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A Conversation about Commercial Theatre, Covid, and Connection, with Cody Colvin

By Julia Moriarty

Abstract

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[Colvin Theatrical](#) is a regional theatre based in Grand Rapids, MI. Their virtual theatre festivals, simultaneously broadcast online and on local TV, have created a new outlet for theatre artists in a time of shutdowns, while also creating a model for commercializing theaters. Etudes' co-editor-in-chief Julia Moriarty was able to sit down with founder Cody Colvin to discuss the machinations of a recent theatre festival, *Overcoming Isolation*, in which she participated as a director.

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Julia Moriarty

So Cody, tell me a little bit about the history of Colvin Theatrical, how you got started, and what you looked like as a theatre before all of this happened.

Cody Colvin

Ah, let's see. So I started helping produce shows in college, and I got on the marketing and business side of our college theatre, which used to be an equity summer stock program and then transitioned to a regular college theatre. And I got a really good nuts-and-bolts look at the business of theatre, less from the artistic side, more from the business and managerial side. And then out of college, I moved back to Grand Rapids. And after about seven or eight months, I started auditioning for shows again, and I started doing more shows. And then I was added to the Board of Dog Story Theatre, which is a local venue. And then I started taking over their lead producer assignments. So we were mostly just a rentable venue, but if we did a fundraiser, I would put that together and recruit people. And then at some point, I just thought, 'Well, you know, I have these skills that I've amassed, and you know, I'm not necessarily going to make a career out of it, but I'm going to put it out there. And if people want to work with me, then that's great.' So I did that. And then earlier in this year, I started getting a lot more traction. So more people pitching their projects, you know, more scripts being sent in...At some point I just started advertising some of my third party outsource management services. I work in commercial real estate during the day, which is a lot of investments and finance. And I thought, 'Well, why don't we put that into theatre and see if

we can teach people how to run a theatre from a business person's perspective, you know, not just a nonprofit.'

JM

So you had just started becoming a self-producing entity, when all of this hit, but beforehand, you were helping other people figure out how to produce or you were facilitating other people's visions, as it were. But so far, you've produced three play festivals since COVID hit, correct? You've had two 24-hour festivals, and then the most recent one you recruited scripts for. What is your process in general in recruiting talent? How do you make contact with playwrights and actors and how do you write?

CC

So I'll say, we actually didn't intend for [this one] to be a professional festival. We didn't intend to have a professional working on it, didn't intend for it to, you know, have any contracts. So [it was] going to be just this kind of local small-scale thing. And then I think, you know, we had a director come on who recently moved to Grand Rapids. And she opened up her network...and then we kind of we decided, well, let's leverage our network a little bit and go and get some more people.

Had we known it would be what it was and had I known that I would end up putting money into advertising and, you know, putting it on public television and really taking it the distance, I would have set it up very differently. So now, it's a lot easier for me to look back and say, 'Alright, well, now we know that we can get a certain level of performance, a certain level of art, a certain level of performer, we can plan it a lot better, we can have much better execution on the technological or the technical side, on the contractual side.' So I think it grew so fast. And that was really

fun. And then we were just opportunistic in terms of advertising, which helped a lot and helped boost the festival to a lot of people. And I think we're almost at 10,000 views or something along those lines on Facebook.

I'm a consummate optimist personally. And I say this understanding that COVID has pretty much killed the business at many theatres around the country. For us, this has been awesome, because we have access to professional talent that we wouldn't have access to ordinarily. And it forced us to adapt and improvise in a way which would not have occurred on the local level. But online, you know, people have time. They want to make art, you can get people from all around the country. That made it way easier for us to expand our own network and to increase the quality of our productions.

You know, most business is relational, obviously with theatre especially, because you just don't know what people are like under pressure. You don't know what they're like with different pieces, but you just have no idea what they're like until you really work with them. And that's probably responsible for the generally slow growth of theatre as an art form, business-wise, is that it's not scalable, generally. And so now, and I'll stop my soliloquy in a second, but theatre as an art form, is not scalable in the way that live sports are or film is. Let's say with live events, comedy acts, anything live, right, that has two sources of revenue: the live ticket sales, and then whatever sort of broadcasting element they have. Both of those are important revenue sources, and theatre—and Opera too but theatre especially—does not have that broadcast capability generally. Right? And so you're not able to scale in a way that a typical business would scale. But *now*, all the producers are forced to have to incorporate some sort of broadcast element into their work. And I think they're seeing, oh, wait a

minute, rather than, you know, 100 people in the black box, I can reach 10,000 people? How do we keep it theatrical and live and keep that energy while also scaling this product?

JM

Yeah, we're starting to see some theatres adapt. The Old Vic is going to stream live performances of *Lungs*, which is the first notable live social distance performance that I've really come across. So moving forward, how do you think that you're going to incorporate the lessons that you've learned through these festivals?

