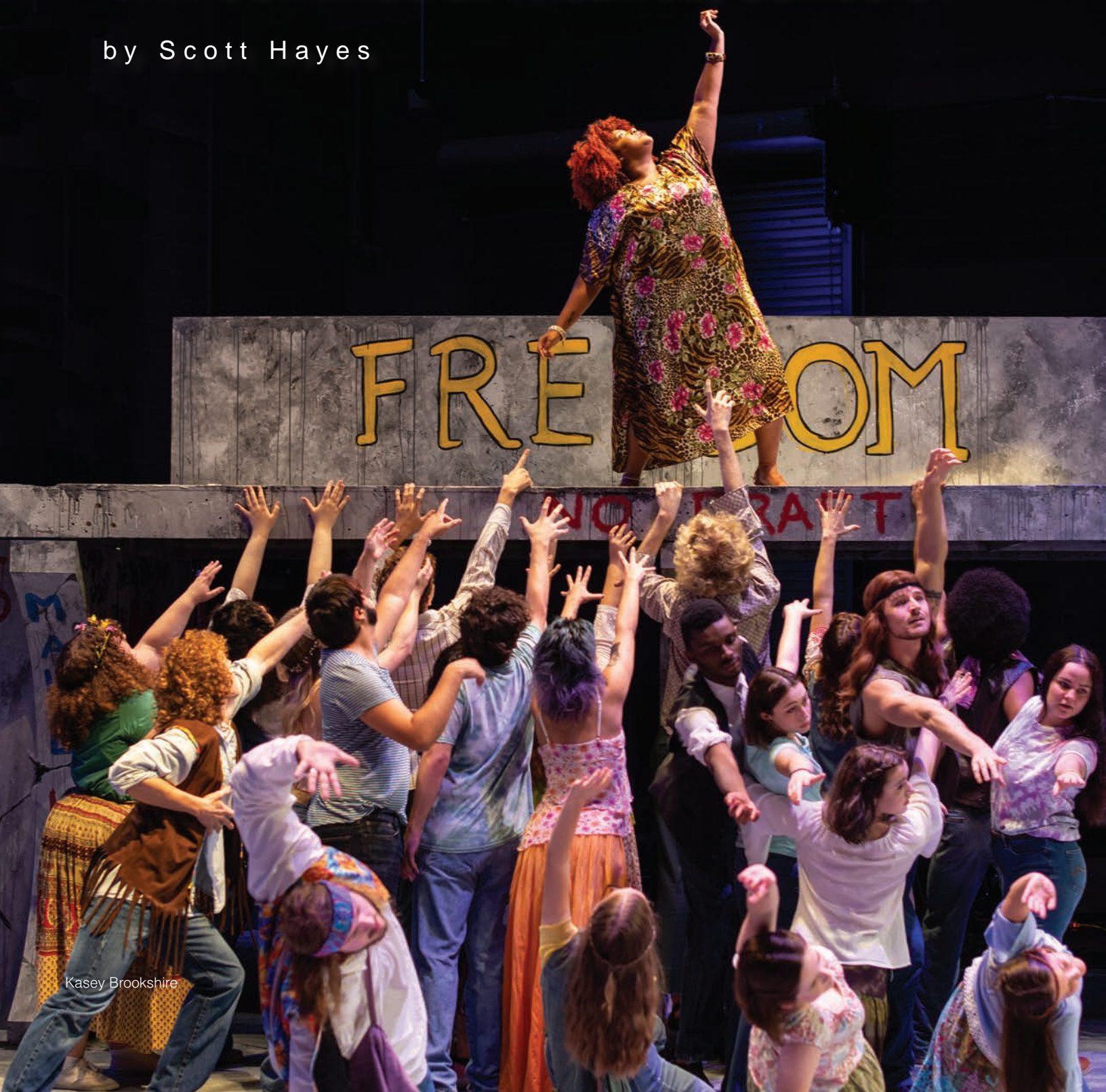


GOING BACK

Which Pandemic-Inspired Changes Will Continue at Theatres, Schools?

by Scott Hayes



As members were coming home from the 2020 SETC Convention in Louisville, residents all over the United States began to receive confirmation that COVID-19 was spreading nationwide. Within two weeks, nearly every company and school offering theatre programs was dealing with a brand-new question: How can we teach and produce theatre when we cannot gather together?

