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Democracy Dies in Darkness

With playhouses dark, interactive theater online is lighting things up

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Word nerds of the world, rejoice. Puzzle master David Kwong is adding his cerebral talents to a burgeoning new performing arts franchise — participatory theater online — with a warmly brain-teasing show that is selling tickets as fast as they can be printed.

Kwong’s “Inside the Box” is the latest interactive digital project from the [Geffen Playhouse](#), a Los Angeles-based theater company that has emerged as a dominant player in this lively pandemic-era genre: Its previous show, Helder Guimarães’s “[The Present](#),” merged sleight-of-hand with stories about magicians, and achieved national hit status. Now, Kwong, 40, who creates crossword puzzles for the New York Times, has followed with a show that has Zoom audiences downloading quiz packets and solving mind games with him.

“My goal is not to stump people,” Kwong said in a phone interview. “My goal is to guide them to that ‘aha’ moment where they can feel smart.”

In the early days of the covid-19 shutdown — remember that far back? — there seemed few innovative opportunities for the theater world to engage audiences who were stuck at home on their laptops. Many companies raced to post videos of their stage productions on their websites. Bereft theatergoers clicked on, but the offerings often look stodgy. One’s patience with the remove from the action wears thin all too quickly. For every suavely served up “[Hamilton](#)” on Disney Plus, there are a dozen wooden videos that prompt you to log off well before the curtain call.

Several months into the pandemic, though, performers, designers and writers are using technology — and more generally, connectivity with people in their homes — with more ingenuity. They’re skillfully adapting some of the devices honed in live performance over the years — namely, techniques to break the fourth wall and lure spectators into the show. And in the process, theater is reclaiming for these trying times its rightful status as the most intimate of art forms.

The pioneers in this pursuit are, perhaps unsurprisingly, the smaller, scrappier outlets, which are proving better equipped to usher the conceits of interactivity to market. Commercial producers of more lavish entertainments have yet to improvise online in substantive ways; it may be that the bare-bones mandates of platforms such as Zoom conform more readily to the values of more modest theater operations. Thus you have companies such as Baltimore’s experimental [The Acme Corporation](#) coming up with a recorded play that’s mailed to you with all the performance tools included, or Washington’s Irish arts emporium, Solas Nua, staging live renditions online of its “[Emoji Play](#),” in which the audience converses with the characters, on Zoom and WhatsApp.

New York’s Working Theater conceived a virtual political play, “[American Dreams](#),” a commentary on America’s immigration policies in the form of a game show in which the online audience votes for one of three fictional applicants to be granted citizenship. The show is now on a digital tour, having already “stopped” at Bethesda’s Round House Theatre. Based in Boston, “[The Jar](#),” a group that has a participant choose a work of art that sparks an hour-long discussion with other enrolled guests, has moved vibrantly from live to digital sessions; so far, it has sponsored 58 virtual programs for 861 attendees. And in Sojourn Theatre’s “[The Race](#),” recently performed at Georgetown University, the cast leads a Zoom audience in exercises, scripted and improvised, about their understanding of leadership in a challenging time for democracy.

