

Nightmare Time and a Case Study for Digital Theatre During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This short article assesses a case study in creating digital theatre during the COVID-19 pandemic. Examining the impact of COVID restrictions and overviewing union regulations on small, independent theatre productions, the article focuses on one theatre company, *Starkid Productions*, and how they utilised their prior worldwide digital audience via their *YouTube* channel to both create theatre content and generate a profit during a total industry shutdown. It draws conclusions on how, in the future theatre companies can use new technologies and techniques developed throughout the pandemic as tools to enhance their creative practice and improve the accessibility of theatre.

KEYWORDS

Musical theatre, digital theatre, YouTube, COVID-19, content creation.

Storytime

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused untold damage to several industries, but one of the most notable is the arts, particularly live performance. Several national lockdowns in countries across the globe; restricted numbers at gatherings both indoors and outdoors; and stringent COVID-safety measures at workplaces have all impacted the ability to stage live performances in many instances. *Broadway*, the world's largest theatre industry closed doors on all productions on 12th March 2020 (Paulson, 2020), with London's *West End* following suit a few days later (Daniels, 2020). While the *West End* re-opened its doors on 20th May 2021 (Thompson, 2021), *Broadway* is not due to begin productions until September 2021 (Moynihan, 2021). Smaller, independent theatre faces an even more uncertain future.

With live performance impossible, several projects were launched to make theatre more accessible. One of the most notable was Andrew Lloyd Webber's *The Shows Must Go On* (Longman, 2020), a *YouTube* channel on which hitherto pay-per-view only recordings of live productions of popular musicals such as *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *The Phantom of the Opera* were made available for free viewing over the space of a weekend, before returning to pay-per-view status. Other initiatives launched similar schemes, with the *National Theatre* (Moyseos, 2021) offering limited online viewing of their productions for free. Others made more permanent changes to accessibility, such as *Shrek: The Musical* (Wood, 2021) becoming available as part of a *Netflix* subscription, and *Disney* bringing forward their highly anticipated release of *Hamilton* to their streaming service *Disney+* on Independence Day weekend in 2020 (Gartenberg, 2020). Still, while this may have allowed for theatre fans to continue to enjoy content, employment rates of actors and crew in the theatre industry plummeted (Brown, 2020, Marrone et al. 2020), and with no traditional work available, for many of them it was necessary to innovate using technology.

Bringing recorded theatre to the internet has not always been straightforward. Prior to December 2020, the capability to distribute filmed theatre in the US was complicated by a stalemate between two unions: *Actors Equity* and *SAG-AFTRA*. As the pandemic prevented live theatre productions a legal battle was launched as to which union had jurisdiction over filmed theatre. As reported in *Playbill*:

The jurisdiction battle between *Actors' Equity* and *SAG-AFTRA* continues over who has representational rights over streaming theatrical productions [...] *Equity* maintains that *SAG-AFTRA*'s governance in the live streaming theatricals arena results in lower income and health insurance coverage deficits. In addition, *SAG-AFTRA* does not represent stage managers, which are part of *Equity* for in-person productions, and has allegedly resulted in the laborers either being fired or told they can work as independent contractors (Meyer, 2020b).

This followed a rejected proposal from *SAG-AFTRA* that would have allowed '*Equity* to handle streaming theatrical projects through mid-2021—provided that *AEA* acknowledges *SAG-AFTRA*'s general control in the domain of filmed media, streaming or otherwise' (Meyer, 2020b). An agreement was eventually made between the two unions on 19th December 2020, stating that *Actors Equity* would represent 'work that is recorded and/or produced to be exhibited on a digital platform, either as a replacement for a live theatre production that cannot take place because of the pandemic or for a partially virtual/digital audience that supplements a live audience during the pandemic period' (Meyer, 2020a). But this uncertainty regarding who holds the rights for recorded theatre has long been an issue for digital theatre productions. For example, actor Dylan Saunders is a member of *Actors Equity* and also a performer in the independent theatre company *Starkid Productions*.