Now, after nearly three years of testing, masking, social distancing, virtual productions, video conferences and other pandemic-necessitated actions, theatre companies and programs face another question: What changes to theatre production and training that came with the pandemic will continue into the future?

More than 150 individuals in SETC's database responded to a *Southern Theatre* survey on this topic, with 60% of the responses coming from professional, community and outdoor theatre companies and 40% from university and professional theatre training programs.

From video auditions to online classes, we share on the pages that follow their thoughts on what will remain and what will disappear.

AUDITIONS, INTERVIEWS AND PORTFOLIO REVIEWS

Video submissions, long a requirement for film and television work, became the only option for most theatre auditions and interviews during the pandemic, and 69% of the survey respondents indicated this change would be permanent, at least for the first rounds of activities.

While some respondents noted that video auditions are not always ideal for getting to know the auditionee, others said they are helpful in that they provide greater accessibility for auditionees and often at a lower cost for the theatre as well.

Some respondents, like Nathanael Fisher (he/him), producing artistic director at Emerald Coast Theatre Company in Destin, FL, regularly used video submissions prior to the pandemic, but have seen a large increase in these submissions since 2020.

While Melanie Cornelison-Jannotta (she/her), executive director of The Prizery in South Boston, VA, did her 2022 casting through video submissions, she says the practice has limitations: "I think it's a great tool for finding people you are interested in, but I really want to have callbacks in person before casting."

Others say they expect initial auditions to continue as video submissions, with "live" callbacks over Zoom or other videoconferencing platforms.

"Zoom allows us to provide re-directs and interviews in real time, face-to-face. This saves time for

all," said Lynn Stallings (she/her), executive director of Atlanta Workshop Players, which plans to continue both online and in-person auditions.

The Dollywood entertainment park in Tennessee also holds both in-person and video auditions, but "we *always* prefer in person interviews and auditions. *Always*," said Roger White (he/him), entertainment manager.

At colleges and universities, plans vary. Karen Brewster (she/her), chair of the East Tennessee State University Department of Theatre and Dance, said her department plans to keep using video submissions until the pandemic is completely over, but she is "not sure if we will keep video beyond that."

Dick Block (he/him), associate head of the School of Drama at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, PA, noted that his institution has always allowed "both online portfolio submissions and interviews/reviews." On the other end of the spectrum, Paul B. Crook (he/him), executive director of the Etheredge Center and External Programs at the University of South Carolina Aiken, said his school's small department did not use video for auditions or interviews prior to or during the height of the pandemic and doesn't plan to in the future.

The Theatre Department at Georgia College & State University in Milledgeville has "embraced video interviews and meetings," said Eric Griffis, (he/they), interim chair.

Opposite page: Theatre and school representatives say many changes instituted at the height of the Covid pandemic will continue at least short-term going forward, but most don't plan to present streamed or online shows, except in special cases. Instead, the great majority have returned solely to live shows, like this 2021 production of *Hair* at Piedmont University in Demorest, GA, featuring Brittany Wilder as Dionne, a vocal member of The Tribe.

Shelly Elman (*pronouns?*), chair of the Department of English, Film, Languages and Performing Arts at the University of West Georgia in Carrollton, acknowledged that while her department accepts video auditions, in-person is preferred.

"We like the face-to-face auditions because we want to talk with the student as well as audition them," Elman said. "If we use a tape, the interview doesn't necessarily happen."

UNDERSTUDIES, SWINGS, MULTIPLE CASTS AND CREWS

Most of the survey respondents acknowledged that the pandemic affected their use of understudies, swings or other forms of substitute cast or crew members. Before the start of the crisis, only 19% of respondents represented institutions with an understudy or swing policy, but that number has risen to 54%. The specifics of the policies differ.

Shenandoah Summer Music Theatre in Winchester, VA, has always used understudies from within the company, according to Elizabeth Albert (she/her), managing director. But as the pandemic continued, she said, "we have had to hire separate swings and assign understudies to every principal role, which is an added cost."

Additional swing hires have been necessary at Jobsite Theater in Tampa, FL, as well, with "folks in smaller roles prepared to step into larger from the beginning," said David M. Jenkins (he/him), producing artistic director. "Directors and other company personnel are also being conscripted, for a lack of a better way of putting it, to go in."

Marina Hunley-Graham (*pronouns?*), artistic director of the *Unto These Hills* outdoor theatre in Cherokee, NC, said her theatre began using three tiers of understudies in 2021.

