

SPECIAL SECTION

## Notes from the Field: Remembering Times of Crisis

*Editor's Note:* In March of 2021, we issued a call for reflections on the things we have experienced, learned, and want to document and remember during more than a year of pandemic life and its attendant upheavals. As a journal primarily concerned with engaging histories, we were especially interested to know: How did people make it through community lockdowns, forced isolation, tentative reemergence with attendant social distancing, the shift to online education, the need to postpone and/or reimagine research projects, and so on? We received contributions that shared glimpses of innovative pedagogy, tests to and refashionings of community, experiences of loss and medical crisis, feelings of confusion and despair, and yearning for the opportunity to do differently and better in the future. We are thankful to the contributors here, who are helping us to document both the challenges of the present and our hopes for the future of our field.

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### Taking the Rural International

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In March 2020, Southern Illinois University in Carbondale (SIU) went into lockdown. With the annual Big Muddy New Play Festival about to kick off—two productions entering tech and four full-length staged readings rehearsing—SIU's M.F.A. Playwriting Program had been left in the lurch. COVID-19 and the scramble to move courses online and to graduate our M.F.A.'s canceled the entire festival. A year later, still online, the SIU M.F.A. Playwriting new play festival did not meet this same fate. Based on twelve months of experimentation, the program was able to develop a streaming festival. Our 2021 new play festival on YouTube brought together more than forty artists across eight time zones to collaborate with our five graduate student playwrights. The international ensemble, represented in an interactive map (Fig. 1), showed how open-access software and streaming platforms could help students at our rural university transcend our limited geography.

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Figure 1. The interactive map representing the artists of the 2021 SIU Big Muddy New Play Festival, <https://tinyurl.com/rxfbzpw> (accessed 14 April 2021).

Our experimentation with new play development online had four distinct phases. In summer 2020, we developed a combination of software that allowed for streaming productions. In fall 2020, we produced monthly evenings of live-streamed new short plays as well as private recorded readings of full-length plays. These innovations led to the planning phase of a virtual Big Muddy New Play Festival in winter 2021, and ultimately to the productions of the festival in March 2021.

After our 2020 new play festival was canceled, the four graduate playwrights who had staged readings scheduled wanted to produce the readings online. M.F.A. student Dustin Hageland took the lead in terms of technology, combining Zoom, Open Broadcast Software (OBS), Voicemeeter Banana, and Virtual Audio Cable (VAC) to then stream on a newly created SIU New Play Lab YouTube channel. This allowed us to create staged readings of shows that included not just heads in boxes, but visuals alongside the boxes, as well as preshow and postshow music. We experimented first with one of my scripts that had been produced in-person at Ball State University (BSU) in Fall 2019 under the direction of BSU student Sarah King. Since the production had already happened, we could use production stills alongside the heads in boxes presented by Zoom. We reasoned that if this experiment proved disastrous, it would be my script—not a student's—suffering the consequences. Overall, this first trial was successful, and each of the four graduate student's scripts were subsequently streamed this way over the course of summer 2020. These streams looked much like what professional theatres had figured out at the time. These similarities provided us proof of concept.

In fall 2020, we used the same mix of technology to create evenings of short new plays streamed, but performed live, as well as private recordings of in-progress full-length plays. During a face-to-face academic year, the M.F.A. students in playwriting at SIU are asked to produce a monthly, script-in-hand, minimal-tech evening of short plays called Big Muddy Shorts. The exigencies of COVID changed our modality, but not our objectives. For these evenings of new short plays in fall 2020, we wrote specifically for the new Zoom/OBS medium, and Hageland took on the role of technical director. We found that he could have all the actors on a Zoom call, but control via OBS what was projected on YouTube so that audiences could see only the people currently acting. Using OBS overlaid with Zoom technology this way, Hageland could also talk to the actors on the Zoom call without streaming his voice to the YouTube channel, thereby keeping the audience from hearing their conversations. This layer of technology essentially allowed Hageland to stage-manage the virtual event. This combination of technology and talent worked surprisingly well, and we leaned into ways to create spectacle in this streaming environment. For instance, in a play called *Left On Read* by Payton Heinold, actors seemed to pass a letter from one Zoom box to another (Fig. 2). This type of investigation would later serve us during the 2021 new play festival.

At the same time that we were experimenting with evenings of shorts, the graduate students were developing full-length plays that would ultimately compose the 2021 Big Muddy New Play Festival. At first, we conducted these readings live, via Zoom, as we would with face-to-face actors in class. However, we quickly discovered that technological glitches—if an actor's Wi-Fi dropped, for instance—could bring a performance to a screeching halt and disrupt any sense of dramatic