Starkid Productions is a musical theatre company whose selling-point is utilising the internet to make theatre accessible to a mass audience. Established by Nick Lang, Matt Lang, Darren Criss and Brian Holden at the *University of Michigan*, the company first gained prominence thanks to the viral success of *A Very Potter Musical* (2009), uploaded to *YouTube* in 2009 with the initial intention of showing the *Harry Potter* parody to friends, and instead amassing a global audience. Over the course of their transition from student project to professional theatre company, *Starkid Productions* have written and performed eleven musicals and one staged script reading for live audiences, releasing each production for free viewing on their *YouTube* channel. Sister project *Tin Can Brothers*, established by *Starkid Productions* members Joey Richter, Brian Rosenthal and Corey Lubowich, has similarly released the full-length musical *Spies are Forever* (2017) and the one-act play *The Solve-It Squad Returns* (2017) to their own *YouTube* channel. Due to their independence and university-troupe beginnings, many of their productions have been non-Union, meaning that previously regular performers such as Dylan Saunders were excluded from productions for several years due to his union membership (Team Starkid, 2018a). However, the tentative new deal between *Actors Equity* and *SAG-AFTRA* has granted performers the freedom to participate in a variety of digital projects during the pandemic, and as veterans of accessible digital theatre, *Starkid Productions* may have found the solution for creating new theatre in a time of crisis.

Prior to the shutdown of all theatre performances, productions by the *Starkid Productions* were funded through *Kickstarter* campaigns promising rewards to backers and the sale of merchandise, with further revenue generated by the sale of live tickets to performances, advertising revenue on *YouTube* uploads, and DVD and soundtrack releases of productions. In some instances, as with the recent ‘Hatchetfield Series’ productions *The Guy Who Didn’t Like Musicals* (2018) and *Black Friday* (2019), the release of paid digital tickets to performances in advance of the *YouTube* release allowed an international audience to watch the production at the same time as a live audience. With an online presence built into their business model, a dedicated worldwide online audience, and a decade of experience in bringing musical theatre to *YouTube*, *Starkid Productions* appeared to be well-positioned to respond to the challenges facing the theatre industry in light of the COVID-19 pandemic; yet all productions to date had still required the regular trappings of live theatre: a live audience and a stage on which to perform. While prior productions could continue to generate revenue through *YouTube* advertising, COVID-19 restrictions prevented the company and crew of *Starkid Productions* from working. In response, a new project was formed combining live script-reading via *Zoom* with pre-recorded musical numbers. *Starkid Productions’* attempt to create new stories with COVID-19 restrictions was uncharted territory, yet Curt Mega, one of *Starkid Productions’* regular actors, believes that despite this the company’s established international digital audience allowed the transition to livestreamed theatre to be relatively simple:

Starkid has already built this idea that for most people, being online is their point of contact, so it seemed very logical for the audience to buy a virtual ticket and interact in a livestream chat. The people behind *Starkid* and *Tin Can Brothers* have already been thinking about this for a very long time, so it made the experience of creating in this year where all of our lives changed overnight much more straightforward. Moving to performing digitally was a big learning curve for many, but those of us involved in *Starkid* were already set up for this. This is why I believe *Nightmare Time* was a success. (Appendix A)

Nightmare Time (2021) is a series of six hour-long horror-comedy plays set within the ‘Hatchetfield’ universe, focusing on characters introduced in the musicals *The Guy Who Didn’t Like Musicals* and *Black Friday*; and described by writer/director Nick Lang as ‘something for [the audience to] make new content; keep the momentum of the story going forward a little bit’ (Julia Delbel, 2021). The decision to create plays within this universe was in part due to the third musical in the ‘Hatchetfield’ trilogy, *Nerdy Prudes Must Die* being cancelled as a result of the pandemic. The six plays were performed over three nights, the first consisting of ‘The Hatchetfield Ape-Man’ and ‘WatcherWorld’ premiering live on *YouTube* alongside a live chat. Episode Two (consisting of ‘Forever and Always’ and ‘Time Bastard’) and Episode Three (consisting of ‘Jane’s a Car’ and ‘The Witch in the Web’) were made available to watch live via a paid digital ticket. The performances took place during October 2020 to coincide with Halloween, and episodes two and three made their premieres on *YouTube* in February 2021 to mark the one-year anniversary of *Black Friday*’s debut on the platform. The plays were all written by Nick and Matt Lang with music and lyrics written by Jeff Blim, as with the other productions in the ‘Hatchetfield’ series.

