

## Theatre Aurora keeping drama kids engaged remotely

While it seems like the sudden and widespread societal shutdown pulled the rug out from under children, Theatre Aurora is making every effort to not leave them rudderless.

Since the COVID-19-related closures were announced, the building had to close and the youth shows have been cancelled. But the resolve to keep their student members involved and engaged only strengthened.

When the advisory came that we could no longer gather in groups at the theatre, I remember saying to Jo-Anne (Pulfer), our director of Youth Programming, that we would suspend (not cancel) the programs, and find a way to reinvent ourselves. I proposed that we create a program that could be delivered online in a workshop or master-class format. I didn't want a stop-gap. I wanted a first-rate experience that the students could look back on 5 to 10 years from now and think, 'Wow, that was a fantastic opportunity! I was really lucky to have had it', said Jason Silzer, VP Productions at Theatre Aurora.

The Theatre Kids program (ages 10-13) and Young Company (ages 14-18) are both up and running, with online instruction and interaction with guest speakers from the industry.

I wanted to do everything in my power to get a program of some sort to all the students. It gives them a schedule, something to look forward to and a sense of normalcy, said Ms. Pulfer. A number of us have been meeting to play games or do script readings online, everything from Shakespeare to film. Many of our musical members are putting together songs vocal or instrumental and sharing them online too. It keeps us going and lets us showcase our creativity without us being together.

Silzer pointed out that in order to make the program unique, they are exposing students to topics in theatre that are often not even covered at university, and which they may not deal with until they are actually creating theatre. We tossed around the idea of bringing in guest speakers who made their living in the theatre arts to come and talk about their own career paths, and answer questions from the students, and we started reaching out to our networks, said Silzer, who was humbled by the reciprocation.

The responses to those calls have honored and humbled me, and I still can't believe how willing people have been to say yes, and volunteer to talk to us. We have people coming to talk about professional voice acting, film casting, script writing, festival performances, working as an in-house tech at a downtown theatre. We have an intimacy choreographer coming to talk about how to create and claim safe space and representatives from some of Toronto's most established professional houses coming to talk about the business side of show business, he said.

Their in-house instructors have been creating workshops and master classes on topics like forum theatre and approaching the technical design of a show as well, with little lead time.

With their ongoing efforts, students have some semblance of being immersed in theatre.

?We seem to have struck a good balance of bringing in guest speakers from the industry ? professional theatre, film and TV ? and giving them online instruction. Our students let us know what works and what doesn't so the instructors have made changes to what or how they are teaching,? said Pulfer.

The team at Theatre Aurora will continue delivering their new program up until mid-June. ?We continue to plan for our AGM in June, and are starting to explore ways to engage both the public, and our members, in spite of restrictions that come from stopping physical co-location. Above all else, we are planning for that exciting day when we can reopen our theatre to audiences and fulfill our mandate to produce shows that stand up against Toronto's best theatres,? said Silzer.

In the meantime, as they might agree, the show must go on.

**By Kinjal Dagli Shah**