

Etudes: an online theatre & performance
studies journal for emerging scholars

Opportunities: A Contemporary Play Reading Series and the Pandemic

By Amanda Dawson and Michael Shipley

Abstract

In an effort to expand engagement with contemporary works, Utah State University's Department of Theatre Arts created a reading series that focused on contemporary plays. The goals for producing and staging the readings were to provide additional opportunities to work with contemporary material and to bring in added institutional and audience support. In response to the pandemic, the initial season included five online play readings over five weeks. The second season returned to in-person performances, with three readings spread throughout the year. Based on student feedback, the contemporary play reading series added a valuable dimension to USU's programming and will continue to be useful even beyond the pandemic.

Opportunities: A Contemporary Play Reading Series and the Pandemic

By Amanda Dawson and Michael Shipley

At Utah State University, the Department of Theatre Arts covers a wide range of theatre literature in our Playscript Analysis, Theatre History and Literature I and II, design, directing, and acting courses. Despite our extensive combined reading list, the number of contemporary plays is somewhat limited. While electives include Contemporary Theatre and a newly created special topics course entitled Contemporary BIPOC Plays, these courses alternate yearly. Our mainstage seasons also generally include a new or contemporary play, adding only one additional opportunity each year. For this primary reason, we wanted to provide our students with more exposure to—and opportunities to work on—contemporary plays. Our solution was to create a reading series focused specifically on contemporary works.

To that end, we proposed to the faculty an addition to our 2021-22 production season: a play-reading series of four contemporary plays (which we loosely defined as “within the last 10 years”), including one theatre for young audiences (TYA) play. The readings were intended to coordinate with the mainstage productions and to fulfill these articulated goals: 1) to provide substantial and worthwhile opportunities to work on contemporary scripts without the time, energy, and money that would be needed to fully realize the plays; 2) to be billed as an integral part of the 2021-2022 season to ensure institutional and audience support. In addition to the stated purpose of the series, our proposal also outlined the general production roles that would be involved, including assistant directors, stage managers, dramaturgs, and designers, as well as actors and directors.

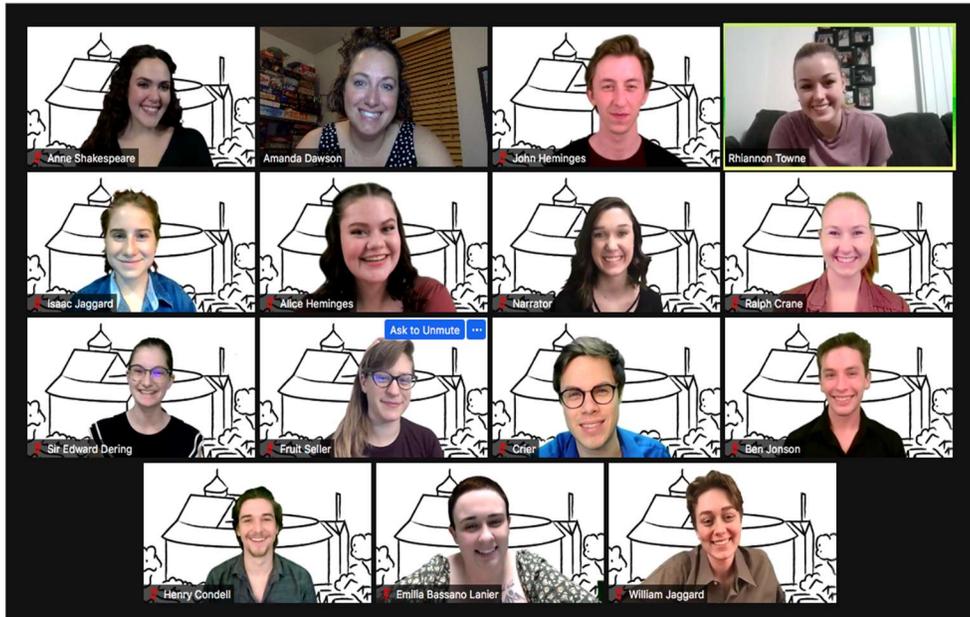
Our hope was that the reading series would serve the entire department. For faculty, it was an opportunity to engage with more

