

# Theatre Annual

A Journal of Theatre and Performance of the Americas



# THEATRE ANNUAL

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Cover Photo: Story Pirates perform their adaptation of *Pizza Revenge*, written by Lillie, age 10, Arkansas in the 2019 Changemakers benefit at Five Angels Theater in New York City. Photo by Hyphen Photography and courtesy of Story Pirates.

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# Editorial Foreword

Ann Folino White

Final preparations of this volume coincide with preparations for a new academic year. For many of us the apprehensions that accompany this return far exceed those that the phrase “first day jitters” once encapsulated. To what will we return? How do we return? Alongside such questions and dis-quiet, I have also observed and experienced flickers of hope. I do not think it is naïve. Rather, this hope signals belief in our collective power to answer these questions with actions that transform the academic and artistic institutions of which we are a part. I did not plan an issue centered on a particular phenomenon or concept. Yet the essays featured in this volume all examine theatrical projects undertaken in extremely difficult sociocultural contexts, while the authors’ pointed critiques and critical reflections provide lessons in the enterprise of hope.

Virginia Anderson’s essay, “Story Pirates Radio as a Document of America, 2020,” records the ways in which one group of theatre artists provided essential support to young people and their grown-ups throughout the devastating social, political, and ecological events of the past year. Story Pirates, like many theatre companies, was compelled to find ways to continue to serve its audiences despite the seeming impossibility of live theatre during the Covid-19 pandemic. Anderson shows us the significance of these artists’ creativity put in service of their mission to “celebrate the words and ideas of young people” (pg.8). Story Pirates Radio offered much needed imaginative engagement as well as mitigation of the unrelenting isolation wrought by the global health crisis. Even more, it also actively produced *communitas*. Combining interviews with Story Pirates creative director and Story Pirates Radio host Lee Overtree, performance analyses of this improvised digital show, and partici-pant observations as a grown-up audience regular, Anderson parses how Story Pirates Radio realized, what Jill Dolan has identified as, the utopian in performance.

The role of theatrical performance in desperate circumstances is also the subject of Seth Wilson’s essay, “‘There’s Something in That Girl More Than Woman’: An Ideological Reading of the British Garrison’s Performance of *The Recruiting Officer*, Annapolis-Royal, 1733.” Wilson keys in readers to the importance of performance to soldiers who were in the absence of material support and isolated from their homeland in the harsh environs of colonial Nova Scotia. Likewise, Wilson attends to the stakes of performance for the British imperial project. Through deep contextualization of the social and political circumstances under which troops garrisoned at Annapolis-Royal staged Farquhar’s romantic comedy, Wilson first illuminates *The Recruiting Officer’s* particular usefulness in promulgating patriarchal gender ideology. Then, he theorizes the transformative dynamics of this all-male performance of an otherwise conventional comedy. Wilson explicates how the plot and sexual titillation, which originally hinges on a female performance of a breeches role, became an effort to shore up the British masculine prerogative of empire building, while limiting the homoerot-icism within military installations to the stage.

Bryan M. Vandevender examines the representational violence committed by staging the historical United States as a racial utopia for late-twentieth-century audiences in “Spinning the American Racial Narrative: Nicholas Hytner’s *Carousel* of Imagined Progress.” Vandevender’s analysis of the problematic colorblind casting in the 1994 Broadway revival of *Carousel* troubles the idea that because race is not explicitly integral to the storyline, it is not germane to the history the musical represents—a notion that continues to prop up a white musical theatre repertoire. Despite the director’s intention to use the past to project

the possibility of a future without racism to audiences grappling with anti-Black violence, Vandevender elaborates the ways in which the 1994 revival erased the history of white supremacy in the United States. In doing so, Vandevender catalogues the considerations vital to casting canonical musicals in ways that sincerely and actively, rather than superficially, resist whiteness—considerations that support the demands made in “We See You, White American Theater.”

The final piece in this volume, by Claire Syler, continues this conversation. Syler provides guidance to white theatre and performance studies faculty for “how to see, trace, and try to resist the whiteness embedded” in academic institutions and theatrical practices in the United States (pg.56). Syler’s essay, “Field Work: Academic Relationships with Whiteness,” is both a personal reflection and an intricate examination of the social, geographic, political, and historical dimensions of white supremacy specific to the University of Missouri, where she works and lives. Syler renders her ethnography through the lens of critical whiteness studies to expose the racist implications of mundane campus programming and life, as well as the space occupied by the university. Syler, likewise, critically examines the spaces and positions she occupies, offering two examples of the work she has undertaken as a theatre scholar/teacher/artist to reckon with white supremacy in theatre training. It is the very situatedness of Syler’s experience that renders its crucial significance for theatre scholars and artists working in higher education throughout the United States.

In conclusion, I wish to thank all of those who worked on this volume. Thank you to Book Review Editor Daniel Ciba and the authors of the reviews for providing a remarkable section rich in scholarship that decenters whiteness, patriarchy, and heteronormativity in subject matter, methodologies, narrative techniques, and critical perspectives. Thank you to Managing Editor Laurie J. Wolf for patiently fielding my many questions and for her daily labors to maintain Theatre Annual. To the editorial board and anonymous readers, the care you have taken in reviewing the scholarship included in this volume, as well as that which does not appear here, exemplifies genuine support and collegiality. Many thanks to Editorial Assistant Emily Yates for being a sounding board for my ideas, for her cleared-eyed edits, and for her kindness. Thank you to Bryan M. Vandevender, Claire Syler, Seth Wilson, and Virginia Anderson for the opportunity to edit your essays; your scholarship is invigorating—much like the open and committed exchanges we enjoyed in preparing them for publication. To all of you, thank you for the hope kindling collaborations.