Nightmare Time featured actors performing live on *Zoom*, interspersed with pre-recorded musical segments. These were usually at the introduction and conclusion of each story though some (as in ‘WatcherWorld’), included their musical numbers in the middle of the performance, in a more traditional musical theatre format. The combination was then streamed live on *YouTube*, or on a private streaming service for Episodes Two and Three. These two episodes featured some minor editing between the live broadcast and their later debut on *YouTube*. Stage directions to illustrate actions that could not be performed on *Zoom* were read aloud by writer/director Nick Lang. As such, the *Nightmare Time* plays functioned as a ‘hybrid series’ of both live and pre-recorded content (Lang, 2021). Nevertheless, an improvised piano score was still played live throughout the performances by musical director Matt Dahan. A cast recording was also made available on *iTunes* in February 2021.

Starkid Productions were certainly not the only theatre company to experiment with livestreamed theatre during this period. Other notable examples include a *TikTok* trend that culminated an unofficial musical adaptation of the *Pixar* film *Ratatouille* written and performed online to fundraise for out-of-work theatre actors (Alter, 2020); and a star-studded remake of *The Princess Bride* filmed remotely and edited together for broadcast on *YouTube* (Breznican, 2020). However, while these projects may have been novel experiments for the celebrity casts of *Ratatouille* and *The Princess Bride*; for *Starkid Productions*, *Nightmare Time* presented a unique opportunity to flesh out the mythos of the ‘Hatchetfield’ universe by telling stories that would not fill a full-length stage musical.

Each *Nightmare Time* story focuses on a select number of ‘Hatchetfield’ characters, previously introduced in *The Guy Who Didn’t Like Musicals* and *Black Friday*. One of the selling-points of the livestream performances was giving fans the opportunity to interact more with these characters, as the parallel universe structure of the ‘Hatchetfield’ series and the ensemble casts of the stage shows prevent the opportunity for specific character studies. While maintaining the parallel universe element of the series (with almost every tale ending with the death or otherwise complete transformation of the protagonist), the inability to create elaborate staging and musical numbers inspired a more intimate focus. Additionally, the *Zoom* script-reading format of the tales freed up the writers to present narrative ideas that could not be realised on a live stage.

In comparison to other digital theatre projects of the time such as Rob Myles’ *The Shows Must Go Online* (2020-2021) (which performed the works of Shakespeare through a *YouTube* livestream utilising *Zoom* and replaced stage directions with props being passed on and off screen), *Nightmare Time*’s reading of stage directions allowed writers Nick and Matt Lang to create grand-scale terrors in their horror-comedy stories without being limited by budget and practicalities. ‘WatcherWorld’, for instance, is set in a haunted amusement park, with the climax of the tale transpiring during the perilous descent from the summit of a faulty rollercoaster. Psychological horrors, such as the time travel torture of protagonist Ted in ‘Time Bastard’, could also be staged without concern for special effects. Stage directions being read aloud by Nick Lang throughout the performances assisted the audience in imagining elements

of the story they could not see, while background images projected via green-screen added to the sense of placing the performers within the setting described.

The absence of a live audience in the livestream productions was compensated by the actors' presence on screen performance throughout the performances. Presented via a gallery view on *Zoom* (aside from the pre-recorded musical segments), the full cast remain on screen throughout, serving as a live (though muted) audience for scenes in which they do not participate. Watching the actors function as an audience adds another layer of enjoyment for the streaming crowd. For example, in 'Jane's a Car', the audience (communicating via a livestream chat function) derived pleasure both from the comedic yet disturbing of actors and narration in a sequence depicting a sexual act between a man and a possessed car; and from responding to the horrified faces of the other actors witnessing the performance in their own windows on the *Zoom* gallery screen. Additionally, despite the remote locations of each performer, some cast members living together were able to create an in-person live rapport. For Curt Mega, sharing the screen with his wife Kim Whalen in 'The Witch in the Web' made the process of remote performances easier than with his isolated co-stars.

