

## **Challenges of Online Theater Stage Managers in the Development of New Norms**

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### **Abstract**

This study examines the difficulties faced by stage managers for online theatre in the creation of new norms. The nation's creative arts industry has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic's health danger. The financial crisis's long-term consequences on the sector are quite complicated. This study's goal is to examine the framework of stage manager difficulties in online theatre staging and provide conclusions on how online theatre helps stage managers adjust to new norms. The study's findings demonstrate that stage managers have significant difficulties when it comes to online theatre staging because meetings can only be held virtually and training cannot be conducted physically.

### **Introduction**

The theatrical development hindered by the spread of COVID-19 has to some extent provided a new atmosphere in the staging of theatrical art. An art which was previously able to attract many theater fans has ceased to do so since the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic to Malaysia and has restricted theater fans from watching live stage performances.

The production division is amongst those affected by COVID-19 virus infection in managing theatrical productions due to its nature (Epstein, 2020). Due to the presence of physical contact during theater performances, production companies and art activists from various sectors were found to be at high risk of transmitting the virus. Many theater arts institutions, organizations and production companies around the world have closed, and various exhibitions, events and performances planned throughout the year have had to be canceled or postponed, beginning with the arrival of the epidemic in Malaysia.

The issue that needs to be addressed is the staging of online theater in the development of new norms. Theatrical staging during the pandemic is focused on the maintenance of guidelines and Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) in the industry. In compliance with these guidelines and Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) is prioritized and closely monitored to ensure that it is always regulated. Although online theater staging was introduced, the researchers found that from 2020, theater staging continued and was found to be increasing during the COVID-19 pandemic. Online theater staging presents a challenge to stage managers in introducing new norms in the theater industry.

The presence of the audience is important as a motivating factor, especially for the group of actors who play. Theater performances without the presence of an audience will not be perfect as said (Miles-Brown, 1994) in the book *Directing Drama: "Without the presence of the audience the purpose of the production is lost; because the purpose is the actor's reaction to the audience's response. Theater is a creative exchange that can clearly be observed in the laughter, silent absorption or applause of the audience. Also the quality of the performance itself is influenced by the audience's level of appreciation and attention."* The relationship between the actors and the audience in the theater is immediate. Immediate contact allows the actor to hear, see and feel the reaction of the audience while the audience when seeing the action of the actor, feel the impact and give an empathetic response. All these effects occur simultaneously. Immediate relationship makes the staging of the theater unique. A similar script, when performed every night, will produce different performances and the effects will also differ.

As such, one needs to understand that stage managers are different from the type of production manager who makes a presentation (Reid, 2001). Nevertheless, essentially a theater arts manager is the relationship between the main office with the actors as well as the production staff. The stage manager is basically overseeing matters related to human resources rather than overseeing technical matters. Therefore, a good stage manager must be efficient so that they can manage organizational problems that allow them to focus fully on human administration, i.e. performance artists and specialists. Arrangements include administrative groups that organize the planning of organizing work. The stage manager has 11 roles to carry out the responsibilities of the unincorporated division. In this way, in the world of staging, organizational directors are gathered to do the work of managing. However, stage managers should also do organizing work (Reid, 2001).

On the day of staging, the stage manager is also in charge. The stage manager is responsible for everything that happens on the day of staging. Being a stage manager requires a high level of stage management expertise. Stage management is essential to the success of a production. The stage manager is an administrative impact that ensures the theater management strategy runs smoothly. All stage tasks, such as exchange sets and props used on the day of staging, are under the management of the theater industry. Stage management is important because it is based on a complete understanding of the stage and the administration of staging according to the organization that operates it.