"Before, it was just the role and one understudy," she said. "We found a need for a fourth tier this year."

Swings have played an important role at Creative Greensboro (NC) during the pandemic, according to Todd Fisher (he/him), performing arts coordinator.



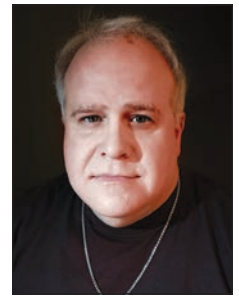
Nathanael Fisher



Melanie Cornelison-Jannotta



Lynn Stallings



Roger White

"We would have had to cancel several performances if it wasn't for swings," Fisher said. "They were considered part of the cast and even given a bow if they did not perform that evening."

Other institutions have not used and do not plan to use understudies or swings. The added cost of understudies or swings is beyond the means of many theatres that have suffered income losses during the pandemic, said Donna Northcott (she/her), the founding artistic director for St. Louis (MO) Shakespeare/Magic Smoking Monkey Theatre.

"We are a non-Equity company and working on an even tighter budget as a result of being without income for two years," Northcott said. "Paying even an honorarium to understudies/multiple casts is just not an option."

Todd Davison (he/him), artistic director at Maples Repertory Theatre in Macon, MO, said his theatre is in a similar situation.

"Our runs are short, and we have rolled the dice on people staying healthy," Davison said. "We've had emergency understudies go on book-in-hand and we have had to cancel shows because a key player was quarantined. However, in the future we will still likely operate without understudies as we are still in a very precarious funding situation."

Finances aren't the only reason some theatres continued without understudies or swings during the height of the pandemic. Mark Chenovick (he/we), artistic director at SecondStory Repertory in Redmond, WA, noted that hiring "understudies and swings give actors the impression that

they are easily replaced. It also creates unnecessary competition and comparison within the cast."

While more than half of theatres reported hiring swings or understudies, few theatres said they had put formal protocols in place to create multiple crews or crew substitutions. Only one-fifth of the survey respondents said they now use crew substitutes, and most of these said they cover their needs using less structured processes such as having present crew members take over the work for missing personnel.

"Since the pandemic, we are now cross-training many of our tech personnel to be able to use them as needed, where needed," said Thom Wilson (*pronouns?*), first vice president at Tablerock Festival in Salado, TX.

Several respondents noted they did not have enough personnel for existing crew needs, let alone substitutes.

STREAMING PRODUCTIONS

Half of the survey respondents reported streaming productions during the pandemic. However, nearly all of these respondents were from colleges and universities. Most stand-alone companies responding to the survey said they could not overcome the financial or logistic issues required to stream productions.

One of those noting that difficulty was Valerie Rachele (she/her), artistic director at Oregon Cabaret Theatre in Ashland.

"For a small theatre, it's not as simple as just pointing an iPhone and putting it on a live social media platform," Rachele said. "There are rights and royalties to pay to the writers for the piece, the actors, the unions, the streaming service you use,



Dick Block



Karen Brewster



Paul B. Crook



Eric Griffiths

as well as the cost your ticketing system charges you, etc.”

At colleges and universities, the trend toward streaming has slowed as the pandemic eases. Less than 20% of the colleges and universities that streamed during the pandemic planned to continue the practice for copyrighted titles. Five respondents said they planned to stream only works that were also presented in front of an audience.

A number of respondents, including Riley Risso Coker (she/her), producing director at Oklahoma Shakespearean

Festival and director of theatre for Southeastern Oklahoma State University in Durant, expressed disdain for the practice.

“We are trying very hard to get our audiences back into the theatre,” Coker said. “Streaming our productions does not accomplish that.”

William Morgan, artistic manager for the Cleveland (OH) Hearing and Speech Center, which presents SignStage, a deaf awareness program using theatre techniques to educate audiences about Deaf culture, also called for theatre to return to the stage.

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Elizabeth Albert



Marina Hunley-Graham



Todd Fisher



Riley Risso Coker

"Theatre was invented as an in-person live event," Morgan said. "If you're not doing in-person live performances, then you're not doing theatre. Don't change the definition. Theatre is for *live performing*. That's what theatre is!"

Even with the generally negative view of streaming, some respondents acknowledged they would use or would consider using streaming for specific purposes. For example, some said they planned to continue streaming original work, crediting the pandemic for the change.

