



9AM Travel Writing sin Travel

An Ode to the Unsung Heroes of the Performing Arts

This is an era of Netflix shows, recorded Broadway performances, and Zoom readings of Shakespeare. As we thank the performers for all the work they put in, we acknowledge what has had to go on behind the scenes to bring joy to our screens during this insane time. This is an ode to the unsung heroes of the performing arts.



by [Elisa Simone Diaz](#) on May 8th, 2020

As a performer myself, I have been lucky enough to, alongside my peers, receive accolades and applause for the hard work we pour into each of our shows. But during this time where the performing arts have become so integral in maintaining our sanity (it's okay, we all binge-watched *The Witcher*, no shame) I find myself wondering: how much does the world know about what goes on behind the curtain and how these masterpieces are brought to life? I spoke with three members of creative teams in the arts- behind the curtain of a Broadway national tour, wielding the pen of several award winning TV shows, and a woman on the forefront of making accessible the joys of live theatre before, during, and after this quarantine.

We've all turned on a TV series and seen the extensive list of co-producers and executive producers on the screen, but who knows what their job actually entails? A writer writes, a director directs, and a producer? "You do EVERYTHING. But it's fun, it's really fun" says David Rambo the producer and writer of TNT's *Will*, *Empire*, and *CSI* of what it's like to be a

producer of live theatre. In TV and film, however, things look a bit different. “Producing is making decisions within a budget” Rambo laughed “Everything on television has to be on schedule on budget. There’s no getting around it. So part of our job is to write a script that IS producible” I noted how much weight that must be to carry and Rambo chuckled saying “Yes it is! Which is why that glass of wine at the end of the shooting day... you start looking forward to it about two hours after lunch.”

But this responsibility and chaos isn’t limited to life behind a camera; if anything, its intensity is felt ten fold on the Broadway- especially the National Tour of the award winning show *Hamilton*, of which Taylor Haven Holt was the resident director. Holt, pre-pandemic, had already left her life on the road because although she describes her experience as “amazing and scary and stressful and beautiful” she also found that “directing is a very solitary job.” She was also teaching a lot of kids how to be adults with a job and an income- “I saw a gap in learning.” So, when offered a teaching position in NYU Steinhardt’s Vocal Performance department, Holt was eager and ready to “get in at the ground floor. I thought a year and change [with *Hamilton*] was enough, and it was important to me to teach.” Right before New York City shut down, Taylor was not only teaching Mondays through Fridays, but she was also directing an NYU production of *Cry Baby the Musical* each night, and had just been called on as a substitute resident director for the *Hamilton* tour in Florida.

Reporting on live theatre is not any easier than directly being on creative teams for shows either. In fact it’s like being on the PR team for twelve shows at once- something especially true to Beth Stevens the managing editor of *Broadway.com*. Since *Broadway.com*’s start in May of 2000, their editorial team has always had the same goal: “Treat Broadway stars like movie stars. We wanted to make Broadway very mainstream... We really think of ourselves as cheerleader’s for Broadway.” For those of you that have seen competitive cheerleading, you understand the amount of backbending that is done to be the best, and it is no different for Stevens. Laughing a little as we discussed her “pre-pandemic” life, Ms Stevens describes the different hats she wears in a day as not only producer and editor, but also as host and writer for some of the content on the website. *Broadway.com* has worked tirelessly to continue to put out quality content during this pandemic that is up to par with their normal content such as interviews and footage of cast members and rehearsals or their award-winning coverage of the Tony Awards each year, keeping Broadway and it’s fans as connected as they were before. It’s a lot of thankless work, I’ve come to realize, but Ms Stevens only “feel[s] lucky. [*Broadway.com*] is always changing, that’s why I can stay...that allows us to challenge ourselves on how we can cover things.”

Even with the craving for challenge that all of these creative team workers have, there are still so many unknown challenges that have come along due to COVID-19. “This is a virus, just like HIV” said Rambo when discussing the effects of the novel virus on the performing arts. “I wouldn’t say HIV/Aids was a pandemic, I would say it was an epidemic. There’s a very very important distinction. HIV could only be transmitted through intimate contact. This virus is airborne... as scared as I was of HIV- and I was terrified I watched my friends dropping dead like flies- I’m *paralyzed* when I think about how easy it is to get this. And how vulnerable so many people are.” Rambo is currently officially unemployed and when we spoke he was having his first day that wasn’t a workday. “I want to be hiring actors again!” Rambo exclaimed- to which my heart, of course, leapt for joy and crumbled with a bittersweet longing. When we spoke, Rambo had just wrapped up the first season of a Netflix original series he was working on entitled *Tiny Pretty Things*. Not only did Rambo

relocate to Toronto for seven months, but he was on set everyday, finding locations to shoot, working with the director and cinematographer, approving changes in the script, and finding ways to use money and time wisely. Of course he and his colleagues are hoping for a second season, but “how will that happen? We don’t know!” Who’s on set when, what kind of scenes will have to be cut, and the amount of intimate scenes that can be shot is bound to cause a big shift in writing and producing TV shows- “These are precautions some studios have to talk about”