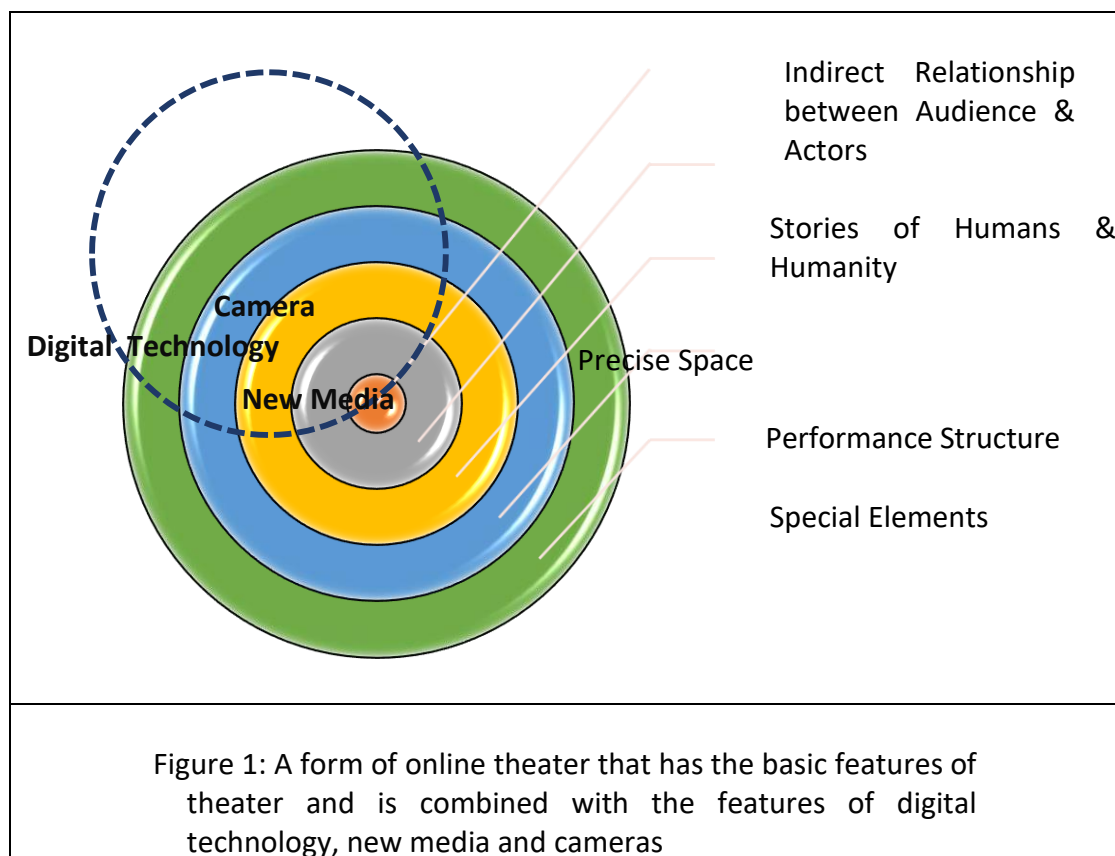
The stage manager is an important position in theatrical production. The job of the stage manager is to mediate between the director and the actors. Stage managers have a big job in taking care of artists and actors. The role of the stage manager is to control the training and

the cleanliness and safety of the training venue so as not to injure the actors. The safety of the actors at the rehearsal venue is the responsibility of the stage manager.

An introduction to the term online theater is felt to be necessary to justify the form of online theater so that it is better understood and various styles and forms of performance do not arise. This online theater refers to the adaptation of the following features namely starring a group of actors in a moderate number, the storytelling plot related to human and humanity that is "straight to the point" structure or style of storytelling more towards acting in the form of "narrative play 5", made in a special space such as a studio is not necessarily a big stage as long as needed, has the same element of admiration as theater but is supported by the use of other digital technologies such as "green screen" to replace the 3-dimensional background set, either presented through digital medium or video camera either live "live streaming" through digital medium or recorded, which is then edited and replayed using various online digital platforms such as Zoom, Facebook, YouTube Channel and others.

Online theater is a sub-genre in the development of new millennium theater. The "*Oppy and Professor Communities*" theater, under the direction of Fasyali Fadzly is the closest example of an online form of theater that is done in the form of recordings and "live streaming". Stage managers face various challenges in operating an online theater and it requires many parties to succeed such as crews to help, and there needs to be an audience as well as certain venues. In addition, the audience response was a bit less encouraging because the COVID-19 season directly we could not allow a large audience to enter the stage and it would have a profound effect as this theater needs spectators to enliven the atmosphere. The next challenge is related to the venue. At the beginning of COVID-19, we had to sit at home and theater performances were conducted online according to the new norm.

