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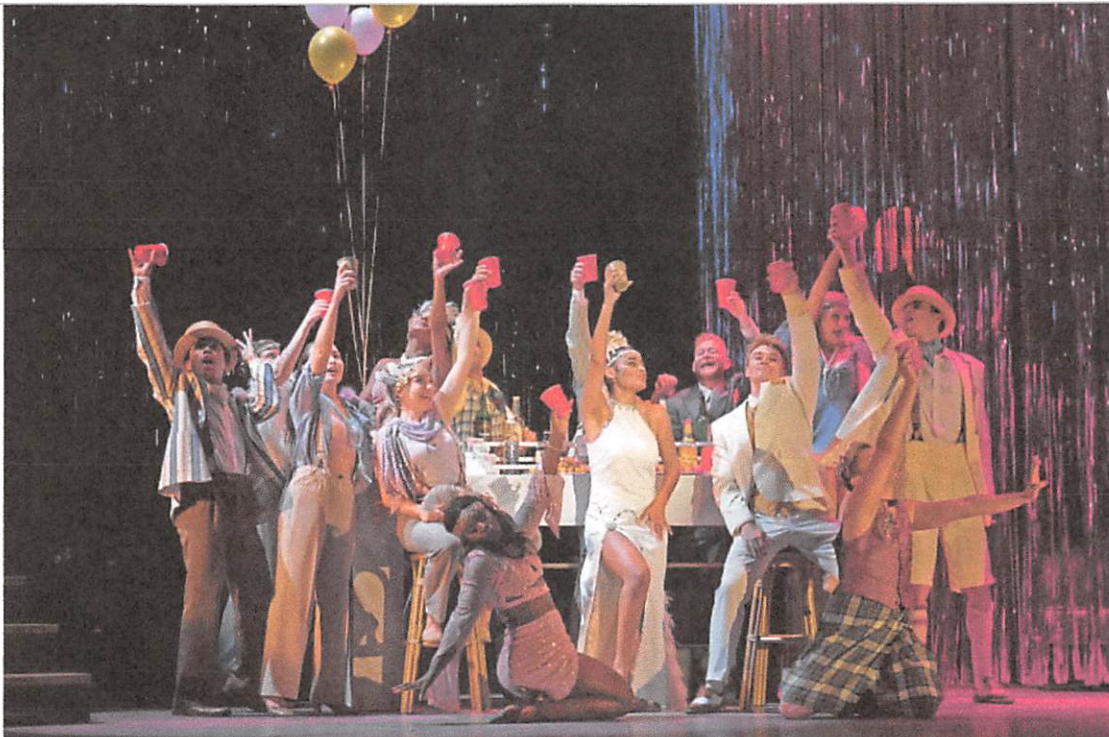
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Maya Sistruck (center) in the University of Michigan production of Andrew Lippa's "The Wild Party."

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Back to School After a Year of Hard Lessons

Students and faculty reflect on returning to in-person education in acting, playwriting, tech, and more at some of the nation's college theatre programs.

BY [DANIELLA IGNACIO](#)

Coming back to campus after spending my senior year online never ceases to feel incredibly weird for me. Yet I still come back to work front of house for the Washington, D.C.'s American University musical theatre program's first in-person musical since the pandemic, [The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee](#). As people enter through the stage door, it's a parade of returns as I hug a friend, then a professor I have not seen in person for what seems like forever. I take tickets, a process that hasn't changed as much as the one at the box office, where proof of vaccination is required. Then I settle in for the show, and it's like time hasn't passed at all.

But things have changed. Vaccinations are more widespread, and a sense of normalcy is coming back, but programs aren't fully out of the woods. At issue is not just COVID-19 safety. Programs are also figuring out how to better support their students' mental well-being and address concerns about inequity that have risen to the fore in the past year-and-a-half.

I talked to students and faculty across the country about their experiences returning to school this fall. My hope is to explore the scope of changes to college theatre training after a 20 months of pandemic and protest, as well to gauge what hasn't changed. Some had hybrid experiences, and some were more or less in person the whole time. Others had zero in-person classes, and didn't begin performing for live audiences until this semester. This is not the comprehensive last word on all in-person college theatre throughout the U.S. But the stories and strategies detailed below tell a story of return, revival, and in some cases, revamping at many colleges.