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Michigan State University occupies the ancestral, traditional, and contemporary Lands of the Anishinaabeg—Three Fires Confederacy of Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi peoples. The University resides on Land ceded in the 1819 Treaty of Saginaw.

## *Story Pirates Radio* as a Document of America, 2020

Virginia Anderson

“Ahem. Ahem. Is this thing on? How does this work? I’m doing a radio show? *Story Pirates Radio*? I don’t know—what is even radio? I’m not sure—is it like a podcast? Is it something else? I don’t know!”<sup>1</sup> The “something else” creative director and show host Lee Overtree pondered on March 23, 2020 in the first performance of *Story Pirates Radio* represents the extraordinary possibility of live theatre in the face of the burgeoning COVID-19 pandemic. Over the course of six historic months, when theatre companies around the world faced immeasurable losses, the show abetted the company’s growth. In modeling audience inclusivity, it also engendered the *communitas* and hope promised by Jill Dolan’s exploration of utopia in performance.

Story Pirates is a renowned group of comedians, musicians, and educators perhaps best known for an award-winning and popular podcast which turns original stories written by kids into sketch comedy and songs.<sup>2</sup> Born from the undergraduate theatre organization Griffin’s Tale at Northwestern University, Story Pirates was launched by a group of 12 and incorporated in 2004. It grew to employ hundreds of performers to work with schools across the country, particularly in Los Angeles and New York City, where it became the resident theater company at The Drama Book Shop. With the promotion of kids’ words and ideas at its core, Story Pirates evolved into a national transmedia arts and education organization at the peak of its live theatre endeavors just as the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Days away from presenting the largest productions in its history, Story Pirates, like so many theater companies, was forced to postpone indefinitely and adapt to a landscape no longer safe for crowds to gather or for performers to project their voices and sing.

Within a week of the shutdown, *Story Pirates Radio*, an hour-long improvised “radio” show, launched; it was hosted by Overtree and featured numerous special guests. The show aired nearly every day from March 23, 2020 through September 4, 2020. While it wasn’t exactly theatre, it wasn’t exactly *not* theatre; it thrived within this liminal space by embracing the ephemerality of its liveness. It was rendered extraordinary during this pivotal period when conventional theatre was impossible through the nearly constant reminders of the presence and influential reactions of its listening audience, creating “moments of liminal clarity and communion, fleeting, briefly transcendent bits of profound human feeling and connection” that

Dolan describes, moments that arose “from alchemy between performers and spectators and their mutual confrontation with a historical present that lets them imagine a different, putatively better future.”<sup>3</sup> In these ways, *Story Pirates Radio* documented the experiences, anxieties, and resilience of young people and “their grownups” during an historic and tumultuous time.

The title of this essay is an homage to Mark Hunter’s piece, “Marc Blitzstein’s ‘The Cradle Will Rock’ as a Document of America, 1937,” which models how a remarkable performance produced in “extraordinary circumstances” may encapsulate a pivotal time in history.<sup>4</sup> Addressing Blitzstein’s experimentation with form, Hunter insists, “Whatever its vitality as a work of art, [ . . . ] as a symbol of activity in America, 1937, this musical play and its creator deserve the historian’s attention.”<sup>5</sup> So functions *Story Pirates Radio*, I argue, as a document of the same country 83 years later.<sup>6</sup> Through its creation of an interactive listening community, young people navigated a rapidly changing world with the help of its affirming host and cast of characters. Set against the backdrop of not only the COVID-19 pandemic, but major cultural events including the devastating wildfires in California and Black Lives Matter protests, *Story Pirates Radio* captured what it was like for its young audience to make sense of the pandemic, to unexpectedly transition to remote learning, and to miss being with teachers, family, and friends. It also documented what it was like simply to be a kid during this time: to lose family pets, to fight with siblings, and to experience a birthday in quarantine. The sharing of these experiences engendered utopian performatives, “moments in which audiences feel themselves allied with each other, and with a broader, more capacious sense of a public, in which social discourse articulates the possible, rather than the insurmountable obstacles to human potential.”<sup>7</sup>

With Dolan’s framework as a guide, this essay begins by tracing the rapid development of *Story Pirates Radio* in the wake of indefinite postponement of the company’s live theatre shows and in-school programming. It then traces the show’s experimentation with form and the *communitas* engendered by shared experiences of listeners (and performers) facing challenges associated with learning and working from home. The Black Lives Matter protests following the murder of George Floyd provide a case study for how *Story Pirates Radio* and its audience confronted this period in history together. It concludes by exploring the significance of a shared period of reflection, community awareness, and closure as the show transitioned from nearly daily congregation as routine was re-established, as kids returned to school, and as *Story Pirates* began to place its focus on other emergent—digital—offerings. Through its audience roll call, improvisational games based on listener suggestions, recurrent guests, and direct confrontation of the lived realities of its audience over nearly six months, *Story Pirates Radio* engendered strength and *communitas* within its young audience, offering



hope for a better future.

### ***Communitas for Creators Stuck at Home***

In March 2020, the Story Pirates were in the throes of rehearsal for the largest philanthroproductions of the year for the company's nonprofit arm, Story Pirates Changemakers. Philanthroproductions, as I have previously defined, are professionally-produced, fully mounted performance events developed exclusively to raise money for nonprofit services. Such events have three defining components: philanthropy, largely original production elements presented with artistic integrity, and the presence of both ideological and artistic spines.<sup>8</sup> Changemakers brings arts and literacy programs to underserved schools,<sup>9</sup> homeless shelters, hospitals, and refugee centers. Like its umbrella organization, it strives "to celebrate the words and ideas of young people and to create confident, literate students equipped with a variety of tools for written, verbal, and artistic self-expression."<sup>10</sup> Changemakers' mission is embodied through the Story Pirates' philanthroproduction, as stories written by kids are at the heart of each adaptation.