In an online theater performance, all of these basic elements are already available, only the feature of a direct relationship between the audience and the actor that does not occur as in a conventional theater performance. This is the most special feature that only exists in theater and makes the performance a theater. The presence of an audience on stage and watching a live performance is a necessary condition to make a performance fulfill the concept of a real theater.



This study uses theory (Y) from Douglas McGregor which is management theory. The researchers' focus is to apply this theory to the challenges of online stage managers in the development of new norms. The researchers see the effectiveness of theory (Y) to be applied in theatrical production.

A stage manager is someone who controls production that combines both technical and creative processes. The creation of a great stage manager who can manage staging events according to development theory and who understands and can digest the basic processes in stage management namely planning, execution, monitoring and evaluation is one that can be linked based on this theory.

Each component of this process should be included in a checklist and fully completed, taking into account the resource requirements and level of competency of the implementing employees. Based on the theory used as the reference of the study, it can be clearly seen that to be a stage manager is not an easy thing. This is because the stage manager theory shows a manager who needs to be in him in order to be able to manage a program or event more effectively. Stage managers need to cultivate a responsible attitude, where stage managers need to act fast in performing their duties.

The findings of the study based on 2 main aspects, namely the challenges faced in managing online theater and also the benefits gained by stage managers in online theater. Part of the findings of this study is to answer the research questions posed and to describe more clearly about the objectives studied. On research question one that is how the challenges as a stage manager in online theater staging have an overall aspect that will be formulated by involving

answers from informants and based on the second research question i.e. what are the benefits of online theater to stage managers in addressing the new norms.

The first aspect studied is about the challenges faced by stage managers in online theater staging according to the new norms. The main challenge of stage managers in handling online theater staging is that they face various risk problems and crises occur unexpectedly. According to this study, as many as 93 per cent of art activists and crews were once again affected by the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, this with 80 per cent almost or completely losing their source of income (Zaini, 2021). It is very challenging and the fact is, we are struggling with challenges that have never been experienced. Not only in our country, but the whole world is facing the same crisis (Desa, 2021).

The findings of the study obtained from the first informant stated a clear answer to this matter, he described the overall challenges of stage managers in the development of new norms and understanding from a general point of view which was also expressed by other informants. Through the results of the study of the second, in we make a project or theater staging that involves its implementation online, technical plays an important role, if this problem occurs, for example in terms of disconnected internet network or certain reasons that can occur during online theater performances takes place. The conclusion that can be made for the whole aspect is that the challenge of the online theater stage manager does not restrict the implementation of online theater. Thus, even the atmosphere of theatrical performances changed before the country was hit pandemic, but it did not stop the theater industry from being active because these artists were mostly creative and had a lot of ideas for performing theater.

The second aspect that was studied is about the benefits of online theater. The findings of this study found that online theater has its own benefits although there are constraints in the early stages of the introduction of online theater, but it is able to provide benefits by saving costs in terms of hiring actors, for training, venue rental and transportation costs to the venue which involved high cost. When it is done online, the cost can be reduced because the venue involves one's own home which makes it easier theater management. The second benefit is to be able to learn a new way compared to before having to act on stage and now actors perform in the comfort of their own homes. As art activists, we cannot remain silent and definitely think of alternatives. While somewhat complicating online theater, it is much easier than staging face to face with an audience.

Next, for the development of new norms, not looking the other way, the practice of new living norms in the context of the still contagious COVID-19 epidemic needs to be strengthened among the community and local population. Adherence to Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and physical detention rules, hygiene practices, wearing face masks as well as avoiding 3C practices (crowded places, confined spaces and close conversations) must be practiced at all times without compromise.

The final conclusion is the development of new norms, these new norms have been relevant in the psyche of artists since the country was hit by the COVID-19 pandemic (Misrani, 2021). This is because the new norm is to live in an environment of the still contagious COVID-19 epidemic and at the same time stage managers have to face any challenges in managing

online theater. Through the results of the study, researchers can identify the challenges faced by stage managers need to familiarize themselves with the new norms in performing theater performances online.

