

Performance in The New Normal

Careena Fenton-Cullen

Magician

I am a performer of mystery and magic. I began to perform children's shows and parties in 2006 and more recently bizarre, storytelling magical theatre.

Before Covid-19, I created my shows as immersive experiences. Audiences were small and the atmosphere deliberately spooky. I primarily performed in site-specific locations amenable to performances of the bizarre and strange. These included venues reputed to be haunted, such as cemeteries and museums. Audiences touched and held props. Volunteers were on stage. I had very few set pieces of magic that did not involve people joining me on stage and examining mysterious objects. As soon as the pandemic began, this method of performing and presenting shows became unviable. Like many performers in March 2020, I watched with horror as every single show cancelled for the year ahead.

Pre-Covid, my primary source of income was my show 'Phantasmagorical'. The show features mind-reading and magic framed within the concept of Victorian Spiritualism. The strapline for the show is: "full immersion into the world of the Victorian Seance." The show's ideal performance setting was a small theatre, or strange and intimate venues from museums such as The Old Operating Theatre in London, to Arnos Vale Cemetery in Bristol. I felt that to rip the show apart and recreate it for an online show felt like creating Frankenstein's monster. The initial show's very concept was to create an immersive experience, one in which the audience joined me as the main character in my world. The opening lines of the show questioned the reality of the audience. Were the audience spirits communicating with the performer, or were they alive? The show worked in a live environment where the audience consented to join the performer in the act of co-creation. The invitation is to question the nature of the protagonist's reality. The venues' atmosphere and the set dressing, such as candlelight and scent, created a good atmosphere for audience consent to join a new theatrical reality. Re-creating the show for a virtual audience meant that I would have to relinquish control of the audience's environment. The show would become a visual spectacle, something to be watched as an outsider rather than experience from within. In an attempt to stay financially afloat and mentally buoyant, I needed to create something new.

I went back to the drawing board and applied myself to acquiring new skills. I have been working on new material that is no-touch magic with zero volunteers on stage and online shows for families.

Newhampton Arts Centre contacted me in September. The idea was to launch a socially distanced show and audience. The brief was simple but stark. It had to be a show that was entirely no touch and with no volunteers on the stage. Could I do this? Yes, I could. Finally, the new material that I have been working on would have a real live audience. The show was to be for a family audience of invited members of the public. The aim was to help people feel confident about returning to the theatre. It was also to pilot the rigorous health and safety measures now in place at Newhampton Arts Centre. As well as my first return to the stage, it was to be the first time Newhampton Arts Centre opened their doors to an audience since March 2020. We were all on new territory.

The protection measures at Newhampton Arts Centre are exemplary. One week before the show, Wolverhampton's Covid Risk rate went into the "high" zone. We also have local lockdown so no mixing of households. I did question the rationality of performing the show under these heightened conditions. Would it be wiser to wait until the Covid risk had dropped to low or even medium before we all went inside the theatre? Public Health at Wolverhampton Council advised that the Covid-19 infection rate was higher in the home than in public areas. Plus, a quick chat with the managerial team at Newhampton allayed my fears. The Health and Safety procedures at the NAC are commendable. They include a new one-way system and increased cleaning. The audiences sat at tables and chairs within their bubbles of six and remained seated for the whole show. When unseated, masks were worn. The nearest tables of the audience were three metres away from the front of the stage, and I performed mid-stage. The audience was instructed not to cheer, shout, sing or dance. Clapping is still thankfully allowed! No one joined me on stage and no one touched anything that did not belong to them. When not performing, I wore my mask too. Everyone checked in on the NHS app, and details were held via the box office.

The experience of performing in the new normal was exciting but challenging work. Health and safety meant that I had to get all my props inside the theatre unaided as unnecessary handling creates risk. Typically, it was pouring with rain, and so my kit was moved in by my bedraggled self. Once inside the theatre, social distancing and mask-wearing continued—an uncomfortable but necessary evil. The tech and box office team were on top form as always. It was fabulous to see friends and colleagues who I have not seen for months!

