

## CAS Podcast: Performing Arts during Covid

Richard Gay, Interim Dean: Welcome to 30 Brave Minutes, a podcast of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. In 30 Brave Minutes we'll give you something interesting to think about. I'm Richard Gay, Interim Dean of the College, and with me is Dr. Ashley Allen, Interim Associate Dean. Today we'll be talking about the Performing Arts in 2020. Now get ready for 30 Brave minutes.

Ashley Allen: Hello everyone. Thank you so much for joining us today for our podcast on the Performing Arts in 2020. I am very excited to introduce Sarah Busman, James Bass, and Dr. Jonathan Drahos, who will be our guests today. I'm going to let them tell you just a little bit about themselves and what they do before we get started. Sarah Busman, will you take us away?

Sarah Busman: Yeah, sure. Thanks for having me, Ashley. My name is Sarah Busman. I am the flute professor at UNCP and I play principal flute in the Fayetteville Symphony and play flute in a bunch of other ensembles. I'm also the founder and director of Dark Water Women in Music Festival, which is at UNCP and when I'm not doing that I have two very small children, which you will likely hear on this recording.

Allen: Wonderful. Thank you. Okay. So, James you want to go next? James Bass.

James Bass: Sure. I'm James Bass. I'm the Executive Director of Givens Performing Arts Center at UNC Pembroke. I also am an adjunct professor of Mass Communications. I teach Photojournalism and I'm a photographer by my art trade.

Gay: I'll add that he's a very talented photographer. He's being very modest. He's got some skill over there.

Busman: I will second that. It's awesome stuff.

Allen: Well, James, I had no idea, so I feel like I just learned something very important about you. So thank you for that. Alright, Dr. Jonathan Drahos.

Jonathan Drahos: Hi. I'm Jonathan Drahos. I'm the director of theater at UNCP. I'm also a professor at UNCP, teaching a wide range of courses in our curriculum. I'm also the artistic director of the uprising theater company Shakespeare in the Pines, which is here in Pinehurst, North Carolina, and so happy to be here. Thanks for doing this, Ashley.

Allen: Thank you so much for being here. We're really excited. We want to talk a little bit about the performing arts, generally, and sort of what goes into your work in terms of putting together a production or performance, and then maybe talk a little bit, as we get going, about how things might have changed in 2020. Let's just start off with just what goes into your general work putting together a production or a performance?

Bass: Sure. Well, I guess I can start there. For us at the Givens Performing Arts Center, staging a production is usually, it can be an all-day event which starts very early, sometimes 6:00 and 7:00 in the morning with a truck rolling in and all these set pieces, audio, sound, lights coming off the truck and being assembled, which takes pretty much all day and then possibly a 7:30 or 8:00 o'clock performance. And sometimes the tech may be running up until 3:30 or 4 o'clock in the afternoon, with sound checks and preparations. Now that was in our pre-covid world, and I'm sure we'll talk a little bit more about what has changed, but on an average day that's what it might have looked like.

Allen: OK. Thank you. That's perfect.

Busman: I suspect Jonathan and I have the same addition to make to that, which is you can prep for a performance for months and months, I mean, we're both professors at UNCP who put on performances of different kinds and I know my students practice their stuff for the whole semester before we put on things so the sort of preparation that the theater sees from James' side, it like, spans back so many weeks (everyone laughs) when we are learning our pieces or lines, in Jonathan's case. Am I right on that Jonathan?

Drahos: Yeah, I mean, for example, we're about to put on a production of Macbeth and we've been working on that for 12 weeks. Its five days a week. It hasn't been long hours in terms of each rehearsal because of covid because we've been rehearsing outdoors, but 12 weeks is a long time to put together a piece. I think it's a testament to all the hard work you guys do. When we see the performances they look so effortless and I know you guys work very hard to make that magic happen. Clearly, a lot of work that goes on behind the scenes and for people who've never been involved in a production themselves, they really don't get a sense of the hours of prep time that goes into, you know, two hours of magic one night. I appreciate all that extra work you guys are doing that the audience just doesn't see.

Drahos: It's great that you said that Richard because you're absolutely right. People come in and see two hours of magic and as an arts presenter, we get that all the time from people saying, you know, what would be great if you could bring in that well, you know, whatever is some Disney cartoon or whatever, because they have no idea that these things are tours that have been put together, rehearsed, staged, and then put out on the road. Sometimes in the audience's mind it is just you can just sort of pick and grab whatever titles, and make them happen. And they take that magic for granted.