Stage managers face various challenges in operating an online theater and it requires many parties to succeed such as crew and audience. The next challenge is related to the venue. At the beginning of COVID-19, we had to sit at home and theater performances were conducted online according to the new norm. As the SOP's were eased restricted audience were allowed during performances but the response from the audience was less encouraging and this led to have profound effects as theater performances needed spectators to enliven the atmosphere.

Through the results of conversations from the two informants, financial difficulties were also faced by the performing arts industry as no spectators equates to no ticket sales to generate revenue, the actors were also reduced due to financial difficulties. The constraint faced by stage managers, if this pandemic continues in the future is that it will be nearly impossible to attract spectators to watch theatrical performances when it is done online. Undergoing theater training is also a major setback following the COVID-19 pandemic, as it is limited the movement of the actors and also limited practice time, as the actors are at home. In addition, theatrical performances also have problems in terms of self management.

This is because when everyone is at home, there is limitations to guidance and training becomes individualistic. Communication techniques are through the virtual world and dance moves for theatrical performances are also limited. The next impact is in terms of internet network problems, if one's internet network is unstable, it does not provide a good communication for theatrical performances. In relation to this, it also has a negative effect when stage managers are unable to apply knowledge in online theater staging because they cannot do onsite work and have no physical encounters.

An analysis of the findings was made to suggest the benefits of online theater based on the informants' point of view and theory. The analysis of the study conducted refers to the second research question. Based on the findings of the study, this theater performance brings benefits to the community. This is because, it is able to educate the community in technological skills and also can give an impression to the community that the use of digital media is actually easier and safer when the country is in a new norm. The use of this digital media has many benefits in online theater performances. This is because, this media platform is also important as a way to communicate. This makes us interact with each other without boundaries. Media platforms such as the internet are also easily accessible and considered a window to a new world. The existence of digital media further facilitates the communication process. Various information can be disseminated and obtained through it. This online theater show even though it is conducted online, income can be generated. This can be seen through online ticket sales. In order to attract more spectators, the theater managers need to be smart in promoting the staging through the production of good posters and good use of social media such as Facebook, YouTube. In fact, the best platform and can make it easier for people to buy tickets is a contributor to the revenue of these online theater performances.

The findings of the research is summarized in the table below.

Stage manager's challenge in online theater staging		
Training/Meeting	Technical	Financial
Training cannot be carried out physically	Unstable Internet connection	Actors had to be reduced because there was no provision.
Rehearsal theater performances are difficult to monitor.	-	The theater arts industry faced huge losses when the government was ordered to immediately close all sectors in the early stages of COVID-19.
Meetings are online only.	-	-

### Conclusion

Based on the entire study, a comprehensive analysis that has been conducted is related to the topic 'Challenges of Online Theater Stage Managers in the development of New Norms'. The first question for this study focuses on how the challenges as a stage manager in online theater staging while the breakdown for the second research question is what are the benefits of online theater to stage managers in addressing new norms and answered according to theme code and aspects. The stage manager's challenge was the first theme code used by the researcher to unravel the answer to the first question and the benefits of online theater was the theme code to answer the second question. Finally, the third theme code is the development of new norms. Overall, the results of the study answered the first research question which is in the early stages of knowledge about the challenges of stage managers.

Next, the second research question of what are the benefits of online theater to stage managers in addressing new norms has also been answered through the conclusion that stage manager theory can complete the process of planning, work organization, coordinating and job control to achieve goals and objectives effectively and efficiently. Stage managers are important to ensure that online theater staging events run smoothly and orderly in order to achieve the objectives and goals in management. This online theater as a whole has adapted to stage managers which has become a necessity to them in an environment of new norms based on technical requirements. For example, video recording has become the main function of theater activists in presenting theater online. Clearly, online theater is not an obstacle to continuing in the COVID-19 pandemic season. The development of new norms can give awareness to theater activists about the importance of technology and the need to increase knowledge and mastery of new knowledge, especially new media technology, screen technology, use of cameras, techniques and editing to ensure the sustainability of theater art. Most of the conclusions made have stressed a number of things such as the challenges of

stage managers in handling online theater performances and also the benefits to stage managers in line with the development of new norms.

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