

**Interviewee:** Jason LeClair

**Interviewer:** Elizabeth Sconyers

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**Location (Interviewer):** Jacksonville, FL

**Transcriber:** Elizabeth Sconyers

**Abstract:**

Jason LeClair is a theater arts teacher at a charter school in Rhode Island. In this interview, he discusses how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected parts of his personal life and daily routine. He talks about specific effects the pandemic has had on performing arts, such as the use of Zoom and drive-ins for theatre and concert, the delays in reopening the performing arts to the public, and how the shutdown of performing arts has effected the economy. Finally, he touches on some concerns for the future of performing arts and how he believes the performing arts will be different after this pandemic.

**ES 0:03**

All right, my name is Elizabeth Sconyers. I'm a student at Arizona State University and I'm conducting this interview for the Journal the Plague Year archive. Can you tell me what the n--time and date is?

**JL 0:23**

Today? Right now, it's 4:02 PM on November the 3rd, 2020.

**ES 0:31**

Great, thank you, and what is your name?

**JL 0:34**

My name is Jason LeClaire.

**ES 0:37**

Alright, now can you tell me a little bit about your thoughts on the COVID-19 pandemic and how they've changed th- since the shutdown?

**JL 0:46**

Um, there's a lot. [laughs] Um, there are, there are several levels to what I do. So I'll start with a base level, which is education, and dealing with theater education specifically. And the, the cornerstone of theater education is social emotional learning, where we are trying to, you know, get people to understand and work with their emotions and bring them forth on stage communication, and the human condition, etc, etc. And if there's ever a time for needing social interaction and emotional support, etc, it's at a time of massive isolation. The flip side of that is that we are particularly and dance are generally the first programs to go in any public institution when the funds run out. So we're at this kind of really bad spot, right now when it comes to

theater education, and that's the thing to move forward with all of the other theater. And that's why I bring it up first, because with COVID, the kids need to distract each other and they're not allowed to distract each other. Marginalized groups of children that usually use theater to help themselves [unintelligible] to have the day to day issues they have now have coordinated these issues and have less interaction, but community based on them. But for the future it's even more important because we're talking about the profession of theatre, we're talking about not whether we've retained it but we're talking about communication of theater as a whole professional level. It all starts at the school level. And so eliminating that level, whether they have to work or are trying to cut a corner, etc. um, really dismantles the entire performing art from the ground up.

**ES 3:15**

All right, thank you. Um, so we're gonna talk--We're gonna talk just a little bit about your daily routine. So what does a typical day look like to you?

**JL 3:25**

Well, I try to make sure that I do a regular routine. I've had to wake up early in the morning, I get myself put together, you know, working out, etc. [unintelligible] That way um, little bit of mindfulness, as you know, etc. etc. Then by 7:38 o'clock, I am at my computer teaching, until 2 o'clock, at which time I need to be getting ready for production or working on one of my different specialties that are academic. At that point, even if I have a rehearsal I'm working on my profession, so a lot of that, [unintelligible] unfortunately. Also I'm an illustrator, [unintelligible] so I do lot of things that are related to theater and not related to theater, and still maintain that secondary, so I have that safety net and still have art to keep me together and help me. [unintelligible]

**ES 5:12**

Alright, so how has COVID-19 affected your daily routine?

**JL 5:16**

[unintelligible]

**ES 5:21**

Sorry, you broke up just for one second. Do you hear me?

**JL 5:33**

Yeah, I just missed the last word. How is it affected? I lost that word.

**ES 5:38**

All right, how has COVID-19 affected your daily routine?

**JL 5:42**

Affected my daily routine? Um, [laughs] well, when it first started, it was very difficult to maintain getting up walking and that routine when you're sitting all the time, your body has to

get up, so I actually ended up pulling my [unintelligible] by being at my desk for so much time at my computer. And for two and a half months, I was nursing that physical therapy, etc. I'm now getting past it, [unintelligible] rendered me immobile. But my basic routine, you know I don't have to commute to work any longer. [unintelligible] I'm trying to navigate that way, interrupt routine that, you know, I could be home at home, work at work. Now home and work are melted. My dogs are loving it. I'm not necessarily loving having to figure out how to end them when they start coming in during my day. But a lot of this is constructive, it's more psychological, something that, you know, is ingrained in your mindset. There's something intriguing about theatrical place, that sacred space, that now that that's gone, it makes it really hard to wrap your head around, I'm teaching theater, I'm making theater, but I'm making it in a little rectangle on a screen. So my daily routine gets really interrupted with that. Normal day to day stuff like going grocery shopping at first it was like I felt like I was in a hazmat suit. I had to go grocery shopping, there's somebody immunocompromised in my household, or rather immunosuppressed in my household, so it makes it very difficult. And the social/emotional thing, like causes paranoia, so it you know, your routine gets upended that way where you would take for granted, kind of like, I have to go and get everything.