Allen: Well, in our GPAC, you know, it hosts all of our student performances, but it also hosts things like the Broadway and More series. So you keep a very busy calendar rotating in different events and performances. Okay, wonderful. So as I alluded to earlier, we know that

2020 has been very different for you guys. And I feel like you guys have really worked some creative magic to continue what you do in a meaningful way for the community and for our students and so I wanted to just talk a little bit about how covid-19 has impacted your role in the Performing Arts. Maybe some of the challenges that it has presented. And then after that, we can talk about some of the really cool ways you guys are adapting to those challenges. So maybe start with the challenges first, in some way.

Bass: The obvious challenge here is what you alluded to earlier. There just aren't any shows to bring in. In terms of touring performances, it's just not happening right now.

Drahos: On our end, it's the idea of, is it safe to do theater, to make theater during this time? Is it safe for the actors and for the designers and for the director? And so these are huge challenges that the theater community, broadly, is experiencing. Broadway being shut down until the middle of next year, at least. Most regional theaters are shut down. There's not a lot happening at all in terms of producing theater the way we did it before, so it is an unprecedented time.

Busman: Yeah, in terms of musicians. There's been extensive research that's been done, specifically with wind instruments, which mine is. The flute is a wind instrument, just meaning, like, you use air to make the sound, because that's so tied up in aerosols and we use our air in a really, sort of directive, forceful way, and in a way that goes beyond just like normal speaking. So for us, if we do any rehearsals, they have to be 30 minutes or less, and then we have to let the air sort of circulate. If there's wind instruments, we're only letting nine students in a large room play together, very far apart. And that's with no audience, obviously, which is a huge difference, I think for all of us. We, like I don't want to speak for these guys, but I love an audience. I get such an energy from audiences and we don't have them right now. So my hope is that for musicians, the research will catch up with covid a little bit and we'll know what makes it a little bit safer to play.

Gay: I think it's interesting you were talking about the down time for the rehearsals. Right? I know leave the rehearsal rooms empty for a while so that air can circulate and sort of the parallel to that would be Jonathan's rehearsals outside to keep the buildup of the virus in this space to a minimum there. So you guys have really had to be adaptive in ways to keep folks safe at this. I think our departments have done a great job getting taking these precautions seriously and that's reflected in our low positivity rate on campus at the moment. So thank you for all those efforts.

Drahos: I think that's absolutely right. And I think, you know, as a teacher, too, I do all my courses outdoors because I didn't want to go the hybrid route in terms of having half of the class online at half face-to-face. So I'm teaching full face-to-face socially-distanced outdoors under the cool trees in front of GPAC. So it's been a steep change in terms of teaching as well.

Chancellor Robin Cummings: This is Chancellor Robin Cummings and I want to thank you for listening to 30 Brave Minutes. Our faculty and students provide expertise, energy, and passion, driving our region forward. Our commitment to Southeastern North Carolina has never been stronger through our teaching, our research, and our community outreach. I want to encourage you to consider making a tax-deductible contribution to the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. With your help, we will continue our impact for generations to come. You can donate online at [uncp.edu/give](http://uncp.edu/give). Thanks again for listening. Now back to more 30 Brave Minutes.

Allen: Okay, you guys, so you talked about some of the challenges. We know that it's been difficult to do things, well, I'm going to say impossible to do things normal, right? And difficult trying to figure out ways to produce a product, or bring in a product, or keep the community engaged. So I'm really interested in some of the new approaches that you've used and the ways in which you've had to get creative to make your work happen in the age of covid. So wherever you want to take that is fine with me.

Drahos: For James and my collaboration, I think James can talk a little bit more about. Like, how we're sort of hooking up to produce theater.