What we missed [making *Nightmare Time*] was being with each other. It's a strange thing to only have an in-ear as the only point of contact. Normally when you're working with an actor, you feel their body language, if they make a slight adjustment you can take in what they're doing. Over *Zoom*, it's hard because you're struggling to even see them [...] My character, Duke, who shared almost all his scenes with Kim's character Miss Holloway, was great because we could play off each other more naturally [...] Getting to perform my scenes with Kim in person had me thinking about how cool it would be if we could all be together, having that kind of interaction as a group, and perform the show virtually. With vaccinations, that may become more of a possibility in the future. (Appendix A)

Another challenge facing the creators of *Nightmare Time* was the ability to perform musical numbers via the internet. Even with the pre-recorded music videos, lag issues necessitated the editing of Episodes Two and Three before their upload to *YouTube* (Delbel, 2021). The music videos also required the actors to serve as camera operators, cinematographers and editors. For example, Whalen's solo number 'Time Bastard' was filmed and edited by husband and co-star Mega, then additionally re-edited by Lang, while co-habiting stars Joey Richter and Lauren Lopez similarly filmed, directed and edited their duet 'Peanuts!' In Mega's view, the *Starkid* company's previous digital content experience simplified this process. 'I had spent five years directing and editing short films for a studio I used to work at. The reason [*Nightmare Time*] was incredibly successful was because we knew how to handle it' (Appendix A). Musical numbers were not limited to solo or co-habiting performers, however. Pre-recording and editing also allowed for duets between actors in different locations, such as Mariah Rose Faith and Robert Manion performing 'Forever and Always' from different cities. These filmed clips were interspersed with stock footage to provide a more cinematic quality. This is especially noticeable in the theme song played at the introduction of each broadcast, which features an extended animated sequence taken from a stock images website (Delbel, 2021). Through prior agreements on filming backgrounds, costuming, and the inclusion of stock footage, remote duets and group numbers were given a cohesive visual style.

The script-reading format of the *Zoom* performances additionally permitted *Nightmare Time* to serve as a testing ground for future projects following the lifting of restrictions. In addition to a planned third ‘Hatchetfield’ stage musical titled *Nerdy Prudes Must Die*, Lang claimed that ‘we possibly want to make an anthology film out of *Nightmare Time*. We’ve written several stories specifically to be filmed’ (Delbel, 2021). While *Starkid* charged for Episodes Two and Three in a similar vein to their previous digital tickets, the informal-looking nature of a script reading allowed the company to experiment with ideas and compensated for mistakes, such as actors beginning their performances with their mics muted, or misreading lines. The three performances were also followed by a conversational livestream, in which the cast, Lang, Lubowich and Dahan took questions and immediate feedback on the performance from fans (Team Starkid, 2020c), cultivating once more a personal, collaborative connection with fans online.

At the time of writing this article, *Nightmare Time*’s debut Episode stands at over 277,000 views on *YouTube*, while views for the *YouTube* upload of Episode Two are at 76,000 and Episode Three at 62,000. This does not take into account the figures from the digital tickets of Episodes Two and Three, which are not publicly available. While lower than the audience numbers for their live staged musicals (*Black Friday*, for example, currently stands at two million views), these videos’ permanent presence on the *Team Starkid YouTube* channel will only allow this digital audience to grow. This is in stark contrast to other initiatives, such as *The Shows Must Go On*’s limited free viewing (broadcasts usually being made available for 48 hours), and the lack of an official upload of *Ratatouille: the Musical* following its performance. The continued accessibility of their content has allowed *Starkid*’s audience to grow, encouraging loyalty, promoting re-viewing, and keeping audiences invested in a multi-layered narrative arc. By making *Nightmare Time* a permanent presence online, *Starkid Productions* also serves as a historical document for future audiences, demonstrating how the arts can adapt and survive in the most catastrophic of global circumstances.

While the US has now made it possible for all adults to book their COVID-19 vaccinations (Gambino, 2021), Los Angeles (where *Starkid Productions* is currently based) was not so accommodating to theatre actors in the months surrounding *Nightmare Time*’s production. On 12th November 2020 Governor Gavin Newsom announced that film actors in Los Angeles would be deemed essential, granting them earlier access to vaccines and stringent COVID testing on sets. However, Gov. Newsom only specified film and TV actors, with theatre actors being excluded (Schow, 2020). As for the future of the industry following the pandemic, Mega is very confident that live theatre will not be replaced by digital theatre, but the lessons learnt from projects such as *Nightmare Time* add new tools to the arsenal of ways to perform:

What’s so great about what we’ve learnt over the last year, it’s not that we’re never going to go back to live theatre, but it adds new points and possibilities for performance. Maybe we still want to do a big show, but maybe we also want to put together a more accessible, low-key thing, where we get the cast together and rehearse it as an interactive live-stream performance to be able to do more stuff throughout a year versus having one shot to do one massive show where we crowdfund and find

investors. We can still do that, but there are other ways to create throughout it (Appendix A).

