will go all digital.

Actors, directors, choreographers, dancers, designers, technicians and management will proceed through their work as if preparing for shows, though the end result will be not full-length live plays or concerts, but shorter videos, part documentary, part performance.

Since the pandemic hit in spring, the department has been thrashing out ideas, consulting with other academic training programs, trying to find the most effective ways to move forward, said Sarah Barry, chair of the department, housed in Rowand-Johnson Hall, with stages and rehearsal spaces in Morgan and Manly.

"In spring you just had to adapt super quickly, and try to figure out how to finish," said Barry, also a professor of dance. After a summer of study and consultations, "the faculty came into the fall semester with a much better idea of how things could work."

Aerosol studies regarding COVID-19, indicating ejections from breath can hang in the air, and remain potentially infectious, longer than expected, are cause for concern, as in their exertions, dancers typically breath harder than ordinary. Actors and singers work to project their voices, so even 6 feet wouldn't be enough.

Classes are proceeding mostly in hybrid format, with a small number of students in person, and the rest participating online. Dancers are required to be 10 feet apart. Masks are being worn at all times within UA spaces.

None of that is natural or comfortable for artists working in collaboration, on art forms built around physical and emotional intimacy.

"We really require, more than most academic disciplines, to be in person," said Dominic Yeager, associate chair, and head of the arts management program.

Aside from obvious questions of air safety, and whether an actor could work while masked, limitations required by distancing wouldn't have made selling in-person seats for a live season worth the effort. The two Rowand-Johnson performance spaces, the Marian Gallaway Theatre, and Allen Bales Theatre, are down from 306 seats to overall capacity of 54, and from 149 to 32, respectively. And that's overall capacity, counting all those working, too, so with any significantly sized cast and crew, audiences would have been cut into barely double digits. The Gallaway is also undergoing maintenance right now, further limiting possibilities.

Students have run through a "whole roller-coaster range of emotions" in early days, Yeager said, from general fears about safety, to sadness about inability to work entirely in person, to feeling grateful the department had worked out ways to allow them to do at least some parts of their work, study and research.

"Morale was down a little bit," Yeager said, "but us being in constant communication with them, trying to always be positive about it, looking at their peers in other institutions who don't get to do anything, seems to be helping them settle in."

On the theater side, the season's been adapted from earlier plans. Typically the department crafts its seasons, which run from fall through spring semesters, well in advance, a year or more. Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice" stayed on the season, but Seth Panitch, head of the acting programs, will no longer direct.

Instead, third-year master of fine arts candidate Reid Watson will take on the Bard's drama, with that video slated to be ready in November, while Panitch workshops his original musical "Shooting Star," co-written with and based on the life of Billy Griffin, singer-songwriter who replaced Smokey Robinson as lead singer with The Miracles in 1972, when Robinson left to work as vice president of Motown, and launch his solo career. The video for "Shooting Star" is expected to be done in December.

Matt Davis, head of directing and stage management, will direct Sophocles' "Antigone" for February 2021, and Stacy Alley, head of musical theater, will direct "Spring Awakening" for April.

"The product is going to end up being a documentary about the process of theater, during this pandemic," Yeager said. "We're still going to be completing the vast majority of the production work."

As an example, for "Merchant," green screens will be used for digital renderings placed behind the actors. Tech work will proceed, and costumes will be designed and built, but placed on mannequins in the Allen Bales. Actors will record their scenes on digital devices, with provided green screen backgrounds, and swatches of the costume fabrics for them to work with. In order to get more students working, UA has double-cast "Merchant," with one almost all-women cast, and one more mixed, to juxtapose the processes.

They're planning that sort of production for the entire season, though of course hoping for developments on the vaccine front by the new year. For example, with musical "Spring Awakening," it's hoped there will be ways to get students back on campus to film all of it on stage.

"We're hoping we can have somebody in a room at least, playing a piano and singing," Yeager said. And it's the kind of show that could easily become a concert version, he added.

Dance will continue to track its planned format, though with shorter performances, at a maximum of 40 minutes, Barry said, probably featuring five pieces each.

The Alabama Repertory Dance Theatre concert video, featuring faculty-choreographed works, should be ready in October, with Dance Alabama!'s student-choreographed works on video in November. In December there'll be video of a concert by the four graduate students in the brand-new MFA dance program.

Spring dance schedules will be announce later.

Some of the faculty have video and film production experience, Barry said, and everyone else is learning. They're also bringing in people such as John Virciglio, who has collaborated with the department on a number of projects, for his film and editing expertise.

"It's going to be interesting for our future," Barry said. "Our training in theater is for the stage. Seth teaches acting for the screen, but we don't focus on production, editing for screen."

Though many UA grads work in live theater and dance around the country, on tours, on Broadway, and elsewhere, some have achieved TV and film fame, prominent among them Sonequa Martin-Green, who's starring as Lt. Michael Burnham on "Star Trek: Discovery,"

and had featured roles on "The Walking Dead," "Once Upon a Time," "The Good Wife" and more; and Michael Luwoye, who after playing both Hamilton and Aaron Burr on Broadway's "Hamilton," has stepped into TV roles for "The Magicians," "Bluff City Law," "She's Gotta Have It," and "The Gifted," among others.

But at UA, film and television production falls under the College of Communication and Information Sciences.

"We're certainly learning a lot from this process," Barry said, "and we don't need to let it all go."

Theatre and Dance has created short videos for promotion before, but those are typically only a few minutes long. This season's more in-depth shoots might help not only with student recruiting, but could draw potential new audiences, and serve families who might otherwise have to travel long distances to see their students at work.

Another thing Barry hopes to hold onto is a greater sense of connection, drawn, somewhat ironically, by the distancing.

"One of my grad students was commenting on just how much care she was receiving from the faculty," she said. "All her instructors are much more interested in her well-being. I've felt that, just more attention to the wellness and wholeness of the students.

"I think the students know they're cared for. Not just 'Can you do this turn?,' but 'How is your life going?'

"I hope we maintain that, the opportunity to step back and express this more."

As the videos release, they'll be viewable through the department ticketing system, for a recommended gift of \$20, at www.ua.universitytickets.com. Links will be provided for each separate video.