contemporary plays, to direct a piece that may never fit the mainstage season requirements, and to have additional opportunities to work with students (though faculty would not be compensated financially for this additional work). Students interested in acting would gain additional performance opportunities with lower stakes and shorter time commitments than a full production would demand, as well as enhance their knowledge of contemporary plays. On the technical theatre side, we offered three options for students interested in design, depending on their time and interest: 1) Students could simply complete the research and paperwork components of a design; 2) Students could complete the research and paperwork components for a design and provide limited design components for the performance; or 3) If no design students were involved then we would move forward with a standard reading with no technical elements beyond chairs, music stands, and lights on/off. Students from any program, such as theatre education students and general BA students, would also be able to audition for roles or participate in technical aspects. Additionally, we viewed it as a valuable opportunity to train young stage managers, assistant directors, and dramaturgs in a lower stakes environment. In terms of the budget, the department was willing to fund the cost of scripts and performance rights as required (separate rights for a reading versus a full production were not offered by some agencies). With faculty support we moved forward with our plans for the 2021-22 reading series. Little did we know how fortuitous this planning would turn out to be.

Like most universities, our performance options had been sharply curtailed by the coronavirus pandemic in the spring of 2020. In March 2020, we had just opened our production of *[title of show]* by Hunter Bell and Jeff Bowen, which survived one performance before lockdown hit. The next scheduled production, Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, was canceled a few days into rehearsal. We stayed optimistic over the summer, pared down our

planned 2020-21 six-show season to four shows, and the following fall, successfully mounted a masked production of Sarah DeLappe's *The Wolves*, with small, socially-distanced, masked audiences. Unfortunately, our second production of the 2020-21 season, *A Flea in Her Ear* (David Ives adaptation of Georges Feydeau's play), was canceled during tech week due to rising COVID cases. At that point, with a clearer view of the pandemic's likely progression, we pivoted online, planned to complete the mainstage season with a Zoom production of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* and an original filmed piece called *Re:Fusion*, and strategized for other safer performance options to replace the students' lost opportunities.

As we were already in the early planning stages of our new play-reading series for the 2021-22 season, we decided to reschedule and repurpose the series to help salvage the remainder of the 2020-21 season. We switched from our planned series of four shows spread throughout the fall and spring semesters of the 2021-22 season to a five-week series in spring 2021, with one reading each week of March. This structure fit into the production calendar between the Zoom production of *Our Town* and the recorded piece, *Re:Fusion*, and provided multiple performance and technical opportunities in a short amount of time. After putting out a call for directors, we selected four faculty members and one student to direct readings. We asked these directors to pick a contemporary play of interest to them, and also solicited play suggestions from the students. From the variety of titles submitted by students, we ultimately selected *The Book of Will* by Lauren Gunderson, and the spring 2021 reading series season was set: *Streetlight Woodpecker* by Shawn Fisher, directed by Megan Codling, *Airness* by Chelsea Marcantel, directed by Matt Koenig, *Robyn Hood* by Anne Negri, directed by Matt Omasta, *Ada and the Engine* by Lauren Gunderson, directed by Leslie Brott, and *The Book of Will*, directed by Amanda Dawson.



***The Book of Will* by Lauren Gunderson. From upper left: McKenna Walwynn, Amanda, Dawson, Andrew Moody, Rhiannon Tarver, Ollie Chieppa, Brynn Francis, Jordan Lockwood, Nicole Frederick, Ali Grant, Amanda Cardwell-Aiken, Mason Garcia, Levi Hopkins, Preston Rowland, Abigail Smith, Carrie Jackson. Background design created by Ryan Dawson.)**

We held auditions in early February 2021, cast the series, and assigned production team roles. In total, 35 students were involved in the reading series. In a short amount of time, they gained experience as actors (including people assigned to read stage directions), assistant directors, stage managers, dramaturgs, a technical assistant, and a student production manager. In keeping with the goal of a lower workload, we rehearsed Monday thru Thursday with performances on Friday and Saturday of each week in March.

With each reading, we addressed technical issues as they arose. In our previous Zoom production of *Our Town*, we encountered several issues: 1) freezing due to unreliable wifi; 2) variation in video quality related to the age and model of the students' computers; 3) inconsistent background

images due to the range of student environments. Based on this experience, the department distributed green screens to the actors for remote use, provided spaces on campus with strong wifi support, if needed, and made laptops available to students who needed them. Other improvements we made included coordinating Zoom backgrounds, curating program “slides” to share online, and adding other design elements, including pre-show music and graphics. Though this was common practice everywhere during the pandemic, it felt novel to us, given our limited Zoom experience.

