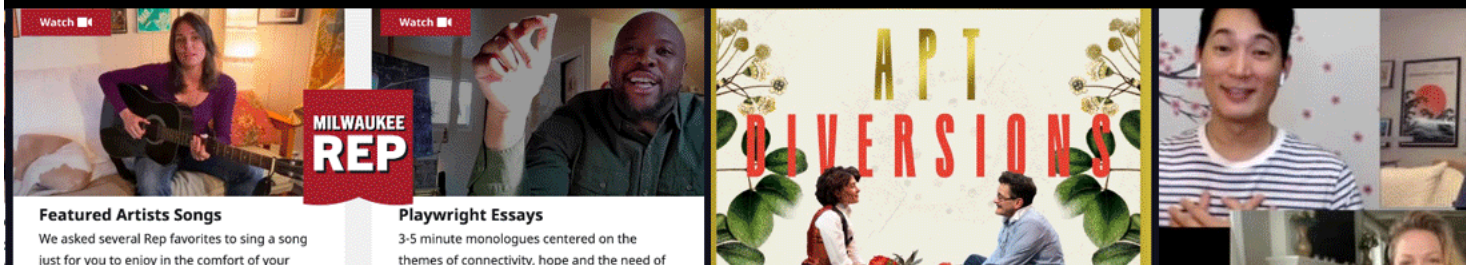




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Virtual Arts Guide - Vol. 50

Curated by Advisory Company member Mike Fischer

Advisory Company member Mike Fischer is a dramaturg and former theater critic for the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. This. Guy. Knows. Theater. We hope you'll enjoy his recommendations for the best arts-in-quarantine content.

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VOLUME 50 (MAY 26, 2021): Onward. Upward. Forward.

In a short and stirring video about why theater matters, Guthrie Theater Artistic Director Joseph Haj got it exactly right when noting that “the very premise of theater is gathering people together in a shared space to enjoy a shared experience.” But when we can’t gather together, sharing electronically is the next best thing to being there. With that in mind, I’ll be sharing five theater-related streaming recommendations each week for as long as this pandemic prevents us from gathering together in theaters.

That’s how I opened my first column, more than one year ago. What a difference a year makes, **which is why this 50th weekly virtual arts guide will be my last.**

The country and its theaters *are* reopening; thankfully, it’s increasingly clear that this summer won’t be a repeat of last summer’s lockdown, when streamed theater was an indispensable lifeline. And even as the Memorial Day Weekend beckons just after Forward has closed the final play in our 12th season, we’re already preparing to welcome audiences back to the Playhouse come Fall for Season 13.

On a personal level, my summer schedule is already filling with live theater events, from Door County to St. Louis and from Milwaukee to Cedar City. As live theater returns to Chicago, I’m settling into my duties as coordinator of a new Jeff Awards subcommittee tasked with judging short-run plays, often staged by smaller and more diverse companies that don’t have the infrastructural and financial support to mount longer runs.

I also want to spend more time mentoring and helping younger critics who don’t look like me, so that the critical profession can begin looking more like the world we live in. And in addition to ongoing writing and podcasting responsibilities for Forward as well as my monthly column for Footlights’ *ArtsScene Magazine*, I have longer, theater-related writing projects demanding my attention, including essays on playwrights I admire (hello, Caryl Churchill!) and oral histories chronicling the stories of Wisconsin’s many great theater artists.

With theaters now reopening, there simply won’t be time to travel and see new productions, attend to all these theater-related projects and responsibilities, and simultaneously spend the many hours I’ve devoted each week to watching and writing about theater for this column.

None of which is to suggest that virtual theater is going anywhere, and it shouldn’t.

As I’ve previously written here, theater fans unable to attend live performances because of age and/or impairment shouldn’t be denied the opportunity to see such performances. Theater companies, playwrights, and unions failing to take these constituencies into account during the years ahead will not just be remembered as woefully shortsighted. They will also be roundly criticized – and should be – for failing to make theater as accessible as possible, to as many people as possible. It’s not complicated: Either we truly care about being inclusive or we don’t.

Virtual theater made during the past year has also forever changed, for the better, the way we imagine theatrical space, what a play even is, and how we might benefit from all we’ve learned, as we incorporate new ways of seeing and hearing into what gets staged.

With that in mind, I’m leaving you with a variation on what I presented in Volume 31. In that column, I looked backward, celebrating the theater companies whose online options had done most to get me through 2020.

In this last column, I want to look forward, with a final five picks celebrating some of the journalists, dramaturgs, and theater lovers whose blogs, columns, and sites have been specifically dedicated to cataloguing and gathering what’s available to stream, and who have therefore been especially invaluable to me in keeping abreast of the dizzying array of available virtual theater. Without their work, my column wouldn’t have been nearly as comprehensive or informed. I strongly encourage you to check them out, so that you can continue making virtual theater an integral part of your theater life. I know I will.

In closing, I want to thank everyone in my Forward Theater family for their incredible support during this past year, with a special shout-out to Forward Marketing and Communications Director Scott Haden, a talented artist and terrific human being. Without all he’s done to shepherd this column to publication and then enthusiastically promote it, there’d be no *Mike’s Picks* (even this title was Scott’s idea).

Finally, a very special thank you to my readers. You’ve written me from London, Auckland, and all over the United States and Canada to express your support, correct my mistakes, and – most important – tell me what you’re watching and thinking, about this art form we all love.

