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## Apollo Theater Goes Virtual for Amateur Night Auditions

Coronavirus shutdown is forcing the theater to hold auditions via Vimeo and YouTube



*The talent competition is traditionally held live every Wednesday night throughout the year.*

PHOTO: SHAHAR AZRAN/APOLLO THEATER

By [Amber Burton](#)

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For the first time in the Apollo Theater's 86-year history, the music hall will exclusively host online video auditions for its renowned Amateur Night because of the [coronavirus shutdown](#).

The talent competition, which traditionally is held live every Wednesday night throughout the year, brings people together from all over the world in front of a notoriously boisterous crowd. Contestants in the adult category compete to win \$20,000.

Though some audition tapes have been allowed in the past for regional and international contestants, all performers have been encouraged to submit audition tapes of their chosen discipline by Vimeo and YouTube. People typically perform a variety of talents from singing and dancing to comedy and mastery of musical instruments.

The Apollo Theater is one of many theaters in New York state that have been pushed to handle what is traditionally a live process from the other side of a screen.

Kamilah Forbes, the executive producer at Apollo Theater, said recent events have forced her and her team to think more digitally. The theater has canceled about 20 live performances through April 12, in accordance with the state's mandate. But she sees the positives.

"What I think we will see is almost probably a wider array of contestants submitting," said Ms. Forbes.

"I think having just worked in theater, we understand that getting in front of a panel of judges is sometimes some of the most intimidating part of

being a theater actor or performer, et cetera. So to be able to do it from the comfort of your own home—there’s plus sides to it,” she said.



***Contestants in the adult category compete to win \$20,000.***

PHOTO: SHAHAR AZRAN/APOLLO THEATER

Her team plans to review audition videos using Google Hangouts and Zoom. She said the acceptance process won’t change, and so far a date for the live shows hasn’t been set.

Patricia Buckley, co-executive artistic director alongside Leslie Noble at Franklin Stage Company in upstate New York, also sees the benefits of online auditions during this time. An actress herself, Ms. Buckley recently filmed an audition at home for a regional theater audition.

“I sort of rigged up a situation where my friend called me on one phone and I was shooting with another phone, and she was reading the lines off camera to me,” she said. “It turned out great. And I thought, ‘Oh, this is good to know for the future.’”

Ms. Buckley said she thinks the bigger issue is the question of how to move forward with so much uncertainty. Franklin Stage hasn’t made any final decisions regarding cancellations or postponements for the summer theater season.

“You don’t want actors to spend the time preparing for nothing,” she said. They have received about 50 videos thus far. Rehearsals for their summer theater production of “Turn of the Screw” are slated to begin June 9.

Marcus Dean Fuller, the executive and artistic director at Saratoga Shakespeare Company, said, “I told my staff and I tell everybody we talk to, we are moving forward with optimism.”

The theater had planned to host live auditions in New York City this year for two plays, but much like Franklin Stage Company, they were instructed by the Actors’ Equity Association to implement video auditions.

He said that the digital auditions have eliminated “geographic borders” and opened the company up to a larger field of talent that wouldn’t have been able to trek to Saratoga or Manhattan. They have received well over 200 video auditions thus far, and he said it might be the new norm.

He likes that he can close his eyes and truly listen to the actor audition without offending them with this habit in person.

“For us, in a very strange sort of way, it’s very good,” said Mr. Fuller, who points to the fact that Shakespeare wrote many of his greatest works during the plague. He added that Shakespeare gave us a language to help understand these times.

“I think what Shakespeare understood and what probably his times taught him, and what we probably stand to remember, is that we need each other. The act of live theater, unlike on a screen, it brings people together in a community and it helps us see ourselves and see each other. It builds empathy in a time when we need it most,” he said.