The year's first Changemakers' benefits were scheduled for March 15, 2020 at New York University's 850-seat Skirball Center and May 3 at The Wiltern, an 1850-seat theater in Los Angeles. The performances were promoted as "our biggest shows of the year. [. . . Past] years have included cameos by Conan O'Brien, Billy Eichner, Kristen Schaal, John Oliver, and more."<sup>11</sup> The original story behind each adaptation was the focus of the performance, with projections featuring the story's title as well as the author's name, age, and hometown in earlier iterations (figure 1). The New York benefit had sold out and the Los Angeles event was well on its way to a similar achievement. As headlines about COVID-19 grew in frequency, however, the Centers for Disease Control advised against large gatherings and nonessential travel.<sup>12</sup>

Overtree recalled how the atmosphere changed: "All of a sudden we were just all home."<sup>13</sup> The postponed benefit was just the beginning. "Ninety percent of the stuff that we were doing was in-school creative writing workshops and shows at schools. And when that went away for us I felt like there was something that we could bring to kids and families to help them fill their days at home."<sup>14</sup>

Overtree was not alone in thinking, "I need to reach out to our audience in some way."<sup>15</sup> His team moved quickly. Katie Kerins, Social Media Director for Story Pirates, recalls a strong sense of purpose: "The day after we had to cancel our NYC benefit, Lee and I were both researching how to do an interactive radio broadcast [affordably] as a non-tech company [. . .] while still protecting families' privacies."<sup>16</sup>

Figure 1. Story Pirates perform their adaptation of *The Giraffe Didn't Know*, written by Jonah, age 5, of Pennsylvania, in the 2019 Changemakers benefit at Five Angels Theater in New York City.



Photo by Hyphen Photography and courtesy of Story Pirates.

Brandon York, who had previously helped Story Pirates to stream video, found a way to broadcast to YouTube with a graphic still instead of video. Development Associate Andrew Miller realized after much experimentation that a service using an online form could show Overtree the listeners' typed comments without publicly displaying them if Kerins could embed it within the Story Pirates website (figure 2). Kerins remembers, "I think we launched within three days."<sup>17</sup>

With the success of not only the podcast, but a middle-grade (readers ages 8-12) book series through Random House and albums in addition to its live shows, Story Pirates had launched a subscription service, "Creator Club," in November 2019. Among numerous perks, membership in the "Creator Club" granted pre-sale access to live shows and "more special surprises all year long."<sup>18</sup> Little did anyone, audiences and Story Pirates alike, know what those surprises would entail over the year ahead. In a March 19, 2020 email with the subject line "New Learning Tools for Creators Stuck at Home," members were notified of a suite of digital content, including the first mention of *Story Pirates Radio*.<sup>19</sup>

On March 23, 2020, one week after the Changemakers' benefit was to have occurred, Story Pirates launched an hour-long daily improvised "radio" show. Introducing the first show, in a move exemplifying the company's transmedia reach,<sup>20</sup> Overtree announced that in solidarity with kids and grownups around the world, the Story Pirates were shutting themselves in their rooms on the Title Wave (the fictional flying ship that transports the Story Pirates on the podcast). Following a signature musical introduction

written and recorded by Jack Mitchell, Overtree invited his listeners to write in the box “below the radio” (“with their grown-up’s permission or have their grown up write in for them”) with their first name, where they are calling from, and what they are up to or how they are feeling. Overtree then read each listener name and comment over the air as “roll call,” responding to each one before announcing the next.<sup>21</sup>

The screenshot displays a promotional banner for Story Pirates Radio. The banner text reads: "Tune into Story Pirates Radio every Saturday and Sunday at 11am ET for fan-favorite songs, play-at-home games, and hilarious bits!". Below this, it says "NEXT EPISODE" and shows a video player thumbnail for "Story Pirates Radio 1/10/21" with a "Watch on YouTube" button. Underneath the video player, there are instructions: "Get your comments in early below or scroll down to catch up on all of the past episodes!" and "Hey grown-up! Want to submit a comment for Story Pirates Radio? Fill out the form below. This form should only be filled out by a parent or guardian over the age of 18. To view our privacy policy, click here. Thank!"

The form itself is titled "Submit your comment!" and contains two input fields: "Kid(s)' First Name(s)" and "Write your comment here!". A "Submit" button is located at the bottom of the form. At the very bottom of the form area, there is a small link: "Never submit passwords through this form. Report a problem here."

Figure 2. A screenshot of the “radio” and form through which listeners would submit comments to be read on air.

Roll call became an essential part of each show, as did Overtree’s own upbeat commentary in this prelude, which sometimes lasted well over twenty minutes of the hour-long show.<sup>22</sup> As the format grew familiar to the show’s host and listeners, so too did the names of the listeners who wrote in. The significance of roll call in *Story Pirates Radio* must not be underestimated, both for its documentation of life in the United States for young people during the COVID-19 pandemic and for its generation of *communitas*, “moments [. . .] in which audiences or participants feel themselves become part of the whole in an organic, nearly spiritual way; spectators’ individuality becomes finely attuned to those around them, and a cohesive if fleeting feeling of belonging to the group bathes the audience.”<sup>23</sup> While Dolan may have imagined a temporary community of a few hours, her assessment amplifies the *communitas* spanning six months of *Story Pirates Radio*. Unlike pre-pandemic theatrical performances, listeners remembered one another

and their ideas, referencing them across shows.