Coming Back to the Classroom

"We take so much less for granted after the year we've had," said Sara Becker (she/her), a professor at [University of North Carolina School of the Arts](#) in Winston-Salem, noting students are returning with a deepened passion and commitment. After holding hybrid

classes over the 2020-21 school year, UNCSCA still requires masks in class. For Becker, that means teaching voice and speech online and outside. She said she still doesn't know if she'll be able to go back to some of the ways she's taught this class in the past.

"Students are understandably nervous about touch and in some cases still uncomfortable with very close proximity to others," she said.

"The modifications I made when teaching online are still in place in the classroom." But there are some upsides, she noted:

"The gains they got working solo online have now transitioned for many of them into developing a personal at-home voice practice. It led many of them to more fearless personal exploration. I'm looking to keep that now that we are back all together."



Sara Becker.

[Webster Conservatory](#) in St. Louis, Mo., pivoted to online learning and canceled remaining productions in March 2020 due to licensing issues, and began hybrid learning in fall 2020, for a school year in which students were allowed to participate in department activities in whatever way they felt most comfortable. Now, with a full return to in-person activities, Webster's faculty and staff are still navigating comfort and health levels, department chair and theatre studies/dramaturgy professor Gad Guterman said.

"Inevitably, there is some awkwardness and friction as we relearn to work in space together," he said. "I believe we have been successful in empowering students, faculty, and staff to share openly any concerns or hesitations. Part of this pivot to in-person only includes

the desire to stage particular shows whose licensing does not easily permit streaming options.”

Robert Shimko (he/him) is director of the School of Theatre and Dance and head of BFA Playwriting and Dramaturgy at the [University of Houston](#), where the school moved to hybrid learning in fall 2020.

In his lecture-based theatre history and dramaturgy classes this semester, he at first was “waiting for people to start asking questions. Now that we’re halfway through the semester, or more than halfway through the semester, it does feel back to normal; we have interesting conversations and interesting exchanges,” he said. “But there was a relearning period, where it was like, ‘Oh, yeah, I can raise my hand and it’s not an interruption, it’s not a problem, it actually keeps the discussion going.’”

At [Rutgers University’s Mason Gross School of the Arts](#), classes first went online in spring 2020, and some classes, including stagecraft and scenic construction, were suspended due to access issues. Interim department chair and head of costume technology Ellen Bredehoft (she/her) was asked to step into the position at the end of August 2020, right before that semester started.

“It was a bit of a fast learning curve,” she said. “Because of the nature of last year, we did not do a search, because we were on a hiring freeze, so I’m serving for an additional year.”

The program went to hybrid learning in fall 2020, and started having all students in at least one class fully in person in spring 2021. This was possible because Rutgers was among the first schools to adopt a vaccine mandate. Masks are still required in all classes, except for certain voice classes and productions.

All juniors and seniors are currently at the program’s required abroad program in partnership with London’s Globe Theatre, making up for the break of more than a year; new COVID rules place each student in individual dorms abroad. The school’s “froshmores” all experienced fully in-person learning at Rutgers for the first time without those upperclassmen around—which, according to Bredehoft, has made it feel a bit like a “halfway semester.”

For their part, students are making the necessary adjustments after a year or more of hybrid learning. Anna Lei Negrin (she/her), a junior BFA Acting student at UNCSA, said that the

school did a good job of making the transitions as manageable as possible. Initially they broke up the 28-person cohort into four groups of eight for Zoom classes. During spring 2021, classes were in two groups, with half in the room with the professor and half in another room on Zoom.

Now, she said with some relief, “You see everyone around campus, and it feels a lot more like the first year for me, which is really nice. Getting to be with our whole group again was so wonderful. I really don’t feel like I’m being robbed of anything in my training, which I’m super thankful for.”



Comfort ifeoma katchy.

For comfort ifeoma katchy (she/her), a senior BFA playwriting student at the University of Houston, the renewed energy around her college and its surrounding city is palpable. Katchy reported that the transition back felt like a natural progression of where she was in her academic career.

“Being back, you see a lot of people’s hopes and spirits really rejuvenated and revived from the crazy year,” katchy said. “You see a

rebirth of passion and understanding, at least for myself and the people around me.”

Coming back also means the return of students who took gap years off due to the pandemic. Ryo Kamibayashi, a sophomore BFA musical theatre major at the [University of Michigan](#), stayed in his home country of Japan and did not return to school until this semester, even as Michigan transitioned to hybrid learning last year, with dance classes in the studio but most other classes online. Coming back, he reflected on differences in performing between the U.S. and Japan.

