**Live and learn: Artists and audience figure out new ways to see and be seen**

**Liane Faulder**

If there was ever an artistic medium born to pivot on a dime, it’s improv. So in a way, it’s fitting that the long-running, live local soap opera, Die-Nasty, should be inventing a new way to be seen and heard.

Restrictions on live performances amid the COVID-19 crisis have forced Die-Nasty, which has been improvising weekly for nearly 30 years, to shutter its Monday night performances at the Varscona. So the tight-knit creators, many of whom are actors thrown out of work due to the pandemic, turned to [Zoom](https://zoom.us/), the video conferencing technology presently enjoying a moment.

“It’s been a really good exercise because you have to look at what you are doing, and who your audience is,” says Stephanie Wolfe, one of the founders of the Die-Nasty. “Just to reinvent who you are has been a surprisingly positive experience.”

[Die-Nasty](https://www.facebook.com/dienastyimprov/) is but one of the artistic groups forced to come up with a new way to reach an audience. The Citadel has created its [Stuck in the House](https://www.citadeltheatre.com/2019-2020/stuckinthehouse) series, which sees a daily, short talent show by a local artist posted on it website until at least April 20. The innovation is getting thousands of hits and thanks to a donation from the Edmonton Community Foundation, artists receive a $100 honorarium.

Over at the [Starlite Room](https://www.facebook.com/starliteyeg/), co-owner Tyson Cale Boyd is also livestreaming select performances at the popular music venue, which has lost all its programming between now and mid-August due to COVID-19. Inspired by a successful, first livestream outing last week that garnered 8,000 viewers, local DJ and club co-owner Blair McFarlane is livestreaming a staple of The Bower’s programming menu, For Those Who Know, on Saturday, April 4, to mark the 19th anniversary of the popular house night.

Nationally, [#CanadaPerforms](https://nac-cna.ca/en/canadaperforms/apply) is a $200,000 relief fund that pays Canadian artists for online performances. Launched by Facebook Canada and the National Arts Centre, the program aims to ease financial strain for talent impacted by COVID-19 closures coast-to-coast. Former Edmonton playwright, Nick Green (now in Toronto) has created an online project called [The Social Distancing Festival](https://www.socialdistancingfestival.com/) to highlight an aggregation of international artists in performance.

Artists are finding that necessity is the mother of invention, says Wolfe (suddenly out of work now that The Garneau Block at the Citadel has been postponed). This year’s iteration of Die-Nasty coincidentally lends itself to a radio format, as it’s set 100 years ago during Vaudevillian times and actually features an ongoing radio segment.

The Zoom platform makes it possible for more than a dozen Die-Nasty cast members to broadcast from disparate locations and to play together, and yet apart. So far, three shows have been created and despite bumps — the technology has some lags and actors have to wait a breath or two before responding to each other — the virtual venue is working well.

Wolfe says there is no doubt the cast misses the audience, and the physicality of impromptu sword play and dancing. But she says the new format allows the possibility of including guests from around the world (many Die-Nasty alumni live abroad), another bonus.

“The live show won’t ever go away, but I do believe this will continue as a spinoff,” says Wolfe.

Likewise, the Starlite’s Cale Boyd says his collaborators have long been wanting to explore livestream options, and COVID-19 has forced them to do so. Their first outing happened by accident two weeks ago and featured The Real McKenzies, a touring punk group with an international following whose gig was cancelled by Alberta Health Services mere hours before it was to begin.

“The band was on stage sound checking and we started throwing out ideas. Livestreaming came up. We had all of the technology, and it was a well-produced, livestream concert,” says Cale Boyd. “It was mayhem, but we pulled it off.”

[The Real McKenzies](https://www.starlitesessions.com/news/the-real-mckenzies-starlite-sessions) garnered almost 10,000 viewers. Now, the Starlite Room is experimenting with other livestream options and has created a website called [Starlite Sessions](https://www.starlitesessions.com/), which already contains a livestream event held Wednesday featuring [Sticks and Stone,](https://www.starlitesessions.com/news/sticks-amp-stone-starlite-sessions-live-announces-amp-spotlight) a Canadian percussion trio. (Check the [website](https://www.starlitesessions.com/) for future musical options.) Cale Boyd hopes to stock the new site with more recorded music sessions, artist interviews, plus podcasts and old concert video.

At this point there is no money in the effort, but there is a [“donate”](https://www.starlitesessions.com/donate) button on the Starlite Sessions website for those interested in supporting innovation.

“It’s part of telling our story,” says Cale Boyd, noting the new efforts help keep Starlite staff engaged and connected.

The Citadel’s artistic director Daryl Cloran sees connection as key to the success of its Stuck in the House series. The series is tagged as a Watch Party to encourage group viewing, and the public is encouraged to donate to the artists themselves through the Citadel website.

“There’s been such a lovely turnout by the artists, and the response from online has been great,” says Cloran.

Certainly comments on Facebook and elsewhere indicate streaming is much appreciated during these uncertain times for artists and the folks who support them. But more than one person interviewed said there may be limited value in broadcasting from your bedroom. That’s because there’s nothing like a live audience for performers, or being in the room for fans.

Audrey Ochoa, commissioned by Cloran for [Stuck in the House](https://www.citadeltheatre.com/2019-2020/stuckinthehouse), says the upside of posting her work online is that doing so motivated her to learn a new technical tool for future marketing. The downside is that she misses the audience in a big way.

Ochoa, a trombonist, downloaded a split screen app for [her performance](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LhTSpb833Js), held in her basement, and learned how to edit with iMovie. She sang All I’ve Ever Known, a stunning tune from the Citadel’s 2017’s production of Hadestown — a show that featured Ochoa as a stage musicians. Ochoa played her own accompaniment on two instruments, and harmonized beautifully with herself. The results of her effort debuted March 25 and is now on the [Citadel website](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LhTSpb833Js).

Ochoa was grateful for the opportunity, but found it lonely to record from home.

“For all performers, it’s extrovert work. I want to do this in front of people. It’s the energy we feed off of.”