

THE BROAD VIEW

## The new abnormal and where we shouldn't zoom to

Once the cloud of Covid-19 lifts, let's get back to physically embracing real people and real things. **By Steve Dixon**

**M**ANY have enthused at, by turns, the ingenuity, innovation, inspiration and spirit of community that has emerged online during the current health crisis. Thanks to Zoom and other video conferencing platforms, we have been treated to the reassuring sight and interactive antics of rows of suddenly absent friends, families and colleagues. My wife Prue and I now link up every Saturday with two sites in the UK and one in New Zealand for a multi-time zone, two-hour quiz with our three daughters and grandchildren, one of our highlights of the week.

Meanwhile, the arts and entertainment community, of which I am a part, seized the potential immediately and launched a performance fiesta. Live Aid style celebrity marathons saluted frontline workers – serried rows of actors stared out grimly from their bedrooms performing serious plays, while musicians and singers conjoined on screen to joyously belt out rousing Broadway anthems. A notable local example was "Seasons of Love", a multi-country Southeast Asian collaboration including Singaporean stars Adrian Pang, Benjamin Chow, Mina Kaye, Hossan Leong and a dozen Musical Theatre alumni from my institution, LASALLE College of the Arts.

It is marvellous, of course, that the arts continue to find a way forward and brighten this extremely difficult period for us all. However, I would caution against being too eager to herald this digital innovation as part of a glorious "new normal". This is perhaps an unexpected point of view from an academic whose research expertise is new technology in the performing arts. But it is precisely because I have seen what technology in live theatre can really do, that virtual performances seem to me somewhat akin to nothing more or less than live television, which has been around for nearly a century.

What is new, and what should be celebrated, is the increased accessibility of making such collaborative work. It is now very inexpensive or even free to gather online and create live shows for the Internet with artistic partners across the globe. Such endeavours are enormous fun to be involved in. Their democratisation is a great thing and to be applauded.

I argue that such collaborations, as well as the televised recordings of major international productions that have gained huge popularity during the pandemic, are more of a medium unto themselves than any kind of substitute for live theatre. As an educator as well as a performance artist, it is also my firm belief that full-time online modes cannot replace a true undergradu-



Students of Lasalle College of the Arts during a short course on acting prior to the Covid-19 outbreak. PHOTO: BT FILE

ate experience on a vibrant city campus. The lessons we must draw from this crisis start right there – from a common understanding that this is indeed a crisis, with most of our virtual activity being a stopgap measure that makes the best of the situation, rather than something we should all get used to in the long term.

At LASALLE, we recently completed our academic year teaching out the last few weeks via home-based learning, and supporting students to submit all their assignments online. It has been draining and a challenge for such hands-on, practice-based creative arts programmes, but our digitally native students rose to the occasion tremendously.

Creative play emerged with small, delightful expressions via WhatsApp, memes and social media alongside assignments. Students began engaging more with artists and designers from around the world and drawing on myriad possibilities of the virtual realm. This year, our graduation showcase is quite a magnificent online event. Our digitalisation efforts have certainly

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been accelerated and we have learned a great deal about incorporating technology into our teaching and learning.

I will not pretend, however, that there isn't huge disappointment that we have had to cancel or else migrate to cyberspace almost 200 planned theatre and dance performances, music concerts, film screenings, fashion shows, and art and design exhibitions. The role of arts education institutions in talent-pipelining the cultural and creative industries as well as bringing together communities is fundamentally realised in these public and socialised events, and the importance of direct face-to-face engagement cannot be underscored enough. LASALLE will maintain a clear and fierce commitment to public events that realise this, alongside virtual experiences.

We have therefore asked all our graduating students to return if they are able in early 2021, all being well, or if not a little later. We will then stage a major physical exhibition. Concurrently, there will also be a series of live theatre, dance and music performances, where everyone can use their full bodies, not just their heads and shoulders, and thrill us with their power, live and unleashed, right there in front of you.

Of course, life, work, entertainment and education may all need to carry on as online experiences for a while. But I question and challenge the assumption that this "new normal" will be a definite, unassailable fact and is the only future.

I find strange this constant talk of "normal" when nothing at all is normal right now. This is all distinctly and absolutely abnormal, and I cannot understand why on earth any of us would wish to normalise it for our future. Personally, I'd like a return to normal as soon as possible and make mine the old version, please. Perhaps one of the most important lessons of the virus is the least obvious one. It is for us not to turn more and more to technology, but rather turn our backs on it for a while.

So, once the cloud of Covid-19 lifts, please join me in the fight to reject the "new normal" mindset and let's get back to physically embracing real people and real things. Let's experience the inimitable and intimate joys of live performance. Let's break out of the onscreen battery hen cages, reconnect with our whole bodies and stop zooming around just as heads. Let's return to some sane, sound and fundamental principles of life, art and education. Come on, let's all become proudly and defiantly normal again.

✉ Professor Steve Dixon is president, LASALLE College of the Arts