



Notes from Playwright/Screenwriter/ Director/Producer Jim Dalglish:

The Premise

During the Spring of 2020, it became apparent that there would be no way for theatre artists to collaborate in person to produce work. Most theaters accommodated this by using Zoom to present readings of established and new plays - plays that were intended to be performed on a set in front of a live audience with the actors interacting with each other in close contact. Theatre artists have been imaginative in the ways they have created these online broadcasts. Some have even presented new work that was written with the constraints of social distancing in mind.

Written to Accommodate Social Distancing

I decided to write a new play that could be produced and shared in a way that could accommodate these constraints. But not only accommodate social distancing, but also use new media to explore how the pandemic has altered the way humans have adapted to connect with each other.

The Story

The story I chose to tell originated with my relatives in Minneapolis. During the bi-weekly Zoom sessions we held at the beginning of the pandemic, my cousin explained how her 6th-grade daughter was faring with online courses at the Montessori school she attended in South Minneapolis. The 6th graders were assigned to create online plays using common household objects as their characters. I thought the idea was hysterical and I started conceptualizing a play from this tiny detail - a teacher who had to figure out how to reach her students under times of duress. As the pandemic worsened and George Floyd was murdered a short distance from where my cousin's family resides, the story deepened into something with greater resonance. I knew that if I tackled this subject, I had to make sure I honored the people whose real-life stories touched on the narrative I was telling. I spent considerable effort reaching out to people in the theatre, literary, and arts communities - from all walks of life and ethnicities - to share my play and listen to their ideas and feelings about the story I was telling. I owe these people a great deal for their amazing insight. I hope the characters I have created and the events that are portrayed honor the people in Minneapolis and the hardships they have endured.

How To Pull It Off

How do you film a "Limited Series" broadcast online over twelve episodes and make sure that no one gets dangerously close to each other? How do you accommodate situations where people are supposed to look like they are in the same room, but are actually separated by thousands of miles? You use every bit of technology you can think of: multiple green screens; ring, box, and umbrella lights; body doubles; mobile phone and computer cameras; a high definition audio recorder; Camtasia and Quicktime Recorder for screen capture and video editing; and Zoom, Slack, FaceTime, and Google software for connectivity.

Virtual x 1000

Every recording session (we called them “shoots”) required jumping through a few dozen hoops - some of them on fire. I had never before converted one of my play scripts into a screenplay - an important first step. Nor had I created a shooting schedule or directed all aspects of video production before this project. Our first shoot - where I had one actor in Washington state and another in front of a green screen in Cotuit - was absolutely nerve-wracking for me. I had no idea if all the technology I had assembled would work, let alone if it would capture something broadcast worthy. I had directed and produced numerous plays before, but this was a whole new ballgame. Producing a play and producing a video/film are two VERY different unruly beasts. I’m lucky my actors were ready for the adventure. We all needed to be fearless. And we were. Miranda Jonté was extraordinary as my lead actress - as well as my remote location scout, set designer, and alternate camera operator. I was only able to meet online with Miranda and Calvin M. Thompson. The same is true for many of the actors portraying students and school board members. It seems insane to me that as a director I never met some of my lead actors in person. We made it work and I can’t thank all of my extraordinary actors enough for their trust and patience.

New Type of Beast

I don’t think I have ever seen anything quite like what we have put together for “Teacher of the Year.” I see it as unique as the year we have all endured.