Separated from the routines and locations that had previously defined their days, listeners found reflection, empathy, and joy within the shared experience of their listening community. It didn't take long for a back channel of communication to begin, one mediated by Overtree as listeners responded to one another, an occurrence that left even the host in awe. "The conversation evolved between people," he recalled, ranging from book and movie recommendations to birthday wishes to condolences when family pets passed away.<sup>24</sup> Overtree reflected on this phenomenon: "I think the acknowledgement, the realization that there is a world beyond your world is really profound. And I think that's what happens when kids [on *Story Pirates Radio*] talk to each other and can imagine somewhere else."<sup>25</sup>

Across geographic space, *Story Pirates Radio* brought its audience experientially together for an hour each day. As listeners patiently waited for their turn to be recognized through roll call, they grew invested in one another's lives and their imagined shared future. They collaborated on creative ventures through the show, such as an intergalactic music festival collectively devised over several shows during May 2020.<sup>26</sup> Advertised in a poster hand-drawn by a listener (figure 3), this imagined festival—one of shared creation, live music and shoulder to shoulder crowds—represents the imagined better world Dolan describes.



Figure 3. A poster for an imagined intergalactic space festival, drawn by a regular listener and featuring the names of over 50 bands contributed by the *Story Pirates Radio* audience.

Photo courtesy of *Story Pirates*.

Between songs from the Story Pirates music catalog, which were themselves based on stories written by kids,<sup>27</sup> Overtree bantered and played games with his guests, from core company members who appeared as their podcast personas to outrageous characters such as: Shawny Knocks, a celebrated delivery person voiced by Nick Kanellis, who announced the delivery of boxes containing items suggested by listeners (i.e. “a celebrity alien famous for transforming into pigs,” “a goat and it’s going to escape from the box and go in the bathroom and eat my towels”),<sup>28</sup> and Morphfriend (also Kanellis), a robot on an introspective journey that could transform into anything suggested by the listeners. Listener contributions engendered raucous fun that sometimes mirrored the world from which they wrote. For example, Belinda the Bird, an avian pop star voiced by Jamie Watson, improvised songs; during one appearance, she made up theme songs for television shows. Introducing one suggestion, Overtree observed, “This one is ripped from the headlines. I hope you’re ready to get into it about the issues of the day. This is from Layla of New York, and Layla’s TV show is called *A Girl and her Mom’s Adventure with Remote Online Learning*.”<sup>29</sup> Belinda replied, “Fantastic. I love that—it’s very of the now,” then she launched into a jaunty riff:

When you’re stuck at home, but you’ve still gotta learn  
 It’s remote learning!  
 You’re stuck at home with your mom on a journey  
 It’s remote learning!  
 Get your iPad, get your laptop, we’re gonna get real smart.  
 It’s a girl and her mom on a journey of... remote learning!

“Wow!” Overtree reacted, “That was incredible! It makes remote online learning adventures actually sound like a fun thing you’d want to do!” “It can be fun, you know?” Belinda replied. Validating the mundane one moment, inexplicably sad days another, Overtree and special guests also burst with excitement the next, celebrating such news as birthdays, lost teeth, riding a bike without training wheels, and numerous updates concerning dogs and cats, often newly fostered or adopted.<sup>30</sup>

Overtree’s relationship with the listening adults proved just as meaningful and established another layer of *communitas*. He congratulated them on tackling home haircuts and honored the Herculean efforts of teachers who were abruptly forced to tackle online education. Story Pirates Associate Artistic Director and podcast co-host, Peter McNerney, frequently referenced his “imaginary children, the Space Scamps,” who could sometimes be heard “in his room on the ship” with him, representing the reality faced by so many adults who found themselves juggling their careers with fulltime childcare

and remote learning. Overtree followed up one such visit, “grownups are working so hard right now to still do their jobs and be a parent and cook food and give kids something to do. So if you’re one of those kids, and you know a grownup that’s been doing that and working so hard, give them a pat on the back today. Say, ‘Hey, good job.’ It goes a long way. It really does. You’d be surprised.”<sup>31</sup> The host’s bright energy fueled each show but such a performance wasn’t always easy (figure 4). Adults could empathize with the audible fatigue that sometimes subtly penetrated Overtree’s delivery: “Go into this week with joy and silliness,” he wrapped one Monday show, “and you know, be a little punchy at times if you need to! Thanks to all of our listeners for writing in such funny things today and making me laugh.”<sup>32</sup> The stress was real for the host. Overtree lives near a hospital and he recalled how “at night you would just hear so many sirens [. . .] and it just felt like the world was collapsing every day. There would be some piece of news of things getting worse, but every morning I had to get on the air, even if I wasn’t feeling right, I had to force myself to be positive, which really worked and actually made me more positive about it all.”<sup>33</sup> Still, he leveled with his listeners.



Figure 4. Lee Overtree broadcasting Story Pirates Radio from his home. Photo courtesy of Lee Overtree.

Five months into the pandemic, isolation was taking its toll. Zeda and Greta from Rochester, NY wrote into the roll call, “I miss school.” “I feel you, my friends,” Overtree affirmed. They wrote into roll call again a few minutes later, insisting, “I *really* miss school!” Overtree, seeming to recognize how such sentiments permeated his listening community, addressed everyone:

My friends, we are in a challenging moment with school. I know that a lot of you are going back to school. Some of you don't even know how you're going back to school yet. Some of you are going back digitally. Some of you are going a little in person, a lot in person. It is just a confusing time—for kids and grownups right now [. . .]. It can be easy to forget to breathe. Especially when you're like 'What's going on with school? I miss it!' Just keep breathing. We'll get through this together.<sup>34</sup>

The active presence and contributions of the audience not only affected performance content, as per common conventions of improvisational theater, but opened extended and supportive dialogue with the host and within the community itself as they navigated challenges in the world beyond their walls.