With live theatre in the UK now reopening and *Broadway*'s imminent relaunch, it remains to be seen whether theatre will continue to develop digital accessibility initiatives alongside traditional productions. Through *Nightmare Time* and previous productions *Starkid* have shown that a global audience can be a benefit to independent productions, and projects such as theirs, *The Shows Must Go On* and others have enabled theatre to be accessible to disabled patrons, those on low incomes and those otherwise denied access to traditional theatre. The COVID-19 pandemic may have had a significant personal and financial impact on theatre workers, but it has also provided the industry the opportunity to make changes for the better.

Note: Between the writing and publishing of this article, Starkid aired Season 2 of Nightmare Time using different production method. Therefore, the article only refers to the first season.

Appendix A

Curt Mega. 2021. *Interview with Curt Mega*. Interviewed by Hayley Louise Charlesworth. [Zoom video conference] Manchester 30th March 2021.

Hayley Louise Charlesworth: As an actor who works in both film and theatre, you have experience with adapting to COVID regulations in both media. How do you feel trying to create content during the pandemic has influenced your practice and allowed you to innovate?

Curt Mega: Theatre really finds itself at a difficult crossroads because with film, of the nature of it, you're able to isolate and contain it. I did an hour-long feature in October where you had the ability that there was at max 15 people at any given moment, everybody was testing and isolating. You can do it safely. With theatre, it's hard because, you could rehearse a cast, I suppose, but the whole aspect is the live audience. Even now with the vaccine rolling out, I don't think there is, from what I can find, I don't know what kind of plan there is. I know they have announced that Broadway might reopen in December. I think that's great. It seems very optimistic, and I hope that it's right, but the challenge is that there's so many potential points of transmission that logistics are overwhelming. And so, I think theatre has found itself at a very difficult crossroads because how do you continue to do this thing when the medium itself is not safe. There is an immediate rush towards people doing some things like augmented reality as a way of not needing an audience. I still think that this is only another tool and in the current timeline it is only a temporary fix. I hope what it doesn't mean is that people decide we can just do theatre on the internet, and we don't need theatre. I think it's another way and a point of accessibility, but this idea that it just replaces the live audience, speaking for myself it doesn't compare to the experience of being able to connect to a live audience, and get to meet them at the stage door, and these things that make theatre so wonderful. However, I do think that it adds another tool to the arsenal of ways to perform. I was recently talking to Corey who I think is on the ground floor of pioneering these things through his work with *Starkid* and *Tin Can Brothers*, and he was saying that what's so great about what we've learnt over the last year, it's not that we're never going to go back to live theatre, but it adds new points and possibilities for performance. Maybe we still want to do a big show, but maybe we also want to put together a more accessible, low-key thing, where we get the cast together and rehearse it as an interactive live-stream performance to be able to do more stuff throughout a year versus having one shot to do one massive show where we crowdfund and find investors. We can still do that, but there are other ways to create throughout it. *Starkid* found an audience because we performed shows for a small audience, but then we filmed it and put it on the internet. There's a totally realistic world where we're able to rehearse and create together and still have the connectivity of live performance.

Hayley Louise Charlesworth: Do you think that the success of *Nightmare Time* might lead to further experiments with digital theatre, both from *Starkid* and the wider industry?