Brent A. Menchinger (**pronouns?**), chair

of Theatre at Murray State University in Kentucky said his school found recorded productions to be a way to reach school children inexpensively: "We recorded public domain scripts and short original plays with author permission. We shot them like a film, then posted on YouTube or sent them to K-12 schools at no charge."

OTHER CONTINUING PRODUCTION-RELATED CHANGES

Most of the production-related changes that respondents said they expected to continue were related to COVID-19 safety protocols. Many noted plans to

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continue masking, temperature checks, social distancing, proof of vaccination and quarantine/isolation protocols. These were generally based on what was mandated by their institutions and/or local and state governments.

Perry Morgan-Hall (he/him), director of the musical theatre program at Greensboro (NC) College, said seating plans at his institution would still use social distancing measures. Jon A. Putzke (he/him), artistic director at Vero Beach (FL) Theatre Guild, also planned to keep seating adjustments made during the pandemic in place.

"We reconfigured the seats in our theatre so the rows are now six feet apart and will be left that way permanently," Putzke said. "Patrons *love* the wide-open aisles in front of each row."

Other changes that began during the pandemic and may become permanent at some theatres include digital programs and tickets.

Venice (FL) Theatre has continued the closure of the in-person box office, said Kristofer Geddie (he/him), general manager and director of diversity. "We've also eliminated the post-show 'enjoyed it' line," he said.

New Stage Theatre in Jackson, MS, is continuing mostly touchless ticketing and safety measures begun at the height of the pandemic, according to Francine Thomas Reynolds (she/her), artistic director.

"We employ a COVID safety manager, we do screening every day during rehearsals and performances, we have changed the way we use microphones, we have sanitizing stations, we are still COVID testing consistently, and we are still pur-

chasing masks," Reynolds said. "We run air conditioning and HEPA filters consistently during rehearsals and performance."

Jenkins, of Jobsite Theater, spoke for several respondents when he mentioned elimination of the 10 out of 12 technical rehearsals and a reduction in "tech week hours in general" as pandemic era changes that will continue. He also said many face-to-face meetings were being switched permanently to video conferences.

At Synchronicity Theatre in Atlanta, most production meetings continue to be online rather than in person, said Rachel May (she/her), producing artistic director.

"While this provides some challenges for creative exploration of ideas, we have found good tools to have those conversations in meetings – including Pinterest for sharing of images, virtual whiteboards for brainstorming, etc.," May said. "And we have in-person meet-ups when we have to engage in hands-on problem-solving. These online meetings have made meeting scheduling somewhat easier and attendance stronger, and has helped our freelance artists who are juggling multiple gigs and gas prices."

TRAINING-RELATED CHANGES FROM PANDEMIC

Respondents who are educators were asked to comment on teaching and classroom changes that started during the height of the pandemic and may continue.

Just under two-thirds of the respondents reported moving to an increased number of individual assignments for their studio-based theatre courses at the height of the pandemic. Of those, less than half planned to continue the practice.

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*Reis Myers
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One of the respondents who planned to continue individual assignments is Maegan McNerney Azar (she/her), chair of Theatre Arts at Furman University in Greenville, SC, and current SETC president, who noted the importance of both individual and group work for actor and dancer training.

Adanma Onyedike Barton (she/her), chair of the Theatre Department at Berea (KY) College and SETC's vice president of equity & inclusion, spoke for many when she wrote, "Teaching acting over Zoom is a nightmare." However, she acknowledged that she, like so many practitioners "still found a way to do scene work, and the students ended up enjoying all of our classes."

Some school representatives said they did not plan to continue additional individual assignments as a general practice, while adding that COVID circumstances might still require flexibility for some students. For example, Reis Myers McCormick (she/her), director of development for the KD Conservatory College of Film & Dramatic Arts in Dallas, TX, said the school would accommodate students based on need.

Most of the respondents said they had allowed video submissions for studio-based courses, but none planned to continue the process unless there was a specific connection to the assignment.

Kyla Kazuszyk (she/her), associate professor of costume technology at Louisiana State University and co-chair of SETC's Cultural Diversity Committee, said there are certain classes where video might be preferred: "For stage makeup and costume construction class, the video presentations have been even better than

the in-person presentations were."

Several respondents mentioned auditions and screen acting assignments as typical of the kinds of assignments that would continue to use video submissions. David Haugen (he/him), head of performance at Ohio University in Athens, found the practice of "filming assignments at home and uploading them to Flipgrid to be very useful" for screen acting courses.