### **Hero-Sized Problems**

Of course, COVID-19 was far from the only cultural event of deep significance during this period. Through the words of its listeners and the voice of its host, *Story Pirates Radio* chronicled hurricanes and Pride Month, as well as a momentous anti-discrimination Supreme Court decision and the launch of the first commercially operated Space X rocket. Perhaps no historical event was better documented by *Story Pirates Radio* than the Black Lives Matter protests that occurred across the nation following the murder of George Floyd during a police arrest on May 25, 2020. The vast majority of the show's content concerning Black Lives Matter came through the submissions of its young listeners, recognized and mediated by Overtree. Through his voice, affirmation, and candor, he enabled young members of the audience to speak with one another with hope and validation. As illustrated through the examples below, such occurrences made “palpable an affective vision of how the world might be better, were the goals of social justice achieved,” as Dolan observed.<sup>35</sup> These moments provided comfort, yes, but they also challenged listeners to confront the reality of what had happened and to consider their roles in the creation of a better, more just world.

A week into the nation-wide protests in response to Floyd's murder,<sup>36</sup> on June 1, 2020, Lily, a regular listener, wrote into roll call with concern, “I don't know what to do or say except that I appreciate everyone here listening and their awesome ideas. And just to stay loving toward each other because that's what's going to help it: if we all gain understanding and love with each other.”<sup>37</sup> The next day, Overtree announced, “My friends, I want to start out today's show by saying that today feels a little different. Every

day recently feels a little different but today even more so. The Story Pirates are blacking out our channels today in honor of #BlackoutTuesday in order to give more focus to the protests that are happening around our country. Today's show is going to be pretty much a normal show, but I wanted to give grownups a heads-up."<sup>38</sup> Between requests for Lego challenges and favorite songs, several listeners shared bare emotion during roll call. Overtree read a simple comment from Clara and Thea: "We're in Minneapolis and it's scary' followed by several frowny faces." He paused before responding, "I can bet that it *is* scary to be in Minneapolis. It's one of the places where there are a lot of protests going on and I bet that it is not always...um...a happy scene...Sometimes people are so upset that they have to get out into the streets and make some noise. I'm sorry that it's scary for you. I know that it is difficult to be there and thank you for letting us know how you're feeling this morning." Another regular listener wrote in response: "We are so glad you are talking about this...We live in St. Paul Minnesota. The protests are scary but we want justice for George Floyd." Overtree thanked her, "I'm super proud of you, Helen Helen Watermelon, for being there and standing up for what you believe in."

Celeste's submission during this roll call was perhaps the most poignant, as was Overtree's affirmation of her experience:

Celeste says 'I'm scared, too. I can hear helicopters and sirens here in DC. I'm going to make a tent made out of pillows so I can only hear *Story Pirates Radio*.' That sounds like a good idea. Yeah, if you're in a big city you might be hearing helicopters at night, and that can be kind of scary. I like your idea, Celeste. This tent out of pillows—create a fortress for yourself out of pillows, get inside there, get as cozy as you can. Surround yourself with the people that you love and the things that you love and if that's *Story Pirates Radio*, that's great and if it's something else, that's great, too. We need you to feel safe and cozy and loved.

In the show's final ten minutes, prompted by a submission from Jane and Bryn in which they say that their heroes "help end racism and violence," Overtree directed listeners to the Story Pirates' website to engage with the "Hero Kit" in which, "a hero doesn't have to be the kind of hero that you see in a movie or on a television or in a comic book. It doesn't have to be fighting intergalactic aliens [. . .]. A hero has to solve a hero-sized problem, that's what we call it. And there are hero-sized problems in today's world. And one of those hero-sized problems is racism. And we can all be anti-racist heroes." The company postponed the release of the next, highly anticipat-



ed podcast episode and instead released a song and interview that spoke to the moment. Additionally, they posted a new “Story Spark” writing prompt “that might help kids think and write about what’s going on right now,” and provided resources to support Black Lives Matter for parents, children, and educators.<sup>39</sup> Over the week that followed, listeners wrote into roll call with their appreciation for these conversations on *Story Pirates Radio*, and when this regular congregation drew to a close three months later, the ways in which the show had addressed this cultural moment were cited by kids and “their grown-ups” as especially meaningful.

The distinct power of kindness was amplified during the tumultuous times captured by *Story Pirates Radio*. Overtree clarifies:

I think there’s a big difference between kindness and politeness and I’m kind of glad that we don’t live in a polite time, because there are a lot of things we need to be direct about, both in terms of the failings of our leaders and the ways that we can do better ourselves. My philosophy is that you can say anything to a kid, as long as you’re being emotionally honest about it. So often we try to talk to kids about things and we try to hide the way it feels because we think we’ll protect them somehow [. . .]. It’s like lying about the impact of the way things are. Kindness is a way of saying, no matter how you feel, we’re still going to take care of each other and you’re still going to be taken care of, no matter what’s happening and how bad things get.<sup>40</sup>

This approach helped children and their caregivers to tackle challenges without dismissing them, prioritizing social justice as central to the achievement of a better future. From the show’s beginning, Overtree encouraged *Story Pirates Radio* listeners to “stay creative and stay kind” at the end of each show, a signature mantra that helped them to navigate a remarkable time in history, a time that felt decidedly *unkind*.<sup>41</sup>

