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A Heads Up with Faith Boucher

With Covid-19 lockdowns worldwide and health authorities urging people to self-isolate and practice social distancing on a massive scale as part of an enormous effort to #FlattenTheCurve of this global pandemic ... we are reaching out to industry friends, colleagues, associates, partners, etc., and asking them to share their #StayAtHome and #QuarantineAndChill activities with us during this extraordinary time.

Faith is originally from the US, but works as a freelance technician in Dublin, Ireland and is just completing her final year of the Stage Management and Technical Theatre course at The Lir Academy, albeit from home in upstate New York! She's looking forward to flying back to Dublin as well as returning to her work as a lighting technician!

Robe: Where are you right now?

Faith: Currently I am back in Upstate New York with my family, specifically sitting with our dogs avoiding the heat!

Robe: How are things emerging from the lockdown in your region / country?

Faith: Needless to say, things aren't going very well in the US. While things in New York are getting a bit better, much of the rest of the country is in turmoil, both from Covid-19 and the 'Black Lives Matter' movement.

There is a desperate need for change in the United States.

Re-education of law enforcement and reform for many branches and long-standing organisations of our government are necessary. I am not claiming to be the source of the solutions, but I do urge readers to continue to educate themselves and remain aware, because all too often these movements have fallen to the wayside after the initial media attention dissipates.

Robe: How did you spend your time during lockdown?

Faith: I've been baking a huge amount! I've discovered a new love of baked goods and am using the time to work on my cake decorating as well as master some more basic recipes!

I've also recently completed my final year dissertation, which was previously occupying a lot of my time, so that has been a huge relief. I investigated future uses of electrically conductive paint in set, lighting, costume, and sound on stage. The paint is still relatively unused in theatre, so it was a fascinating project!

I have also been participating in talks with AIST (Association of Irish Stage Technicians) with other technicians to try and plan re-opening procedures and future problem solving. I continue to look into virtual lighting programmes and considering the various options.

Robe: What are your biggest concerns / considerations as lockdowns ease worldwide?

Faith: I'm not really sure.

As with many others, I'm worried about things moving too quickly. Covid will of course be a worry for years to come, but if people don't respect the guidelines, I fear we could lose the progress we have made.

The US is a perfect example. With many establishments opening too early, the second wave has been drastically worse than the first. Other countries are managing to perform much better than the US, but it is certainly something which concerns me.

Robe: Do you have any thoughts / predictions about how and when live events and the industry will re-start?

Faith: I imagine things will move very slowly. Generally, I think there will be a push for designers and technicians to do much more significant work before tech to minimise the actual time spent in the theatre.

Programmes like Augment3d have already risen in popularity so I think this trend will continue. Virtual programming and designing will start to take on a much greater role, and designers may have more pressure on them to create and stick to their original plots.

Robe: Going forward, how do you think live events and the entertainment technology industry will change in a post-Covid 19 world before there is a vaccine widely available?

Faith: I can only speak for the atmosphere in Dublin and even then, I haven't had the ability to work full time due to college commitments and being overseas.

While many changes are being talked about for contracted technicians, I'm afraid these leave freelance technicians with little representation. At present, I'm unaware of concrete changes that are being made to aid the protection of freelance and contracted technicians alike.

Intelligent fixtures may be used more in larger-scale venues to reduce the need for technicians to touch different lamps repeatedly, lowering the contamination rate.

The addition of a "Covid officer" has also been mooted. It is a great start, but I know technicians who are being told that if there is no officer, then they must simply step up and take charge themselves. This significantly increases the risk for someone who wasn't in a position to take this role on as part of their initial contract.

Smaller working groups have also been discussed with one or two technicians working closely in a 'pod' to limit contact with others. Many changes that are being reviewed are impossible for Dublin's smaller spaces. There are many conversations still to be had that are aimed specifically at less prominent / large scale theatres.

The Art's Council has recently gained more funding and while I think this is a wonderful sign, I'm not sure how viable it is for these safety measures to be implemented across Dublin's creative scene.

Robe: How sustainable do you think these changes will be?

Faith: Some changes will be permanent (as happens after any catastrophic global event), others I don't think will last as long. Many people often take the stance of safety being secondary, I believe this attitude will continue even with the heightened risks we now have post-Covid.

Robe: Has anyone / anything particularly inspired you since this crisis started?

Faith: My brother who has started learning French during lockdown, as well as taking his finals at London School of Economics, whilst sticking to a new exercise regime AND starting a new job as a writing consultant! I struggle with motivation frequently so seeing his determination and seemingly endless energy has become admirable (while sometimes enviable!)

Robe: Own question / answer / message of solidarity or something you'd like to say?

Faith: Our industry is at great risk; nobody can predict what the future will bring. However, I think this is a valuable opportunity to bring attention to the perceived norm of overwork, burn out, and poor mental health in the theatre sector.

We have each chosen to do long hours with strenuous work in very stressful conditions, however this should not exclude us from taking breaks for ourselves. I have often heard people recommend any technician take every job sent their way, but I disagree. While you may lose some future jobs by turning down one now, the benefit of self-preservation is immeasurable.

Unfortunately, most of us will not be able to work in this industry for the rest of our lives, and we should start keeping this in mind. Taking care of yourself should always come first. Whilst I still intend to be fully committed to theatre, this quarantine has allowed me a moment to fully slow down.

I have realised how detrimental certain times in my life have been to my mental and physical health due to over-working. Some may say this is a personal problem I should manage myself, however I have seen it hundreds of times in my co-workers, mentors, and bosses. We should take this time to make valuable changes.