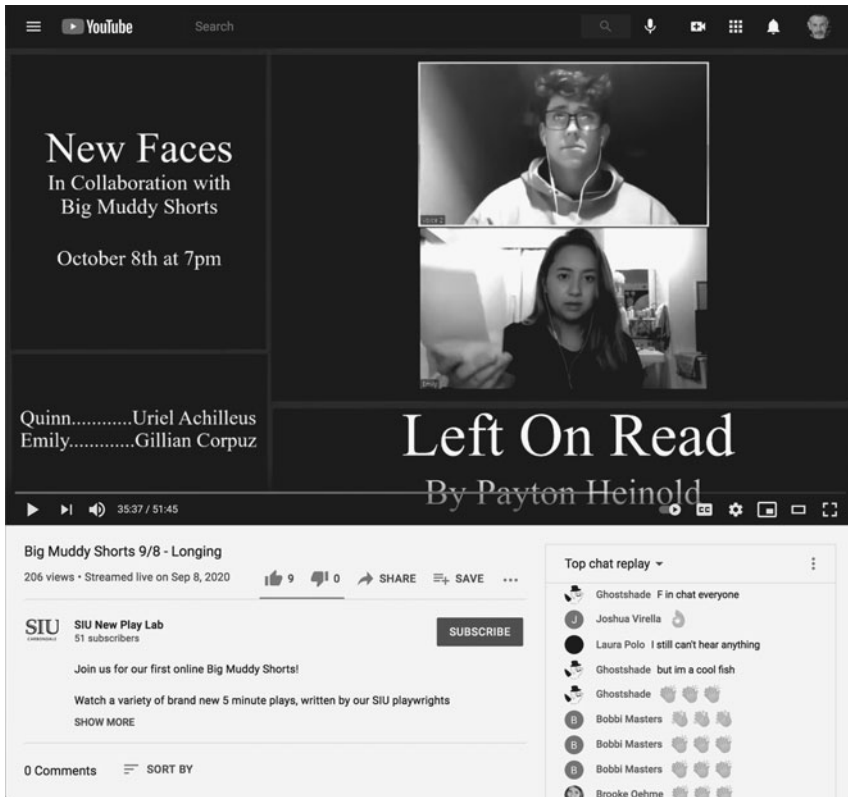


Figure 2. A screen capture from an evening of shorts (Big Muddy Shorts—Longing) on the SIU New Play Lab YouTube Channel, [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC\\_OSYbi4H3dV\\_Uhq53C0xqA](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC_OSYbi4H3dV_Uhq53C0xqA) accessed 14 April 2021.

continuity. For this reason, we decided to record the full-length plays for the festival, and present them as YouTube premieres. More important, via the short play evenings and the full-length workshops, we discovered the strengths of streaming.

Early in fall 2020, when I realized our 2021 new play festival would have to be virtual, I told the playwrights: “We understand the obvious downsides to doing a theatre festival online. We also need to ascertain and lean into the strengths of online theatre.” What we came to realize was obvious in retrospect: since our method of production was essentially a manipulated Zoom that we streamed on YouTube, geography was no object. This latitude meant that for the 2021 Big Muddy New Play Festival, we could collaborate with anyone, far beyond the bounds of rural Carbondale, Illinois.

Initially, our recruited directors were stationed in Chicago, Atlanta, and Abington, Virginia. This geographic expansion allowed us to collaborate with artists who are ensemble members at venues such as Chicago’s Stage Left Theatre and Abington’s Barter Theatre. Likewise, our casting pool opened significantly. A script by M.F.A. playwright McCall Logan called for a nonbinary Native American actor—a specificity

we could not readily find in Carbondale. However, with location no longer an object, the director, Bobbi Masters, was able to cast this part appropriately.

Increasingly, however, the festival productions began to benefit from regionally specific expertise. One M.F.A. playwright, Lavinia Roberts, wrote a script about a young Jane Austen, and Roberts wanted a British cast, if possible, in order to understand whether her script's "Britishisms" felt natural to UK actors. With the help of Professor Kasia Lech at Canterbury Christ Church University and Professor Ioana Szeman at Roehampton University, London, we were able to collaborate with UK-based acting students. Similarly, M.F.A. playwriting student Pearl Moore was able to connect with Tricia Matthews of the Barter Theatre, who cast actors from the Appalachian region in Moore's play as well as age-appropriate actors for some of the play's older parts—something that is typically difficult in the SIU context. Finally, Ph.D. student Angela Duggins was able to use cast members familiar with her play's Ozark context.

In addition to these nationwide and international collaborators, because the plays were streamed on YouTube, audiences, too, were not limited by geography. Although none of the performances have yet gone viral, the graduate playwrights' works were seen not only by SIU faculty, students, and community, but also by an international audience. Since SIU is geographically distant from major theatre markets—it's a two-hour drive from St. Louis, and a five-hour drive from Chicago—it is difficult to invite literary managers, directors, and producers to in-person productions. The streaming nature of this year's festival made it far more likely that theatre makers anywhere could be introduced to SIU graduate students' writing.

While the disadvantages of online new play development remain clear—it is difficult to tell how a joke lands without a live audience, for example, or if a script's final line lets the audience know it's time to clap—the yearlong experiments of the playwriting program at SIU reveal clear advantages. In a moment when access and privilege are being reassessed by the theatre community, the ability to use streaming platforms for new play development turns out to be a powerful tool for rural students to collaborate nationwide and abroad and to gain international exposure.

**Jacob Juntunen** is a playwright and scholar who heads the M.F.A. and Ph.D. Playwriting programs at SIU. His scripts focus on characters having crises of faith in the broadest possible terms, mixing US and East European aesthetics. His plays are produced across the United States and Europe, and have been developed at Playwrights Horizons, the Alliance Theatre, the Great Plains Theatre Conference, the Last Frontier Theatre Conference, Chicago Dramatists, Will Geer's Theatricum Botanicum, and Chicago's DCASE "In the Works." He creates politically relevant work, with dedication to diverse casting opportunities.

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