### “Stay Creative and Stay Kind”

For nearly six months in 2020, *Story Pirates Radio* hosted a unique and sustained live congregation for its young audiences. It aired every day of the week for two months before moving to Monday through Friday performances on May 29; the schedule was maintained until the commencement of the 2020–21 school year. “The radio during that time was such a moment of being present and connected,” Overtree recalled, “but I knew when we shifted [to weekends only beginning in September] that we had to do it.”<sup>42</sup> Even though the shows may still be accessed on YouTube, the liveness of

their creation with their original audience was ephemeral, something that enabled *communitas*: “in the utopian performative’s constitution lies the inevitability of its disappearance; its efficacy is premised on its fleetingness [. . .]. For however brief a moment, we felt something of [. . .] what humanism could really mean.”<sup>43</sup> *Story Pirates Radio* engendered Dolan’s utopian vision, forging connection within isolation through its live performance. Just as listeners envisioned a world in which that very isolation would come to an end, it was that isolation that made *Story Pirates Radio* possible.

During the final show of this period, on September 4, Overtree reflected on what *Story Pirates Radio* had achieved, the evolution of the show, and what he had learned: “What I didn’t realize *Story Pirates* was about as much was the ‘stay kind’ part [. . .]. I don’t know why I started doing this radio show. I don’t know why I thought it was a great idea, but it was, and it taught me so much about community.”<sup>44</sup> Roll call was flooded with expressions of gratitude from kids and their grown-ups as they shared what *Story Pirates Radio* had done for their families: “We feel like you and the gang are part of our family and a huge part of the boys’ childhood through a weird, tough time in history,” “You’ve provided consistency, laughter, a place to discuss complex feelings and more importantly, a feeling of togetherness for all of our families,” “We have spent more time with you and the *Story Pirates* than anyone else this spring and summer.”<sup>45</sup> Even as the ephemeral nature of *Story Pirates Radio* became clear, there was forward momentum. Listeners shared news about the upcoming school year and Overtree promoted the upcoming weekend editions of the show.

Over the days that followed, the lights were brought up on the *Story Pirates Radio* audience. On September 7, 2020, listeners who had submitted photos and videos received an email from the *Story Pirates* with a link to a special video yearbook. For the first time, members of the *Story Pirates Radio* audience could *see* one another, and they straddled the footlights. Individually, each photo or video served as a performer’s bow, acknowledging participation in what had been created. Taken together, they allowed the radio audience to bear witness to the impact of the show on others in the same space. The visual yearbook provided closure on a remarkable experience of dependable structure and creative community.

Weekend editions of the show continued to document the world that its young listeners were navigating: wildfires in California and Oregon, the death of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg, the United States presidential election and—in a remarkable moment that took place live during the show—the Associated Press’ declaration that Joe Biden had indeed won, the storming of the United States Capitol, and Biden’s inauguration.

Coming full circle, on January 14, 2021, the 2020 *Story Pirates Changemakers’* benefit was officially cancelled by the venues and all tickets

were refunded. In the email announcing the cancellation, the Story Pirates acknowledged, “we know that families are spending more time at home right now, and we wanted to offer you free access to a virtual event while you wait.” Ticket holders were directed to a flush online Creator Club and programming that included live improv shows (via Zoom) called *The Story Creation Zone*, afterschool online Creator Camp with teaching artists, and a “Backstage Pass” Zoom event with Overtree and a cohost for “games, musical performances, and some big secrets about what’s to come on the podcast.”<sup>46</sup>

This announcement represents a pivot to digital programming that many theater companies made or considered in order to survive the pandemic, offering a roadmap for how to navigate the circumstances decimating the arts.<sup>47</sup> Story Pirates may have succeeded where other companies failed because it created myriad opportunities for audience engagement across networks, embracing what Sarah Bay-Cheng describes as “the processes by which a performance constitutes, mediates, and is mediated by networks of digital exchange.”<sup>48</sup> Within each new digital venue for Story Pirates performance, this exchange occurs not only between artist and consumer, but among audience members. *Story Pirates Radio* catalyzed a small transmedia empire in which each program existed independently, yet augmented the others through “dynamic networks of digital exchanges.”<sup>49</sup>

Overtree acknowledged the company’s movement closer to (the inexact label of) a media company while emphasizing the prominence of live theater within the company’s identity:

We shifted our focus [in March 2020] mostly because ninety percent of our revenue as a company was coming from in-school performances and workshops, and that all fell apart overnight. We were forced, like so many companies were. How are we going to continue paying people? What do we do? We felt really lucky that we already had some tools [the subscription-based Creator Club] that we were slow walking...and we were able to shift all our focus there. I think we shifted a little bit further away from an identity where we could call ourselves a theater company. Now theater is a thing we do. And it’s where our roots are. We’ll always, in some ways, be a theater company, but we’re so much more now.<sup>50</sup>

As Story Pirates continues to expand its transmedia offerings, its foundations as a theatre company grow ever more apparent alongside its guiding philosophy dedicated to elevating kids’ ideas, experiences, and creativity. Its rich history of educational programming and performance, including fifteen

years as resident theatre company for the storied Drama Book Shop, warrants a place in the recorded history of American theatre in the twenty-first century, especially for how it reflected—and departed from—the experiences of so many performing arts organizations in 2020.