Bass: Yeah, as Jonathan said, he and I have collaborated for, going on four years now, on producing a production together. Our first one was Romeo and Juliet, and of course, that whole paradigm was turned upside down this year, when we couldn't do that. But, for me over the summer, as things progressed and I think after March when we initially went in for our shutdown, I think every day was sort of a quest for optimism, to say maybe tomorrow, maybe there will be a vaccine, maybe there is some solution, and maybe we'll get back. And I hear that a lot with our Broadway producers when I speak with agents, and they are telling me, yeah, we're still looking at 2021 dates. We're looking at these dates, and there is a sense of optimism there and in your head, it's not going to happen. It's just not going to fall out the way you think it's going to. But in my world, we talked earlier about my title and that Arts Creator thing that is in my career band, the pandemic has essentially turned things around for me because technically what I was before covid was a presenter and we present the Arts. We basically turn on the lights, open the doors, and put it on the stage for you. And covid has really turned my role into that of an Arts Creator now because we are really having to produce all the content that we're making for our audiences. And the place we've gone is digital. And we found that that's been really good for us. In fact, I was on yesterday a webinar with the Wallace Foundation and we were talking about reimagining the future of the Arts. And of course, all venues mostly have gone. Those that are still open have gone virtual and digital in some capacity. And I think now the attitude we're beginning to see is that not only are we, we will return to live performances at some point and at GPAC we certainly will, too, but this is changing the way that we're doing things and we've learned a lot about our digital creation. And as we move forward GPAC intends to keep some sort of digital content as part of what we offer. I can talk a little bit more later about some of the benefits that we've noticed from that, but that has been our world, is to turn to digital and there are very obvious benefits to it and I will say this, you know, I'm as

ready as anyone for live performances to come back, but I'm really also very excited about the things that we're doing right now because they're very innovative and collaborative. You know, I'm working with Sarah on a project now that we'll be finishing up in the next day or so, and ready to release. I'm filming Jonathan's play beginning next week and that will be coming out soon, and some other side projects with that. So, you know, I will say this in closing. I think that the pandemic has really pulled innovation off the sidelines.

Busman: I agree that like, we're sort of moving to this like digital world of performance which we've sort of been dealing with that, but this is next level because we can't just have a concert, and you know, have people in the seats. So I think to piggyback on what James was saying, I think it's led to a lot of innovation. My husband loves baseball. I only watch it during the World Series because it's a nice thing to do for him because I love him, but I find it not super exciting. So the World Series is happening right now. So I'm like, you know, I'm sort of watching and they're good games and they're great players. And so the quality is really high and there's a lot of excitement, and there's good things happening, but I would so rather go to see my local minor league baseball team in the park and it's not because I don't see the difference in the product. It's because there's a vitality that you get from feeling like you are part of big group of people who are all watching the same thing. There's such an energy and there's such a life there and like when you're sitting in the seat, you're like maybe the ball is going to come to me or maybe I'm going to get a high five from the mascot. Like feel like you're part of the thing and so, I think for me knowing that like that energy and that participation factor for the audience is not going to be there in a natural way, means that the artist-musician needs to do extra work. Like we need to get them engaged because that's what makes performances special. It's what makes you remember that first time that you went and saw the orchestra when you were in third grade. Like it makes you feel like you're part of things. So my goal has been, we want to do the digital thing, but we want to do it, not just like pick up a performance and plop it online. That doesn't give the person watching it any, like it doesn't invest them in the same way as like, you know, if there's something that we're asking them to do, or asking them to think about, or asking

them to look at that's different. That's been my grand unified theory of covid Performing Arts and baseball.

Drahos: I just couldn't agree more, and I think that baseball analogy is genius, because it's an absolute nightmare not to have an audience if you are a performer. And as an audience, watching something on video, especially a theater piece, or a music piece, is not the same. Of course not. And for thousands and thousands of years, there's been live performance. And there's been studies done that an audience's heart beat all sinks together when they're watching a performance live. And so there's a real communication towards the actors and the audience, a real conversation that's happening implicitly over the top of the explicit performance. So that dynamic cannot be captured on video. That being said, there's a lot of things we can do with digital, like James was talking about. These innovative ideas in terms of what we're doing is we're filming Macbeth and we're getting the cameras right on stage with the actors. So it's not like we're setting up cameras and just letting it roll on the play, but there's a sort of hybrid feel to where we can sort of record the play and document the play as a theatrical piece, but also use elements of film and elements of film acting in it to create a more hybrid feel to the experience for the people watching.

Busman: That is really cool.

Allen: One of the things they might think of, specifically as a general audience when they first think about performing arts in covid is maybe something like Hamilton being on Disney plus and some things like that, I think, people are seeing as you know, you're picking up theater, picking up these experiences that people might not normally have access to, and putting it in a way that's accessible to them in their living room. And it's definitely different, but do we see any value in that?