“I have two kids, who are somehow hungry every two hours. I’m not walking to the subway every morning anymore and going across town for shoots, sure... but I have to balance a lot more than I’m used to” Stevens said about what it’s been like to work from home. How does one work a job that requires reporting live theatre during a time where there is no live theatre? “April is the height of my theatre going... It’s a fun time to just have a really social and busy schedule” and May trailing closely behind is prime time for coverage of Broadway’s most treasured awards show the Tony’s. *Broadway.com* has had to start furloughing staffers because of this tumultuous experience and who knows for how long this will continue since, as Mr Rambo pointed out “I have a feeling things are getting worse before they get better... And I don’t know where the American theatre goes from here... I worry about the nonprofit world which is where most of the new work comes from... I don’t know if they can survive this. Because even if they come back to produce a season, will audiences want to sit in a room with several hundred or a thousand people?” Taylor Haven Holt not only had to put two productions on hold and adapt to an online teaching environment, but she was also just awarded an extremely prestigious fellowship for directing through the Drama League and is having to navigate that process. Her third year applying, Holt is one of four women of the chosen eleven, those eleven being out of around 600 applicants. “It’s a milestone as director in the new york theatre community” one where she will assist in either a Broadway, off-Broadway, or regional production and also direct her choice of a one-act play *hopefully* in January, but according to Holt, it’s now unclear if the timeline will stay the same. “It’s been hard to pick a play that you can direct confidently in life and on the internet... all of my research is having to be online... it’s limiting and frustrating.”

Throughout this frustration, however, there has been a shocking sense of community that has appeared especially in the world of theatre. Holt was relieved to see on a Zoom call that the rest of the fellows were experiencing and sharing in her frustration. Having worked through 9/11, Hurricane Sandy, Blackouts, and other disasters that have rattled the US, Stevens has confidence in the resiliency of the theatre community- “This is a resilient community... we adjust, we improvise. There’s a lot of compassion right now... I’m trying to tap into that.” *Broadway.com* has continued to provide quality content throughout this pandemic including celebrating Stephen Sondheim’s birthday with artists around the world, rejoicing in their own 20th anniversary from quarantine, and keeping their daily special *Live at Five* up to date giving fans consistency. *Live at Five* is a special live show where Stevens is joined by co-editor Paul Wontorek and producer Caitlin Moynihan at 5pmEST everyday to interview a Broadway star. They’ve continued to produce these daily livestreams during quarantine, video chatting stars such as Sutton Foster, Kristin Chenoweth, and Jeremy Jordan. David Rambo is finding some peace in all of the crazy appreciating the time to reflect that we’ve been given saying “Everything takes longer, right? Slowing us down and I don’t think that’s a bad thing.” Holt has seen a new level of comfort within her students when they don’t have fifteen faces staring at them in a classroom. The shared sentiment I took from these interviews: “This will pass.” Rambo

encouragingly and knowingly reminds us that “artists always come out of times like this energized... art is so important in times like this” and of course laughingly poking at the angsty teen in all of us, he jokes “and we will come out the end stronger...we all hated tenth grade, but you get to eleventh! Forgive your parents for everything!” he laughed. Holt tells us all to “Just persevere. This will end... It might look a little different on the other side, but it will end. In the meantime...you’ll be able to do the things you want to do. Use this time wisely. **Be kind to yourself**... you don’t have to become Picasso... but read that play you’ve been wanting to read, watch that old Broadway production, this is a time where you can get those things done.” Most importantly, all three emphasized that this pandemic is uncharted territory for all of us. “Art is so massively important in times like this” Rambo says, “[Performing Arts] is an important part of the U.S. economy and more than that, it’s a defining part of our identity... a lot of the world knows us from the stories that we tell. If we can’t tell those stories, it hurts us... It damages or diminishes the footprint that we leave behind- who we were and what we did when we were here.” The important take-away from this being, we cannot stop and we cannot let this take away our fire for story telling. “People want story-telling, it’s part of our DNA,” Stevens reminds us, and she urges artists to remember “This is just...an intermission of sorts”. Things will go back to normal; the world will need stories of encouragement to get us through this and ones of triumph to celebrate once ‘normal’ returns.