My first thoughts about the new theatre layout were how far away the audience was going to be. There is a standard agreement between performers that no one wants to perform on the dance floor of doom. This occurs when the performer stands alone on the dance floor and everyone sits miles away around the outside of the square. The physical distance does not create a good atmosphere. This was a little like that. The new safe capacity of the theatre is now 42 with distancing. Pre-Covid the total was 140 tiered and 130 cabaret. The audience was so far away from each other and also from me. It was going to be tough to create an atmosphere of conviviality. Luckily there is one thing that traverses cavernous spaces and breaks down barriers, and that is laughter. Laughter is not restricted and to hear people laughing was a tonic. It was great! Of course, it's difficult to encourage children not to shout out. Other ways of interaction such as clicking fingers, stamping feet and pointing are good ways of communicating. I dropped a lot of pre-covid material during preparations for the show, because the very nature of magic for children is that they do call out. Despite encouraging the audience to wiggle their fingers or do the universal sign language for applause, the odd little shout out did slip out. However, everyone sat so far apart from each other that the risk of aerosol transmission was low.

I'm pleased to report that my new visual show of magic was successful. Newhampton Arts Centre has received good feedback about the show and how safe the audience felt at the venue, which was positive for future performances. Newhampton issued feedback forms to the test audience after the event to gauge the health and safety's success, which returned 100% positive as did feedback about the show itself. I received personal feedback from members of the audience on social media. Comments such as 'I thoroughly enjoyed the show and felt safe with Covid Measures in place' and 'it was a great show, well done you and the NAC for attempting a Covid Safe performance, I hope you come back,' were posted. All of this helped to create optimism for future shows.

The downside of performing in the new normal is everything takes twice as long as it did before. More time was spent loading, unloading, tracking, and going around the one-way system than previously. The staggered leaving and arrival of the audience took longer than it did in the pre-Covid era.

In October 2020 I also performed a bizarre magic seance themed show at Magic Alley walkthrough attraction in Stratford Upon Avon. The audience was only

allowed to purchase group 'bubble' tickets for staggered group 'bubble' arrivals and multiple shows. My colleague performed his own socially distanced show in his room, and then small audience bubbles made their way to my room for another show. We were performing shows for groups of twos and threes and the maximum group at any time was a group of five. My entire performance was no touch and socially distant; I was also behind a clear plastic screen. Before the show went ahead at the end of October 2020, it became law that the public must wear masks in an attraction, museum or shop. With that in mind, some audience members wore their masks whilst watching my performance. This was an unsettling new experience. Being unable to see facial expressions and reactions was disconcerting. In a seance theatre-style performance, audience reactions are different. I don't encourage an audience to applaud. The nature of the show means that there is no trick effect to be applauded. Instead, each development and sequence of performance delivers an experience of magic as spirit manifestation and clairvoyance. Facial expressions are instrumental in gauging the impact of an 'experience.'

The staggered performances and small audiences have a significant financial impact. Pre-Covid, a larger audience would have sat together and watched as one. Post-Covid, smaller and safer audiences impact the financial gain versus time. It took approximately three times longer to earn half of what I previously made with live shows. However, as my experience of performing in a post-Covid environment has grown, so has my income. I am providing family shows online via Zoom, and these are increasing as the pandemic continues. A huge benefit is that virtual magic can be performed online at any time of day. I have performed online in virtual shows hosted in New York, Las Vegas, Massachusetts and in locations all over the UK. All without leaving my house. Repeat bookings from online birthday shows from performing for siblings earlier in the year are now coming in. I perform online in different time zones, adjusting my sleep patterns to perform. In many ways, the necessity of the Covid restrictions has opened up new growth opportunities. I am far more confident on camera than ever before, and I have learned new technical skills. Necessity has also facilitated the creation of a performance studio in my garage. I've turned it into a permanent rehearsal and recording studio complete with heating, cameras, backdrop and a strong ethernet connection. I have also launched an Etsy Shop where I market tarot readings and parties online. These see multiple people gather for individual readings, and I open and close the tarot party with magic, so the whole experience is very much a 'show'.

My experience of performing this year has been one of sharp learning curves that have been both terrifying and pleasing in equal measure. Once the

devastation and depression of losing all of my work had eased, opportunities for growth and expansion have arisen. New virtual performance skills have provided new methods of performing and income streams that will undoubtedly continue to be applied. Looking optimistically ahead, I hope to resume creating and performing theatre shows at live events in 2021.