Bass: I do. As I was saying, yesterday I was on a webinar with the Wallace Foundation and one of the things they recently found in a study was that there's a difference and a diversity in people who are visiting Arts organizations now. And in fact, they figure that of the people using digital content from theaters, those who had been to the theater in person in the past year were twice as likely to be African-American and twice as likely to have incomes less than \$25,000. Well, I think Hamilton has been a game-changer in that respect, because the Arts are there in your living room. They're very accessible to people now more than they have been before and all of the content that we're doing right now through GPAC is all free. And we're posting on our website and we're doing digital ads to put it out there in social media for people to discover it. So, you know, what the Wallace Foundation is saying is very in line with something that I hoped would be a result of doing virtual performances, is that we would reach audiences that we may never have reached before. And there's a good side to that coming up because when we do return to what we consider a normal time, we hope that we'll bring audiences in we may not have before. People who were exposed to things digitally and said wow, let me give this a chance, you know, I never had an idea that a play looked like that or that I could get that close to a performer. I think, you know, while they can't and you know, Sarah hit the nail on the head when she said this thing about energy, and Jonathan as well, I mean there are neurological connections that we make as an audience. We're all in sync when we're watching something. We're missing that energy, but I think in some ways audiences can pick up a little bit on that, digitally, and want to really feel that in person when they come in. So I think, you know, there are going to be some great benefits to what's happening virtually and digitally and when we return to our "normal world," which I really don't even think is going to be that way anymore, I think we're going to see some sort of modified world in the Arts when we come back that's partly living in this world of digital creation and partly in a world of live performance again, but I think there's some tremendous upside to this.

Allen: Okay, wonderful. Sarah, I would love to hear you talk a little bit about the railroaded project you had told me about before, so if you don't mind...

Busman: No, not at all. So I think one of the interesting ways that I've had to think about teaching this semester, is that a lot of classes are sort of built around like a culminating event. I teach like Intro to Music, so normally, you do intro the music and then there's like a final exam, and because you know my class is hybrid, I can't have like a final exam like I normally would. I think a lot of professors are dealing with that. In the performing arts classes, a lot of times, the culminating event is a concert and so we can't do that either. So I think a lot of the Performing Arts folks are thinking, you know, are doing the same thing that all of the faculty at UNCP and everywhere are doing. Like, what does it look like to finish a semester and have these students feeling like, you know, there's sort of an arc to the semester and that we have like a nice little pinpoint at the end when normally that would just be a concert? So for my students what we did was we contacted a composer that I know, Nicole Chamberlain. She's come to UNCP before in the before times. She wrote a piece for a flute choir called Railroaded. So I contacted her to ask if she would give us permission to film it and have the students record it. And she very graciously sent us a click track, which is something that she builds on her end that students can listen to in their ear and all record their parts separately, but then we can sort of combine them. So we're like a hundred percent sure that they'll sort of lineup, which was fantastic that she sent that to us because she's really excited about the project. So I think we all know that there's a lot of railroad tracks around UNCP. So what we did was I had my students over the course of like two weeks, I video recorded them at different railroad tracks, very safely I might add. They got like on the railroad tracks. I have video evidence that this is the case then we're sort of going to stitch those together and they are audio recording them separately with actually the music department's tech person, Andrew Beck. So he's going to mix them together and then we'll add that together, so it'll be a really cool new music project. The students are really engaged because part of their final project is they have to help me choose like spots and images in their own video to put in, which I think is a useful way of learning about editing without saying like, good luck. I think it's going to be great for UNCP because like we're making a fun feature of that thing that sometimes annoys us when we're like coming late to class and we get stuck by the

railroad train, but we're like we're totally embracing the railroad with this project. So it's been really fun. I'm super excited. It's definitely not something I would have done pre-covid because I'm learning on the job, too. Like, I'm learning how to edit video, I'm learning how to take video, I'm learning how to edit audio. So I think it's going to be super cool. I'm really excited.

Allen: That sounds really interesting. I'm excited to see it and you talk in there just about some collaboration that you've had. I'm interested. Are there any other projects that you guys have going on that are collaborative, I mean, it could be within UNCP, but also outside of our University that might not have happened had things not changed for us?