**ES 8:14**

All right. And how has COVID-19 affected how you communicate with friends, family and coworkers?

**JL 8:25**

Um, so this is another one of those double-edged sword things. With coworkers, it's naturally, they're not in my face anymore, so I don't ever see them. We have a production meeting or faculty meeting. And then it's again just through Zoom. [unintelligible] daily interaction with, pass in the hallways, I chat with on grades, whatnot, and that's all normal. Friends however, and family it's like other cases. I have--I have a core group of friends that I've had 12, 12 or 13 and every single week on Tuesday, and have been since this started this March. This is a group of friends that I might have seen once, maybe twice a year on holiday or randomly I'd meet one of them. Now, we have wonderful conversations and I think we're really getting to know each other as adults more than we ever have, which is fantastic really. I communicate with my family almost every day, and normally I wouldn't get to in my regular [unintelligible]. a lot of different work. We're learning to understand how to work together in the same space and taking in more of, etc. etc. [unintelligible]. So you know, relationships have been [unintelligible]. This era has led everyone, in unison, several ways, to reopen themselves. To reopen relationships [unintelligible].

**ES 10:33**

Alright, so we're gonna move on and talk about performing arts specifically. Questions on that. So what is your role in the performing arts industry and how has COVID-19 affected it?

**JL 10:51**

My role is two-fold, I'm a {unintelligible] at the theater as I've mentioned, or [unintelligible] at a Theatre Arts at a charter school, an art school majoring in theater arts. So I'm one of the fortunate few that has retained my position full time, it's a major at my school, so there's no way that they not have it, kind of our selling point. What the effect of that is that even if the kids go back to school, being a high school, they'll have to do their art online. Because they're--the administration thing, nobody has figured out how to get it so that we can distance learn these things just based on the way our school is structured. So I'm looking at a year teaching theater online, that's not dictating the world. With my professional life, it has been devastating. I normally will build, [unintelligible] six or seven sets a week. And I'll usually fly out to four or five conferences to, like choreography lessons, and/or [unintelligible] lessons, sometimes the makeup stuff, all of that. In fact, the weekend that all the schools shut down, I was supposed to be in North Carolina at the North Carolina [unintelligible] Festival, and I think they me playing for like thirteen different classes for that weekend. So all of that has been a massive break to one. And all of my, I still have a set up at a school at the other side of the state that hasn't gone down yet. Somebody's still looking at [unintelligible]. And so it's really hard. But reinvention again, somebody found me just recently through drawing, there's a drawing, just kind of like a fun thing that people do called Inktober, where every day in October, you do an ink-based drawing. And somebody's doing Alice in Wonderland out in Ohio as a Zoom. And that means to create all of the backdrop to look like the old illustrations from Alice in Wonderland. So now that's got me rolling like, oh, doing background for theater and performing art. This is a new market. Here we go. And start working toward that. So again, that reinvention that sort of thing. It opens up things the opening the door when--opening a window when a door closes, that sort of thing. I'm trying to handle it and think about it that way, but it really is kind of, it's hard to not [unintelligible]

**ES 14:07**

All right. And how have the delays resuming the performing arts made you or people you know feel?

**JL 14:16**

Made me a what?

**ES 14:18**

How have the delays in resuming the performing arts made you or people you know feel?

**JL 14:25**

Um, I feel very, very down about it. I feel very down about it. As somebody that is directing and does, you know, produces shows as well, I haven't, I can't go ahead and hire the artists I would normally hire. So, the tech director, the musical director, my costumer, my makeup designer. All those things, when I'm putting together a show, when I'm using my math department [unintelligible], my team staff, I can't hire new people back and it's really difficult as somebody that has [unintelligible] where I'm the performative contractor, or the producer, and I watch everything that I've [unintelligible] falling and feels horrible, and not be able to say, Hey, [unintelligible] people that, you know, I rely on, [unintelligible] that I would hire for my class to

bring in. My [unintelligible] because there's no theater. So [unintelligible] teaching art. That's the problem. So I've done a bunch of people that now are going without a paycheck on that hand. Watching my theatrical [unintelligible] just [unintelligible] trying to reinvent something, it's really, really hard. I think everybody that, you know, in the profession, we're all trying to support each other, we're all trying to keep spirits up. But you know that we're all devastated and trying to survive.

**ES 16:22**

Great. Um, so do you think or how can performing arts venues open in a way that meets CDC guidelines?

