



Featuring: Adrian Pang, Gavin Yap, Keagan Kang, Mina Kaye, Neo Swee Lin, Petrina Kow, Zachary Pang

World-Wide Recognition for Innovative Virtual Theatre Production

First Play Written for Zoom

Innovation can occur when you least expect it and this is what Marc Palmieri, communications studies instructor in Mercy College's School of Liberal Arts, did when he became the first American playwright to compose a one-of-a-kind play solely designed for online broadcast.

The play, "Waiting For The Host," has seen great success with audiences and critics since its release in spring 2020. It involves two acts – "Waiting For The Host" and "Still Waiting" – both of which have been streamed by prominent national and international theater companies, including Syracuse's

Redhouse Arts Center, Penn State Centre Stage and Pangdemonium, a Singapore-based company. In even more exciting news, a book adaptation of the play has been released by the Dramatists Play Service, one of the premier play-licensing and theatrical publishing agencies in the world.

The performance vehicle for "Waiting For The Host" and "Still Waiting" is the now all-too-familiar online meeting platform Zoom, which is fitting, since the play is about a tech-challenged church meeting hosted over Zoom to plan a virtual version of The Passion Play, or Easter pageant, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Palmieri's play paints a complete picture, with touches of humor, drama and empathy, of what people have been experiencing during the pandemic. Situations like adjusting to increased social isolation, navigating online platforms to participate in virtual work meetings and extracurricular activities, and helping family, colleagues and friends who may not be as tech-savvy navigate technologies such as Zoom are common experiences.

"Part of the gag is that everyone's trying to use Zoom correctly," Palmieri explains.

Palmieri is the first to compose an online play at a time when fans are reeling from closures of their

favorite performance spaces due to social distancing mandates. Craving entertainment, the play satisfies audiences, reinventing the wheel to offer virtual streaming of a medium that is typically most enjoyed live. The first live stream of the play drew 1,000 viewers and audiences continue to grow.



In describing the novelty of the production, Palmieri said, “We did our work as theater artists in a dimension where we had never been before.”

Feature articles on the play have appeared in *Newsday*, *Vogue*, *The (New Jersey) Star-Ledger*, among many others. Critics and reporters from *Broadway World*, *Robb Report*, *Newsday* and *Time Out* international magazine praise “Waiting For The Host” and “Still Waiting” for being relatable, comical and clever, and laud the actors’ passionate performances that despite being behind a computer screen are in no way watered down.

According to *Broadway World*, “A play such as ‘Waiting For The Host,’ that was written and created to

perform on Zoom, allows a new work, a new approach to performing, a new approach to theater, a new approach to directing to take place and it is definitely entertaining. The play does not disappoint. It is real, raw, and brings some much-needed laughter; exactly what theater is supposed to do.”

The international culture magazine *Robb Report* wrote of the production: “Waiting For The Host is a shining example of theatre’s undying relevance.”

“Waiting For The Host” is based on real-life experience. In April 2020, the pastor of Palmieri’s local church in Queens, New York, an epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic in its early months, requested that he play Jesus in a Zoom adaptation of its Passion Play. After participating, he came up with the idea for “Waiting For The Host” and thought, “I have to write this down now.” He took just two hours to write the 40-minute first act of the play and sent it to his agent and publisher on a whim. Within 36 hours, his pages made it to Rick Lombardo, renowned artistic director at Penn State Centre Stage, who immediately expressed interest in doing a reading.

“The process of writing the play was personally so satisfying – I was able to speak to the sorrow of much of what’s going on and the desperation we are all feeling for it to pass,” Palmieri described. He is proud that the play conjures empathy in audience members and allows theaters to continue connecting with their audiences during COVID-19, a time that has been particularly challenging for the industry, while also providing viewers a crucial entertainment outlet that is fun, positive and uplifting.

“I know that coming out of this, people will be reminded of how necessary live theater is, and how that in-flesh moment of a theater performance is what makes it such a powerful art form. This play celebrates the power of theater, at the same time insisting on its existence in its form,” Palmieri said.

As instructor at Mercy College, he has incorporated both virtual play production and writing into his curriculum with Mercy’s student musical theater clubs to use online platforms to share their creations and talents. “This experience has opened up a whole new possibility of what I’ll be able to do with students at Mercy. Now going through this process, I feel better equipped about doing this type of performance through the classes and clubs,” Palmieri said. And, with the play written to be staged physically, Palmieri hopes theaters and musical theater students will be able to hold in-person productions in due time.

The good news is that the play is written to also be staged physically, so theaters and musical theater students will hopefully be able to hold in-person productions in due time. In November 2020, Ohio’s Walsh Jesuit High School staged the play on a two-tier set for a live audience, with each performer sealed off in plexiglass cubicles. Palmieri sees the play carrying out in regular format once social distancing guidelines are relaxed, and theaters can re-welcome their audiences.

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To date, there have been more than ten full productions of both parts of “Waiting For The Host” on the professional, community, university and high school levels. More productions are scheduled for 2021, including in Virginia, Pennsylvania and Oklahoma. For more information visit www.dramatists.com.