“Personally experiencing America, and then going back to Japan to work again, and coming back here, I started understanding—it’s the same musical theatre art form and yet it’s so different according to culture, language, country, and everything,” Kamibayashi said.

At Michigan, masks are required in all classes, except for singing classes, where students are allowed to take off their mask when they go up individually to perform (though unmasking is not required). For Kamibayashi and junior B.F.A. Musical Theatre major Alyssa Carol (she/her)—who both performed in Michigan’s last show that closed a week before pandemic shutdowns—it’s rejuvenating to be back, but there was a period of reacclimation, what called “a bit of a shock.”

“I literally got back from Japan jetlagged and not expecting to get in [to this semester’s mainstage musical, *The Wild Party*,] but I somehow did,” Kamibayashi said. “I didn’t have time to think about it, I just got to work. It was a pretty smooth transition, but I also experienced the ‘go go go’ sudden adjustment. In my performance classes, there’s a lack of energy. I still feel my gears are a little rusty, I can feel my eyes not being engaged, some part of me is still sleeping.”



Webster Conservatory's production of 'Sondheim on Sondheim.' (Photo by Philip Hamer)

Lasting Online Lessons

For many, new ways of doing recruitment, productions, and classes forced by the lockdown of the past 20 months are likely to last beyond the pandemic. Guterman said Webster learned that they can recruit students without asking them to travel to meet and interview. While they are not doing away with in-person auditions/interviews entirely, they plan to continue doing one day of virtual auditions on equal footing with on-campus and [Unifile](#) auditions, not least because, as Guterman said, “It allows us much greater access to students we might not otherwise have met.”

Becker had students record their final showings of solo material for class and send them to her digitally, which means she can cover more ground over the course of the semester. “Their facility in recording themselves will serve them auditioning professionally, and for many of them, they turned these recordings into small performance pieces,” she said. “I plan on keeping this model from now on.”

Students are also bringing the emotional impact of acting classes online to their work in person. For Carol, online acting classes compelled her to perform in spaces that were vulnerable and personal; she has distinct memories of working on “She Used to Be Mine” from *Waitress* in her hometown bedroom.

“Doing that one felt so raw and real, singing in spaces where so much of me had lived, and I was getting to use that as inspiration for performing,” said Carol. “As I come back in person, I’m trying as much as possible to bring that authenticity and vulnerability that was held in that space to a performance space. There’s nothing like living in the space that creates art.”

Shimko said that the University of Houston had long seen its theatre students taking coursework within the Communication School, but the program has now added courses on digital media to core curriculum. They’ve doubled Acting for the Camera classes and now have a film professor teaching a film and video production class exclusively for theatre students.

“It did cause us to take a different look at technology, not just as a substitute, but as one of the places that the field is headed, and to put our money where our mouth is by changing curriculum and putting resources into that,”



Rob Shimko.

Shimko said. Future students “will have more interaction with the Communication School, and they won’t necessarily even know or care that it was the pandemic era that caused us to make those partnerships or to restructure the curriculum.”

Playwriting students began more self-created projects as well. Katchy said that student driven work continues to invigorate the community, as she participated in a short festival of new works this semester called *Rounds*.

Rutgers’s technical theatre programs have also recognized the central importance of computer-based programs. Technical direction and stage management students are now taking projection design classes for lighting and set design, and are learning to use programs accessible to them on iPads for digital rendering courses.

“We’re slowly adding more computer classes, due to the nature of the industry,” Bredehoft said. “A lot of them had already been in place or were becoming part of the regular curriculum prior to the pandemic. But it definitely reinforced the reasons why we’re using all these things.”

In her advanced costume construction class, Bredehoft created video demonstrations of sample work and homework with YouTube and Canvas, a learning platform Rutgers moved to during the pandemic. Using a combination of these videos and in-person directions makes it easier for students to access information, she said.

Guest artists and new partnerships have also emerged, as being online made it easier to connect. Many schools had guest artists speak to students virtually. UNCSA took note of professional theatres’ question-and-answer sessions, workshops, and recordings.

“We learned that students can still feel a connection with a guest artist, even if they just meet them online,” Becker said. “It is wonderful bringing people down to share space, but if they are too busy to travel to us, it’s better to make that connection than not.”

Future students “will have more interaction with the Communication School, and they won’t necessarily