**JL 16:32**

Oh boy. I don't think we can until the vaccine is very widespread, when it--well, it will not but when that comes, however long it takes for that to come. I don't think even if we say okay, get [unintelligible] and get [unintelligible] out there. [unintelligible] general public that is going to be going back and not wanting to do and be in that enclosed space. And the freedom that the audience has to express to have collective moments where we all laugh or cry or we--we get up, stand on our feet, clap our hands and everybody's there and we're all experiencing it. All of those things that I think people will have a little reticence now that there is a physical and emotional separation that really decades to get over. It's just not--it's never going to be the same. It has to survive, because if it doesn't, I think we'll start losing a lot of our social community but I think it has to survive [unintelligible] different form. And that's, that's what I'm scared of, but, but I'm hoping that we can kind of develop it to work off of [unintelligible] have those emotional moments together, you know. Why theater is just so different, why [unintelligible] of decline, all of those things are there and present [unintelligible] watching it [unintelligible], so there's, again, that collective [unintelligible] part of our audience, [unintelligible] you can play it, record it the form of that, you can do that all you want but when your [unintelligible] can definitely you know, for people, [unintelligible] for people that you can be with for state regulation. What are you going to do that does give you a collective experience. So it's the same five people, you know, so I think that's going to be harmful. I think that payment and looking at the economics of it is very widespread. If you look in New York, you look at 42nd Street, and you look at that whole area. How many people now aren't dining out before or after a show. How many people are not going shopping before, after, during their stay in New York while they're there for some shows. And in local community, same thing. How many people are not going and spending other money while they're seeing the show? How many lumber yards are not working with and getting paid by even the smallest show. That, you know, that thousand dollar lumber delivery that they kind of counted on twice a year is no longer there. Not that lumber is really hard up right now, everybody's trying to get to it. But you understand what I'm saying, the supply chain back there, the local businesses aren't getting the, the things they used to get. We're--I think it's kind of remember that number--it's a multi-billion dollar industry, just the theater and performing arts and arts is a multi-billion dollar industry. But we have to remember is that then cascades to become like, four or five times that in a community. Just a single high school, doing a theatrical

production can potentially earn millions of dollars in a year for their community. And now that's all gone.

**ES 21:11**

Alright, so a little bit ago, you mentioned Zoom backgrounds for plays and drawing those. So what are your thoughts about using Zoom as a vehicle for plays?

**JL 21:23**

Um, it's really interesting. There's a lot of, there's a lot of different technology out there, and it's almost overwhelming, look at how much technology there is out there to play with. I'm trying to do it right now with a show that I'm trying to grow. And it's daunting. I think that Zoom just in and of itself isn't the thing. I think Zoom is that word, it's becoming like Kleenex, we--nobody says facial tissue. Nobody says you know what streaming platform are you using, no, it's where are you Zooming, even if you're leading on Google Meet or something, you're Zooming. And I think there's a lot of different ways, there's so much technology that's ramping up so fast. There's a whole company that--a theatre company, that has created software so you can integrate all of these different platforms and programs, etc., and the theatrical experience is very theatrical. And it has, like, basically, you've got, instead of having a tech booth and turning the lights on in different sections, you've got a tech booth that's switching platform [unintelligible] cameras at the actor's location, so you're getting different things. That's pretty advanced technology. That's the professional level. I think it's doable. Again, I don't think it's the same. You don't have the audience interaction. You know, [unintelligible] is that energy coming off of the audience. You know, I always tell my students, it doesn't matter the size of [unintelligible]. If you had 400 people in front of you, in a packed, you know, small [unintelligible] and they're just silent and not reacting, It's not as good as having four people or forty people that are laughing hysterically, right there with you, going [unintelligible], and so you can you can do coast to coast and have 1000, 2000 people online watching your show, but if you don't hear us, [unintelligible] back, a breathe, anything, what's happening? What's really going on in your television? It's live TV. And I hate to say that. It's so hard now, again, I keep going back, the audience is different. But what makes it so different? The collective feeling. COVID--we can't be collective anyone, we can't breathe each other's air. How can we be, to be in each other's space and hear and exchange laughter? Or exchange, you know, gas at something. It's just [unintelligible].

**ES 24:35**

All right. Thank you. So one thing that I've noticed being discussed more and this might be a little related, is the drive-in alternatives to concerts and Broadway shows. What are your thoughts on those?