While we improved our online production skills as the series progressed, the quick pivot to the spring readings and short preparation time included other challenges. Outside of students in *Our Town*, most had never performed online and needed to work on basic on-camera performance skills such as framing within the Zoom box, adjustments with laptop/cell phone microphones, and lighting within each performance space. The webinar version of Zoom, which we used for performance, had a steep learning curve for directors and stage managers to navigate for presenting the program slides, helping actors appear/disappear quickly, and calling cues. During one performance of *The Book of Will*, we thought we disabled the chat function, but we had not. As a result we were Zoom-bombed with repeated racial slurs appearing in the chat. The Assistant Director was able to work quickly to remove the attendees and then turn off the chat function. With each passing week, the directors and stage managers were able to share the best practices and pitfalls with the next team.



Program slide for *Streetlight Woodpecker* by Shawn Fisher.

While the technical components were the biggest challenges of the project, directors and actors also had to adjust to the condensed rehearsal time, which was new for many of our actors. The directors used rehearsal time with actors to work on a variety of skills. For example, one director chose *Airness* out of a desire to do a “fun play” and spent rehearsals focusing on the “sense of play and recklessness. Finding their voice (rather than their actor voice).” *Robyn Hood*, a new Theatre for Young Audiences play, was further developed over the course of the reading rehearsal process, and the director “aimed to present a work that audiences would find engaging,” with a focus on “storytelling and character development.” In the post-series survey, we found many students specifically enjoyed the chance to practice their characterization work. A student noted, “The readings challenged me to call on my character building skills I learned in previous acting courses and work on making quick character choices.”



***Airness* by Chelsea Marcantel. From upper left: Timo Rasmussen, Kaija Strong, Jack Roberts.**

The students clearly benefited from the process, and the audiences seemed to enjoy the results of their work. The Zoom performances were free and each performance was well-attended, with an audience between 20-40 people. Students were excited to be able to produce shows again and to share their work with colleagues, friends, and family online. As a department, we were also able to see the benefits that the reading series had to offer in addition to the increased exposure to contemporary plays, including focused work on specific elements of performance technique.

After the successful reading series in March 2021, we were committed to producing a more structured, and hopefully in-person, reading series for the 2021-22 academic year, as originally designed. We planned a three-play, in-person reading series with two readings directed by us (Amanda and Michael) and one by a student. In fall 2021, we put out a call for student directors, for which we surprisingly received no response. While students had expressed interest in directing, it turned out that students who had not yet taken our directing course felt unprepared to

commit to direct, even at the level of these short readings. Fortunately, another faculty member was willing to step in to direct another reading.

Since contemporary plays remained a guiding component of the project, the second season of the reading series included Chiara Atik's *Women* (October 2021), a new adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts* by Richard Eyre (January 2022), and *The Colby Sisters of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania* by Adam Bock (March 2022). Similar to the first round of readings, 24 students were involved as actors (or reading stage directions), assistant directors, stage managers, and dramaturgs. The stage managers, with the assistance of our department Technical Director/Production Manager, took on all the technical needs of the readings (lights, sound, and music stands). While the Zoom experience had been instructive, we were grateful to be back performing in person in our black box space, following current campus health and safety protocols.



Figure 4: *Women* by Chiara Atik. Left photo: Ashlynn Rober, Brynn Francis, Berkli Smith. Right photo: Aubrey Felty, Dramaturg.

Now that we were performing in-person, directors found additional elements to focus on. For the reading of *Women*, I again wanted to lean into the storytelling as I had with *The Book of Will*, but I also wanted to highlight the humor. Of course, to get to the humor we had to understand the dramaturgy behind the story, which created a perfect opportunity for the student dramaturg's contribution. As a dramaturg myself, I have been slowly integrating dramaturgy into our program since I joined the faculty at Utah State University in fall 2020, and dramaturging a reading is a great way for students to dip their toes into the work. In rehearsal for *Women*, we also did a bit more movement work as we were now in-person and in the same space. There is a lot of physical humor in the play, and we enjoyed the challenge of translating it to chairs and music stands, including the comedic

death of a character on stage. When surveyed, students were excited to exercise skills in comedic timing and physical humor.

For *Ghosts* rehearsals, the director focused on “linear character development and line of action—only know what you know when you know it” and addressing the “enormous temptation for actors to ‘play the end of the play’ at the beginning.” It also “offered an excellent opportunity to work on ‘positive choices’” and to explore a classic play through a new version by a contemporary playwright.