I love *Nightmare Time*, *Nightmare Time* was so much fun, but everybody's takeaway was that this was great, but what we missed was being with each other. It's a strange thing to only have an in-ear as the only point of contact. Normally when you're working with an actor, you feel their body language, if they make a slight adjustment you can take in what they're doing. Over *Zoom*, it's hard because you're struggling to even see them. A lot of the time in *Nightmare Time*, we would keep all the other actors' thumbnails as a very small sidebar as *Nightmare Time* was more of a table read than a fully-fledged production, so we did a rehearsal but we weren't memorised so our scripts filled the screen. It was weird because you were sort of more listening auditorily to what somebody else was saying which doesn't replace getting to do something with someone else. But the inclusion of the music videos opened my eyes to a combination of live performance and pre-recorded material, alongside green screen, and VR, and the live audience through the chat. It created this very interesting hybrid of all these disparate tools. You get this really interesting new kind of medium that I think arose during the pandemic. My takeaway is I think it will stay with us, and it will be a tool to make more accessible content, but I hope that it serves a greater purpose to continue bringing people to the theatre. Theatre obviously has a long history of being very inaccessible and often for very privileged, rich people, so I think it's amazing to break down those walls, but I also hope it encourages people to still see live theatre. And I think that's something that *Starkid* has been doing for so long. So many people who I met at *Black Friday* would say "I have been watching *Starkid* for ten years, and this is the first time I've been able to come to a show." It was so cool to be able to see how special it was to be there the first time they were able to experience this live thing that they have been engaged with for so long. To me, the perfect circle of things is that it is accessible for anybody, but it still excites people about the possibility of being able to come back to theatre.

Hayley Louise Charlesworth: Do you think that if *Starkid* didn't already have such a core, world-wide digital audience, that they'd even be able to do anything like *Nightmare Time*, especially getting some kind of financial gain from it?

Curt Mega: I think they could probably still do it, but I don't think anybody would show up. I know lots of people who did online theatre throughout 2020, and continue to do so, and the blood, sweat, tears and passion is remarkable, but the incredible thing about *Starkid* is that thousands of people turned up which did not happen for a lot of people I know. *Starkid* has already built this idea that for most people, being online is their point of contact, so it seemed very logical for the audience to buy a virtual ticket and interact in a livestream chat. The people behind *Starkid* and *Tin Can Brothers* have already been thinking about this for a very long time, so it made the experience of creating in this year where all of our lives changed overnight much more straightforward. Moving to performing digitally was a big learning curve for many, but those of us involved in *Starkid* were already set up for this. This is why I believe *Nightmare Time* was a success. They were able to do this project to its full potential right off the bat. I had spent five years directing and editing short films for a studio I used to work at. The reason this show was incredibly successful was because we knew how to handle it.

Hayley Louise Charlesworth: Do you think that being able to play off Kim in episode 3 in person rather than on screen was an advantage?

Curt Mega: My character, Duke, who shared almost all his scenes with Kim's character Miss Holloway, was great because we could play off each other more naturally. I already loved Duke because Nick has a way of being really infectious when he pitches a character he really loves, and it was a very different character to the ones I've played with *Starkid* and *TCB* before. Getting to perform my scenes with Kim in person had me thinking about how cool it would be if we could all be together, having that kind of interaction as a group, and perform the show virtually. With vaccinations, that may become more of a possibility in the future.

Hayley Louise Charlesworth: The agreement between *SAG* and *Equity* didn't happen until after *Nightmare Time*. Did that cause any issues?

Curt Mega: Not really. I don't know the logistics now. What was happening was that a lot of theatre companies tried to do existing shows like *The Sound of Music* on Zoom, and I can understand why Actor's Equity stepped in to say they couldn't do a full production, and why *SAG* got involved. I can understand where there was a butting of heads, though I thought that the way they fought publicly was shameful. But it wasn't an issue for *Nightmare Time* because of the table read aspect of it, which is not a consideration for a full production. The difference when we did *Black Friday* which was a full production was that we were fully with *AEA* and I was the union *Actors Equity* deputy, where I reported to them with the official paperwork. That's a much more intensive process, but for this, even whoever said they had jurisdiction only had jurisdiction over produced, fully staged shows virtually. Table reads aren't covered by *SAG* or *Actors Equity*.

I think both of these unions need to do more digital forward-thinking. Years ago, I became a *SAG* signatory, producing content, and they had no idea what I needed contracts for in terms of digital content. This would include every video I post on *Instagram* under current language, which the implication is that it would require filing a contract six weeks before, and having \$150,000 of insurance, to go on *TikTok*. They need to learn to adapt to a growing social media presence for performers. Technology has developed so quickly and the unions didn't know how to respond. The pandemic may have encouraged them to revisit the digital regulations.

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