Just as Hunter argues that *The Cradle Will Rock* “will stand as a document of American life in the depression era,” so, too, will recordings of *Story Pirates Radio* provide an archive of the COVID-pandemic in the United States. The show documents young people’s perspectives and their experiences, how artists and audiences answered calls to action, and the navigation of crisis for a generation of parents, caregivers, and teachers. Hunter further asserts that “For its creation Marc Blitzstein will be remembered as one of those artists who chose not merely to contemplate social change but to effect it.”<sup>51</sup> Such is the case of Overtree, who led a small but determined team to launch *Story Pirates Radio* by drawing on the company’s theatrical roots and philosophical mission. The continuous acknowledgement of the feelings and experiences of the listening audience by its host was as essential to *Story Pirates Radio* as were the professional actors and musicians who performed improvisational comedy. Through this synergy, *Story Pirates Radio* created an experience far closer to theatre than the myriad Zoom performances and audio recordings made without an audience and consumed in isolation.

Dolan ends *Utopia in Performance* by asking what *communitas* and the utopian performative *do*, offering that perhaps they “create the *condition* for action; they pave a certain kind of way, prepare people for the choices they might make in other aspects of their lives.”<sup>52</sup> *Story Pirates Radio* created the very conditions for action Dolan describes by growing a multivalent network of emotional, social, and creative connections among its host, guests, and audience members. It encouraged participants to work toward the utopian world they imagined, together navigating childhood, adolescence, and yes, adulthood. During this remarkable time in history, through the alchemy of live performance, Overtree and the audiences of *Story Pirates Radio* doggedly envisioned—and created—a better world governed by creativity and kindness.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Story Pirates, “Story Pirates Radio 3/23/20,” March 23, 2020, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MRRMUe4Skgc>, 0:01

<sup>2</sup>The Story Pirates Podcast has been downloaded over 35 million times and has won numerous awards, including the 2020 iHeartRadio award for Best Kids and Family Podcast and the 2020 Webby Award in the podcast category for Family & Kids.

<sup>3</sup>Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2005), 168.

<sup>4</sup>John Hunter, “Marc Blitzstein’s ‘The Cradle will Rock’ as a Document of America, 1937,” *American Quarterly*, 18, no. 2 (1966): 227–233.

<sup>5</sup>Hunter, 227.

<sup>6</sup>*Story Pirates Radio* has a notable forerunner that similarly documented the experiences of young people in the United States. *Kids America*, a nationally syndicated public radio program, aired 1984–1987, depended on the contributions of listeners who would call in to play games with recurring characters. *Kids America* documented daily concerns of its young listeners as well as their confusion and anxiety during such disasters as the Challenger space shuttle explosion and the explosion at Chernobyl nuclear reactor. Many episodes have been preserved through the archive for New York Public Radio.

<sup>7</sup>Dolan, *Utopia in Performance*, 2.

<sup>8</sup>See Virginia Anderson, “Choreographing a Cause: Broadway Bares as Philanthroproduction and Embodied Index to Changing Attitudes Toward HIV/AIDS,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Theater*, ed. Nadine George-Graves (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2015), 923.

<sup>9</sup>In their study published by the International Literacy Association, Mayes, Coppola, and Fa champion the techniques and success of Story Pirates’ school programs, observing that such “interactive theatre-based interventions are promising teaching and learning tools for improving students’ writing outcomes.” See Amanda S. Mayes, Elizabeth C. Coppola, and Bingxin Fa, “Using Theatre to Develop Writing Skills: The Story Pirates Idea Storm,” *The Reading Teacher* 73, no. 4 (2020): 473.

<sup>10</sup>“Benjamin Salka,” accessed January 14, 2021, <http://benjaminsalka.com/bio/>.

<sup>11</sup>Story Pirates Changemakers, “Tickets on Sale to Our Biggest Show of the Year,” email, January 7, 2020.

<sup>12</sup>Lee Overtree, telephone conversation with the author, January 19, 2021.

<sup>13</sup>Overtree, telephone.

<sup>14</sup>The question was asked by the mother of regular listeners, Jane and Bryn. Referencing “that fateful day in March,” she asked, how or why did Overtree decide to create *Story Pirates Radio*?—“Was it already in the works with Creator Club or did you feel compelled to do something?” Story Pirates, “Story Pirates Radio 8/5/20,” August 5, 2020, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Z0bm-5TIB0A>, 44:56.

<sup>15</sup>Overtree, telephone.

<sup>16</sup>Katie Kerins, email communication with the author, January 23, 2021.

<sup>17</sup>Kerins, email.

<sup>18</sup>Story Pirates, “Announcing the Story Pirates Creator Club!” November 26, 2019, YouTube video, <https://youtu.be/iKbnJskX7nc>, 1:08.

<sup>19</sup>Story Pirates Creator Club, “New Learning Tools for Creators Stuck at Home,” email, March 19, 2020.

<sup>20</sup>In their study of transmedia play (in which they cite Story Pirates as an example), Alper and Herr-Stephenson credit media scholar Marsha Kinder for coining the concept as “a set of narrative and non-narrative media elements that are spread systematically across multiple platforms.” They develop their own concept of transmedia play as a “way to understand how children develop critical media literacy and new media literacies through their interactions with contemporary media that links stories and structures across platforms.” See Meryl Alper and Rebecca Herr-Stephenson, “Transmedia Play: Literacy Across Media,” *Journal of Media Literacy Education* 5, no. 2 (2013): 366–369.

<sup>21</sup>Overtree insists that little about the radio show was planned. He used the term “roll call” for the first time on April 6, 2020, more than two weeks after *Story Pirates Radio* began, in recognition of the contribution made by the listener greetings and check-ins at the beginning of each show. He believes the time given to roll call was instinctual, citing Story Pirates’ well-established “Story Love” program

as inspiration. Through this program, volunteers write a personal letter to every child who submits a story to Story Pirates, roughly one thousand a month, validating and encouraging children's creative writing.