Given my (Michael’s) academic focus on voice and text, I chose *The Colby Sisters of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania* so that the students could engage with Adam Bock’s unique writing style. Bock uses a particular formatting style, including punctuation and layout of the text on the page, to communicate the structure of the characters’ thought patterns. Deciphering this type of stylized writing and making informed choices based on the playwright’s use of punctuation and format is a valuable skill for actors working on all genres, and the reading format was a perfect opportunity to explore that style. Much of our rehearsal period was spent discussing these elements and working with the actors to express the thoughts of the characters clearly, without glossing over clues from the playwright—using the punctuation to inform their choices, while not “playing” the punctuation.

As with the first reading series, audience attendance was between 25-40 for each performance, but live audiences made a vast difference in the actors’ work. Hearing the audience response (or lack thereof), allowing the response to influence the timing of the scenes, talking to an audience member during a direct address moment—all of these elements gave the actors a deeper experience during the second series. Audience response to in-person readings was also positive, as evidenced by one audience member who attended out of curiosity and commented that they never heard of

simply reading a play for the public and were surprised at how much they enjoyed it. Based on anecdotal evidence like this as well as attendance numbers, the reading series participants and audiences enjoyed the series.

Along with the anecdotal data, in April 2022, we sent an informal participant feedback questionnaire to students involved in either season of the reading series to better understand their experience. On a scale of 1 to 5, we asked the students to rate how likely they would be to participate in future readings at USU, and how they would rate their overall experience working on the reading(s). We also asked for qualitative responses to the following questions: “What worked well in the process?; What would you like to see improved/changed in the future?; What did you learn or what was the benefit of participating?; For those who acted in the reading(s), what performance skills do you feel were exercised or called on? (voice, movement, character, etc.)” 22% of the student participants responded to the survey, and all respondents rated the likelihood of participating in the future at a 3 or higher, with the majority at 5. The qualitative responses to what worked well noted the opportunities to work with a smaller cast, the limited commitment and lower stakes, and one respondent described it as a “great opportunity for acting students to bridge the gap between [scene work for class] and full-fledged productions.” Students also reported what they learned from the process, which included expanding their knowledge of plays (and playwrights), learning a new role (such as dramaturg), and, as one student noted, it was a “good opportunity to work on a script quickly, and let go of the rules in your head. [...] It’s a great practice in trust and full speed ahead.” The actors in the readings cited specific skills they improved such as quickly taking and applying notes, character development, comedic timing, breath control, and 60% of respondents said voice work, which I (Michael) found especially noteworthy as a voice and speech instructor. The combined quantitative and qualitative data supports the anecdotal view

that the reading series is beneficial to our students and that there is interest in future series.

While we consider the series to be a success and have plans to move forward with another season of readings next year, we did encounter challenges throughout the process. Aside from technical issues surrounding online productions, the challenges were mainly related to interest from directors—specifically, waning faculty interest due to lack of compensation combined with student hesitancy to direct due to limited experience in that role. We also struggled with a casting shortage as the reading series competed with the mainstage productions for actors. Our production calendar is very tightly scheduled and the mainstage shows rely on students both on stage and backstage, leaving fewer options for casting a reading that runs during the rehearsal period of a mainstage show. In addition to our own thoughts about challenges and changes, the student survey participants noted the desire for more acting opportunities for non-BFA acting students (most roles were filled by students in the BFA acting program), the potential for reading student-written work, and a continued call to focus on contemporary plays. We hope to make improvements with each iteration of the reading series, and compensation, especially for faculty directors, seems high on the list of needs to sustain the project.

This project started with identifying a need within the department to engage with additional contemporary plays and playwrights. With the continued loss of performance opportunities due to the pandemic, we faced an additional need to create alternative performance options. In response to these combined needs, we developed a new reading series of contemporary works and produced it under a variety of evolving circumstances. Through this process, we exposed students to eight new contemporary plays and playwrights, drew in new audiences—some who had never seen a play reading before—and provided additional production

opportunities and learning experiences for 50 students out of the 89 theatre majors in the department, who otherwise might have had no creative work during that period. At this point, as we plan for the 2022-23 season of the reading series and beyond, we feel we have successfully met the need we initially identified, filled other unanticipated gaps, and demonstrated as a department that often challenges can be overcome with adaptability and flexibility.