CC

Yeah, from the business perspective, I think, always plan for something being bigger and stronger and greater than you think it's going to be. I always have an open heart to serendipity. But also, and this is something I've been thinking about for a while, you know, having worked in a college theatre, if you're just providing the same product to the same customers for years and years and years, then you're not hot and sexy as a business. I think if they want to survive in the digital landscape, I think COVID is a wake-up call to people. Because anybody in theatre knows that financially theatres have been struggling more and more every year for decades. And so it's becoming increasingly difficult to run a theatre organization and to recoup any sort of investment. The shows that do really well on a national or international scale, that end up being quite profitable, are typically shows that are able to scale somehow, whether it be an album, whether it be, you know, the proliferation of rights acquisitions, merchandising, and only a few shows nationally every year are going to be able to achieve that scale. So how do you provide a product that can scale in your community, and then scale beyond your community? And then the beauty of that is- if

you're making a product that is able to be received regionally or nationally, the overall level of art that people are producing goes up, because you're no longer just limited to your location.

I met with some creatives last week, and they have live-streaming capability that is much stronger than zoom. And they have drones, they have, you know, multiple cameras. And so we're kind of talking about, like, you know, we could put on a real live event, have multiple angles, you know, because if you go to a Billy Joel concert, right, you don't really see him you just see a TV screen and you feel the energy. But that's a live show. Can you give people the feeling that they're seeing something live and raw and vulnerable, from the comfort of their home, while also giving them the opportunity to actually see it live? And the answer is yes, but the tech has to be great. So I would say in this transition period where governments are allowing people to get back into smaller groups, you can put together a small concert with, you know, three or four videographers and audio techs and a couple performers.

Football's [a good example] in a way. They provide value to the ticket holders, and then they provide value to people watching at home. It's different value, it's not the same, you know, it's a whole different experience. And so they're really looking at it from two revenue streams. And I think theatre has to learn to do that somehow. I think that's going to be the next wave of innovation in the arts. But if you have work you want to share, especially original work, you have a national platform if you want it. You know, as long as you know how much money you're willing to spend, you're gonna have a pretty defined outcome of how much engagement you're going to get, how many viewers you're going to get.

The biggest opportunity is streaming and sponsorship revenue. And if you are able, if you are consistently drawing people in your community in and they're aware of what you're doing, say like a small 24-hour Theatre Festival, if you can give a sponsor the assurance that you're going to have a certain amount of viewers, then you have a whole other revenue source that can actually make your art a lot better. And you're not actually changing the production side of it hardly at all. You're just putting cameras on there, you know. So there are these great revenue opportunities. And so, you know, I'm always trying to figure out 'okay, where's the value, where's the value, where's the value?' Because I love to make great art you know, I love when people are in the natural flow of what they're doing. That's peak performance. That's what I live for. You get a lot more opportunities if you make it sustainable, I think and there's more and more opportunity and value now for devised theatre or original works to be able to get out there and you can get a lot of views, you know, if you have good work.

We can take innovative approaches, you know, there are other ways to get money for theatres. And that's just how it has to be. Because the world is changing. It's globalizing. If you can't globalize art, if you can't scale it, then it's gonna die out, at least on the smaller levels.

JM

One of the reasons why I wanted to talk to you today is because you're actually making theatre right now, while so many other theatres are shuttered (for the good of the public health, and also for legal reasons), and will remain shuttered for up to a year or possibly maybe longer. But you're adapting and you're figuring out new ways of making art. And artists are artists and we want to create. You're providing an opportunity

to create when nobody else, or very few other people, are. What have you noticed about working with theatre people in this process?

CC

Man, I think...everybody responds differently to crisis. There are two things you can do ultimately, you can bide your time and wait until it becomes normal and understandable and predictable again. Or you can jump into the unknown and say, 'I don't know what this is going to look like, I don't know what the effect will be.' And you have to be willing to take that risk. Because that's when the market share is earned. Are you willing and able to take a risk in a time where fear is predominant? I think every actor, director, writer responds differently to things. I think there are people who jump into the work, you know, a new way of creating art, and I think other folks are threatened by it. Other folks are scared of it. You know, they're intimidated by the nature of the unknown medium.

So, you know, I have really enjoyed working with everybody I've worked with in this process. I think everybody has to open up their hearts and minds a little bit. And I think we had a great example of everybody doing that. And we all understood that this was something we hadn't done before. And so it's going to be difficult. But if you're okay with that, that's what makes art fun.

JM

Is there anything that we didn't cover that you would like to include, or any final thoughts you might have about doing this kind of work and adapting to this landscape?

CC

Go with the flow, because you never know. You will never know how successful you can be. If you go with the flow, then you open yourself up to a lot more success and opportunity than you would have ever imagined you can have. The world does not play out according to the human mind. It plays out to the collective human consciousness, and I think you have to understand that you're not always going to get exactly what you want. And if you're okay with that, then you get things, you start to achieve things and you start to create things which are far beyond your own expectations. I think we saw that just in our small, small festival. You know, the medium ended up being huge for us, we reached way more people than we would have reached. And I think that is a really good indicator that this works. As long as you can create content that people want to watch.

And I would say to every theatre producer, make videographer friends. Talk to your local community television partners, start making broadcasting partnerships, start offering your services.