Your good wishes have been a major source of sustenance, throughout this long night’s journey back toward day. With the coming of the dawn, I can’t wait to thank many of you in person. I’m sending the rest of you huge virtual hugs; as this column has consistently claimed, such virtual connections really do matter. Feel free to use those connections to chat with me, across space and (at any) time. You can reach me via email through Forward at info@forwardtheater.com or directly at mjfischer1985@gmail.com. As always, both “theater” and “Fischer” are spelled with an er.

Bonus Selections:

What would a *Mike’s Picks* column be without a bonus selection? Here, I’d like to thank those theater critics whose work has meant most to me this past year. While each of them has certainly reviewed plenty of virtual work since the pandemic began, they don’t fall into the category of aggregators and

gatherers identified in my five picks below. But without these critical thinkers, I wouldn't have been challenged to reflect nearly as long or well about what I've watched and, by extension, what I've written, in my own personal theater journals and for this column.

Our critics are an invaluable resource. I know from personal experience how much artists love to hate them; artists would do far better to spend a bit of time just appreciating and loving them, for all they do for theater and the arts (and for the artists who are complaining). Critics give up hundreds of nights each year and then write to deadline deep into the night – away from their homes and their families, usually alone, and without enjoying any of the accolades, love and camaraderie showered on actors – because they love and want to celebrate theater.

Sure, they get it wrong some of the time; **I don't always agree with any of the writers below**. But we all need to do better in expressing such disagreements with civility and respect. Unless they act maliciously or in bad faith (in which case they should be bounced from the profession), critics don't deserve vilification and abuse – much of it reductive, unfair, and cruel – just because one disagrees with their point of view.

When done well, critics' thankless work makes theater and its artists better known and respected. Strike that. Good critics make theater and its artists better. Period. Theater without critics is akin to trees falling in unpeopled forests: any sound it makes would fail to register.

The dozen theater (and, in some cases, culture) critics that gave most to me in 2020-21 (alphabetically, by last name): Arifa Akbar (*The Guardian*); Lyn Gardner (*The Stage*); Jesse Green (*New York Times*); Lily Janiak (*San Francisco Chronicle*); Chris Jones (*Chicago Tribune*); Soraya Nadia McDonald (*The Undeclared*); Charles McNulty (*Los Angeles Times*); Wesley Morris (*New York Times*); Maya Phillips (*New York Times*); Kerry Reid (*Chicago Reader*); Helen Shaw (*New York Magazine*); and Howard Sherman (*The Stage*).

THE FINAL FAB FIVE: CHAMPION STREAMERS

In alphabetical order by last name, here are the five individuals who did most to keep me abreast of various streaming options during the past year:

1. **Caroline Friedman** (founder, Scenesaver):

[Scenesaver](#)

Brit theater and film producer Caroline Friedman was already preparing to launch an online archive gathering performances from smaller theaters throughout the world when the pandemic struck and accelerated her timetable. The result was Scenesaver, a Netflix for fringe drama, dance, and opera; unlike Netflix, every entry is free upon registration (and Friedman is committed to keeping it that way). Intent upon expanding access for all theater fans, and to cultivating a love for theater among young people (Scenesaver has a strong children's section), Friedman also sponsors three theater clubs under Scenesaver's auspices, offering opportunities to talk theater with fellow theater lovers. I've attended and enjoyed multiple sessions of all three.

2. **Lauren Halvorsen** (*Nothing for the Group*):

[Nothing for the Group](#)

Halvorsen, a Washington-based dramaturg, posts a weekly newsletter offering bracing and fiercely smart takes on current theater news; a round-up of theater-related stories she's read during the week; and weekly streaming recommendations, with a focus on historically marginalized communities and artists (and, by extension, frequently smaller companies). Passionate, committed, opinionated, and fierce, she consistently advocates for a new and better vision of theater in America. The release of her newsletter each Friday is one of the highlights of my week.

3. **Luisa Lyons** (Filmed Live Musicals):

[Filmed Live Musicals](#)

Lyons is not only the warm and affable host of one of the Scenesaver Theater Clubs. She's also the curator of Filmed Live Musicals, a trove of currently (and legally) available filmed musicals as well as an accompanying podcast and weekly Thursday newsletter (free) in which she provides a comprehensive overview of currently available streaming options involving musicals (including, incredibly, virtually available high school productions; how she finds time to suss these out and profile them is beyond me). A native Australian who now lives in New Jersey after having also lived in Britain, Lyons brings a comprehensive, informed, and distinctly internationalist perspective to her selections and assessments. Bottom line: Lyons loves and knows musicals (she's also an accomplished vocalist). What's not to like?

4. **Elisabeth Vincentelli** (*New York Times*):

[Elisabeth Vincentelli | New York Times](#)

Reflecting her European background, Vincentelli has long championed more adventuresome fare, of a sort harder to come by in America. Her bimonthly streaming column for the *Times* regularly spotlights work streaming from Europe as well as more daring and formally experimental productions in the United

States. I also appreciate Vincentelli's willingness as a critic to regularly swim against the conventional current; she'll forever have my love and respect for her takedown three years ago of the bloated and boring Harry Potter extravaganza plaguing Broadway.

5. Chris Wiegand (*The Guardian*):

[Chris Wiegand | The Guardian](#)

Stage editor for London's *Guardian*, Wiegand keeps a regularly updated tally of streaming options, focused on but not exclusive to British companies. Each entry comes with a capsule summary and, when available, a link to a *Guardian* review (often by Arifa Akbar, listed in my round-up of fave critics, above). Wiegand has a strong background in dance, and it shows; his list regularly includes online dance as well as theater options.

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