**JL 24:52**

I love the concept, and I think that that is, right now we're going to get into the collective. I'm planning a Shakespeare in the park in the spring, kinda do that sort of thing. And I think outdoor ventures are wonderful and fabulous and going back to the need, you know, thinking Greek theater, all outside, all [unintelligible], theater where everybody's watching, that's great. The

problem is, where are major metro, [unintelligible] New York. Where all the major metro centers that we have are generally in the north. There are major metro centers south, etc., but the weather doesn't always cooperate around most of the year. So, you know, I mean, if Disney World can't get more than 25% of their people in that facility, that, you know, we're looking at, it's gonna be a difficulty. I think it's better to have something than nothing. So if you can get out, you can do either in the open air and people are respectful, they have the masks on and they're going ahead and they're staying, they'll be separated, but they're gonna share [unintelligible] has a vibe to it. I think it's a really clever, amazing drive-in concept that as a technician and looking at it going, oh my God, I wish I had thought of that. [unintelligible] it's always permitted to have the car parked underneath the platform where the viewers would go.

**ES 26:39**

All right. So what are some effects that the that the the pandemic is having on performing artists that you feel the media isn't covering?

**JL 26:49**

All of it. Um, I mean, that, there's, there's a lot going on right now. I can't say I blame the media for not covering, you know, the community theater that's shutting down because of COVID, or the theater that's struggling and actually doing something and making something and doing an outdoor show. It might be a blip, here and there, but it was always a blip, unless you were doing something that was related to a current issue that was provoking. Performing arts has been a blip, it's a public interest story. And there's just way too much going on. I mean, today's Election Day, probably one of the most contested that we've ever seen, country's more divided than we've ever seen. And now, with the pandemic on top of it, we're not the big news story right now. And I don't think we should be. I would love the media to associate this with them. But the only thing they're reporting on us is just the same thing they're reporting on everybody else, the horror and the tragic. Very difficult to get the positivity out there for anybody. Especially performance, not especially, but the arts in general, people aren't concerned with it right now. It's about the country's position as a whole.

**ES 28:25**

All right. So we're actually gonna move into the last few questions, and...

**JL 28:29**

Woohoo!

**ES 28:29**

[laughs] We're gonna be focusing on the future. So what do you hope your life will be like in a year?

**JL 28:39**

In a year? I hope I'm back, I hope I'm back in my classroom. I hope I'm interacting one on one with my [unintelligible]. I hope I'm putting together a physical set with new parameters where I

have to seat people maybe a little bit further apart, but that's the thing, the challenge [unintelligible]. Hope that I can [unintelligible] people again that are tremendous ink artists to ply their craft in a way that, that encourages in the prints people want. I know nothing's ever going back to normal, because we shouldn't be looking for back to normal, we should be [unintelligible]. And so that's kind of where I'm at right now. I'm hoping in a year, I'm making a new background for people to do. and a lot of a lot of [unintelligible]. And working more and more as the, as a visual artist now and so I don't know. I don't know what's coming in a year. I, I love doing all of it. So, I'm just hoping that I'm still making art. With my family, nobody, we're all still here and we're all, not only survive, right. There in life, right now, we're surviving. [unintelligible] start [unintelligible] Our, our [unintelligible] that's going to be the difference, and that's what I'm hoping.

**ES 30:28**

All right. So I know this is a bit hard to predict. But when do you think the performing arts industry will resume as, well as normal as it can?

**JL 30:38**

2022.

**ES 30:41**

Alright. And I know you already mentioned that you--you're anticipating that the pandemic, will result in long term changes to the performing arts industry. So, in particular, what kind of changes do you foresee?

**JL 31:00**

You're not going to have a rebound [unintelligible]. You're going to have a 10,000 or 12,000 seat stadium that holds 3000 people. And I think people will [unintelligible] it to go to these places. The more technology that we produce to the alternate means of performing art, as wonderful as it's helping us right now, I think it's also going to be a detriment to getting people to go and see things. And my biggest fear is that the performing arts is going to become an exclusive thing, the professional performing arts, or the upper class and wealthy only, that no one else will be able to afford it because they have to make back the money that they lost and all that cost. Which I can't be against them for that, they're a business, they're gonna make a business, got to make a living. But that economic divide was already on, on the way. I mean, tickets to Hamilton were what 800 bucks a shot to get down the orchestra at one point. What middle class family in America has 800 bucks per person to sit and watch that? We were already seeing it starting to happen, now it's going to happen in force. So I think that's, that's my prediction, is that I, and I hope it's not true, that we end up with professional performing arts being only for, for the rich, only people that can afford it. And that's going to be a really big hit, and there's probably gonna be, you know, fewer people in the, in the shows watching. So the more exclusive they become, it's supply and demand, the higher the price is gonna go.

**ES 33:04**



All right, so this is actually the last question. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about being in theater during COVID-19?

**JL 33:15**

Um, I think I, I have been overly verbose when answering most of your questions. [laughs] I say, being [unintelligible] and trying to make sure that I've met lots of different [unintelligible] during this timeframe, like I've been refining my contemporary drawings [unintelligible].

**ES 34:09**

Alright, well, thank you so much for your time.

**JL 34:13**

No problem. Thank you so much.