Bass: Could I mention a couple things? I'll say and this is kind of related to what happened with Hamilton. In 2017 we recorded a piece on the GPAC stage called The Rivers Wrath. It was written by Mark Anderson, who's a local musician, very talented and world-renowned composer. Janell Miller came to UNCP and also Jim Wright, who is a music student at UNCP and they performed the piece on the GPAC stage and it was recorded then. Now, in an era of covid, we start looking back and going, well, do we have anything in film? And we were able to find this piece that was very professionally put together and we're using that. So that's a collaborative piece that we did that we didn't even realize that we would use. I definitely want to speak about the project that Sarah and I have been working on because we're going to be releasing that very soon, in the next few days. It's called Ghost Light and Ghost Light is a collaboration also with the Museum of the Southeast American Indian. Nancy Fields, the director there, is a huge ghost story fan and she's been collecting local ghost stories from the community and she had written those down. And so we had some native readers to come in and read those stories on our stage. Linnea Briella Louis did some fantastic lighting and scene design for these readings, and then Sarah coordinated with us some musicians from the Music Department Faculty, including herself. She did a flute piece and that's included in there. And this is all put together sort of like a variety type show. I will be doing the narration for it and we'll go from a ghost story into a musical piece and to another ghost story, and they're going to

be a lot of great visual elements in there. So that's been a great collaboration that we've been working on. Also working with Jonathan. We work together regularly. And so this production of Macbeth that we're working on and another note I wanted to mention, you know talking about the benefits of what we're doing. Again in this Wallace Foundation study, we learned that one of the things that people are asking for in their digital content now. 72% of people are saying that they want to see more inclusivity and more community, and I feel like we're doing both in those collaborations. Obviously doing those Lumbee ghost stories in Ghost Light is going to be one piece, but also and Jonathan can speak about this, too. One of the things I love about working with Jonathan is the fresh take that he brings to his work. He takes Shakespeare and he really modernizes it and makes it very relevant. And Jonathan, maybe you can talk a little bit about some of the social themes that you're including and some of the things that are included there, that really link back into our community and our times.

Drahos: I think what a privilege here is that we get to approach Shakespeare during a pandemic, because Shakespeare was so key to pandemic. I mean, one of the witch's lines in the show, one of the first lines of the play is "Fair is foul and foul is fair, hover through the fog and filthy air." So it really sets up this idea of pandemic and so we've decided to embrace it and set the play in a pandemic so that the characters are actually aware of pandemic. They're wearing masks. They're socially distanced. The play is set in a sort of sick world and that is a metaphor for the division that Shakespeare creates in the play between certain factions and Macbeth sort of dividing the country in a way that is toxic and sick. So we've sort of connected the play to pandemic and to our moment of division in our country. So I feel really strongly about how Shakespeare reaches through time and speaks to us and teaches us about the dangers in the toxicity and the thickness of division and what I love is that he offers through the character of Malcolm a sort of healing voice a sort of Messianic cessation of time so that we can unite and that we can come together as a people and move forward in a progressive way. And so even though the play is a tragedy with sickness and witches in the occult and darkness, the message is hopeful. It is that there will come a time of healing and we must embrace that.

Gay: I think it's a wonderful example of how the Arts have agency. I mean, so often people talk about the Arts just being a reflection of society, but you just proved the point that the Arts actually engage in, and are active participants and are generating the perpetuation of these ideas, right? You're actively engaged in creating modern thought and it's one of the great things about the arts. The visual arts do the same thing, as well.

Allen: Can you guys tell me a little bit about how people at UNCP and outside of UNCP might be able to access these digital projects you guys are working on in case they want to check them out?

Bass: On the GPAC website, which is [www.uncp.edu/gpac](http://www.uncp.edu/gpac) we have what's called The Front Row Art Series. This is where we have curated all these virtual performances that we've been putting together. So, we'll be releasing both Ghost light and Macbeth on our website there and they'll be, at least for a time, available exclusively there. And we're doing digital ads, also, as I mentioned earlier to get people to come in and visit those. So just go to the GPAC website [www.uncp.edu/gpac](http://www.uncp.edu/gpac).

Allen: Thank you all so much for being with us today. I really appreciate it. Hopefully you'll be able to join us again in the future.

Allen: This podcast was edited by Ashley Allen and transcribed by Janet Gentes. The theme music was created by Riley Morton.

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