REMOTE (VIDEO CONFERENCE) ATTENDANCE FOR COURSES

Everyone affected by the pandemic became familiar with video conference use. Respondents had varying answers to whether this would continue in the classroom. Each theatre department has to follow the institution's overall policy, and these policies are frequently based on decisions from local and state governments.

Crook noted his institution had "discontinued remote attendance as an option for a traditional, in-person class."

Several schools continued to allow remote attendance for lecture courses, but less frequently for studio work.

Neno Russell (he/him), costume technician at the University of Tennessee Knoxville and SETC's vice president of services, said that "for studio work, it is very difficult for the student to make the progress they would in person. I personally have gone to allowing them more classroom instruction time to make up for missed classes."

Retaining an option for remote attendance can be important for accessibility, Azar pointed out.

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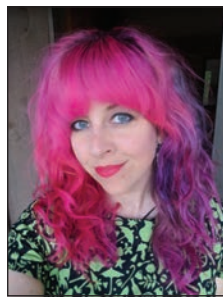
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Kyla Kazuschy



David Haugen



Neno Russell



Raimondo Genna

and we prefer to have them there, but sometimes circumstances are out of our control, and having the option for virtual attendance prevents missed learning opportunities," Azar said.

Like a number of other respondents, Raimondo Genna (he/him), department chair for the University of South Dakota in Vermillion, and McCormick of KD Conservatory noted that video conferencing remained an option for students at their schools who tested positive for COVID-19.

"Our student body has not been entirely COVID-free since our June semester start, therefore the option continues to be offered," McCormick said.

Plans for asynchronous online courses had less to do with the pandemic than with an institution's prior forays into online instruction. Most had started simply due to the demand and expectation for courses to be offered online and accessible to students on their own time..

At William Carey University in Hattiesburg, MS, it was actually another health challenge that led to asynchronous delivery of classes online, said Tim Matheny (he/him), department chair.

"This initiative began during the swine flu outbreak a number of years ago, and the university president requested every class be prepared to move fully online at a moment's notice," Matheny said. "This preparation led to a number of classes that we continued to offer to students as a fully online option."

Face-to-face and online offerings are offered simultaneously at several schools, including the University of Rhode Island in Kingston, where "we have a few classes

that have historically been taught this way and will continue," said David T. Howard (he/him), Theatre Department chair.

FOUNDATIONAL CHANGES

Prior to the survey, several educators reported to *Southern Theatre* that their institutions had seen an increased need to offer preparatory courses for incoming college students since the start of the pandemic – a finding backed up by about half of the survey respondents.

"Freshman through juniors went through two years of high school online," a survey respondent who wished to remain anonymous said. "They legitimately don't know how to prepare/study for college-level work and have to be taught how to do this and how to utilize the resources – the syllabus, office hours, the library, the student tutoring center, the writing center – provided to them. We realized this at the end of the 2021-2022 school year, that it was a universal experience at colleges regardless of size or status and are remedying this moving forward."

Other respondents who said their department or their institution has had to make adjustments to assist such students include Menchinger of Murray State University, who noted that "more students than ever are in expanded Math, English and Reading University studies courses."

There have been other foundational changes as well. Steve Boone (pronouns?), associate professor in the Department of Theatre and Film at Bowling Green (OH) State University, said his school has changed attendance policies and that ACT/SAT scores are no longer required. Several respondents mentioned significant

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additional efforts from departments and institutions to help students deal with mental health challenges. Finally, Menchinger noted what was probably the most shared outcome for all respondents: "Most professors are much more technically savvy than before and more familiar with [their learning management system]."

LOOKING AHEAD

It cannot be overstated how frequently respondents expressed their happiness to return to theatres, studios and classrooms. Many will take the lessons learned from the pandemic as a call to continue protecting their students, companies and patrons.

That's a sentiment well-expressed by Barton: "No one should acquire COVID-19 from going to a play. I believe we all



Steve Boone



Tim Matheny



David T. Howard

take appropriate measures."

Yet Barton also acknowledged a longing familiar to all of us in theatre as we try to move forward: "Our students come to the theatre, and we like to put up shows in person. I pray we can continue practicing this even as the world is moving and remaking around us so fast." ■



Scott Hayes (he/him) is dean of the School of Communication & the Arts at Liberty University in Virginia and a member of the *Southern Theatre* Editorial Board.

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