<sup>22</sup>While the exact size of the audience is unknown, the number of listeners writing into roll call grew from 92 to over 200 over the first month of the show, with numbers dropping on the weekends.

<sup>23</sup>Dolan, *Utopia in Performance*, 11.

<sup>24</sup>Overtree, telephone.

<sup>25</sup>Overtree, telephone.

<sup>26</sup>Story Pirates, 2020, "On Story Pirates Radio Facebook Post," Facebook, May 23, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/storypirates/posts/3671322829550468>. The festival was first suggested by listeners on May 19, 2020 and its development continued through May 23. When Story Pirates Radio started taking weekends off after sixty-eight consecutive days of broadcasts, listeners suggested that they stay connected to one another through even more imagined space festivals "to help the time pass" between shows. Story Pirates, "Story Pirates Radio 5/26/20," May 26, 2020, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A-BTKfRtdVE>, 2:25.

<sup>27</sup>These songs can be found within episodes, searchable by name, on the Story Pirates Gimlet Media webpage, which hosts new and back episodes (accessed January 14, 2021): <https://gimletmedia.com/shows/story-pirates/episodes>.

<sup>28</sup>Story Pirates, "Story Pirates Radio 4/28/20," April 28, 2020, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P23a03NFD98>, 38:32 and 40:52.

<sup>29</sup>Story Pirates, "Story Pirates Radio 7/29/20," July 29, 2020, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IOLSDJclDlc>, 38:49.

<sup>30</sup>Such news documents a significant trend regarding pet adoption during the pandemic. See Kim Kavin, "Dog Adoptions and Sales Soar during the Pandemic," *The Washington Post*, August 12, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/08/12/adoptions-dogs-coronavirus>.

<sup>31</sup>Story Pirates, "Story Pirates Radio 5/4/20," May 4, 2020, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qPcu0jszavg>, 46:20.

<sup>32</sup>Story Pirates, "Story Pirates Radio 5/4/20," 61:50.

<sup>33</sup>Overtree, telephone.

<sup>34</sup>Story Pirates, "Story Pirates Radio 8/6/20," August 6, 2020, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QutSzwach4>, 10:43.

<sup>35</sup>Jill Dolan, "Utopia in Performance," *Theatre Research International*, 31, no. 2 (2006): 165.

<sup>36</sup>See Derrick Bryson Taylor, "George Floyd Protests: A Timeline," *The New York Times*, March 28, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/george-floyd-protests-timeline.html>.

<sup>37</sup>Story Pirates, "Story Pirates Radio 6/1/20," June 1, 2020, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5dGIUZ34Qlk>, 16:02. This listener is Lily (who likes to draw), a name offered to distinguish herself from other children with the same name who wrote in.

<sup>38</sup>Story Pirates, "Story Pirates Radio 6/2/20," June 2, 2020, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jDx7sCXYB4M>. All subsequent quotes in this section come from this episode. For an overview of #BlackoutTuesday, see Joe Coscarelli, "#BlackoutTuesday: A Music Industry Protest Becomes a Social Media Moment," *The New York Times*, June 2, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/02/arts/music/what-blackout-tuesday.html>.

<sup>39</sup>Story Pirates, "Black Voices Matter. Black Stories Matter. Black Lives Matter," *Story Pirates*, June 25, 2020, <https://www.storypirates.com/blacklivesmatter>.

<sup>40</sup>Overtree, telephone. Edited for clarity.

<sup>41</sup>See, for example, Griffin Sims and Stephen Rushin, "The Effect of President Trump's Election on Hate Crimes," SSRN, January 14, 2018, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3102652>; Alexis Sottile, "The Trump Effect: How Hateful Rhetoric Is Affecting America's Children," *Rolling Stone*, November 4, 2016, <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/the-trump-effect-how-hateful-rhetoric-is-affecting-americas-children-123427>; and Hannah Natanson, John Woodrow Cox, and Perry Stein, "Trump's Words, Bullied Kids, Scarred Schools," *The Washington Post*, February 13, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/local/school-bullying-trump-words>.

<sup>42</sup>Overtree, telephone. Edited for clarity.

<sup>43</sup>Dolan, "Utopia in Performance," 165-166.

<sup>44</sup>Story Pirates, "Story Pirates Radio 9/4/20," September 4, 2020, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TFpGI7THfg0>, 55:54.

<sup>45</sup>Story Pirates, "Story Pirates Radio 9/4/20," 18:14, 21:11, 22:25.

<sup>46</sup>The Story Pirates, "IMPORTANT: Your Story Pirates Tickets Refund," email, January 14, 2021.

<sup>47</sup>See “COVID-19’s Impact on the Arts: Research Update,” *Americans for the Arts*, May 4, 2020, <https://www.americansforthearts.org/news-room/americans-for-the-arts-news/covid-19-impact-on-the-arts-research-update-may-4-2020>. This report, released only two months into the pandemic, begins: “The coronavirus has had a devastating impact on America’s arts sector. Since the first U.S. case was reported on January 20, 2020 cancellations and closings are taking place at thousands of arts organizations across the country, and two-thirds of the nation’s artists are now unemployed.”

<sup>48</sup>Sarah Bay-Cheng, “Theater Is Media: Some Principles for a Digital Historiography of Performance,” *Theater*, 42, no. 2 (2012): 40.

<sup>49</sup>Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: Theatre as Memory Machine*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2001); Bay-Cheng “Theatre Is Media,” 38.

<sup>50</sup>Overtree, telephone.

<sup>51</sup>Hunter, “Marc Blitzstein’s,” 233.

<sup>52</sup>Dolan, *Utopia in Performance*, 170.