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A Heads Up with Grace Halton

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.

Grace is an Irish technician based in Dublin who works between lighting and stage/production management. I am currently working on a show called 'To Be A Machine' with Dead Centre as part of Dublin Theatre Festival.

Robe: Where are you right now?

Grace: I am currently in Dublin at my family home.

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

Grace: Unfortunately, Dublin has moved backwards to a level 3 lockdown which means I am working from home.

Theatre and all indoor events are closed including museums and galleries, and indoor dining in restaurants is not allowed. It is a frustrating situation for many. I am glad that we have locked down as the cases are rising but it has meant that Dublin Theatre Festival has had to cancel/postpone the majority of their programme.

Robe: How did you spend your time during lockdown?

Grace: I was surprisingly busy during lockdown! Having 12 weeks of college remaining when we closed meant that I had to adapt to online learning. I spent several weeks doing pre-production prep for a show that we naively hoped would happen in May. It was eventually cancelled, and we began work on two online Shakespeare's, 'As You Like It' and 'The Comedy of Errors' which I production managed.

It was challenging as we were still in full lockdown while creating these shows and we had cast all around Ireland, in the US and UK, as well as tutors and designers as far away as Australia and Chile.

As well as working on the online shows, I was completing my dissertation on burnout and overwork culture in Irish theatre. The lockdown was a blessing for the research as it meant everyone was available for interviews and the return on my survey was far above what could have been expected were everyone in the industry working.

I also taught online speech and drama classes with Betty Ann Norton Theatre School and escaped to the family farm ... where I took care of a herd of cattle and experienced my first calving season!

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

Grace: I am concerned that restrictions will be eased too quickly to allow other industries to come back sooner which will increase cases causing the arts and live events industry to be closed for much longer.

I am mostly worried that we will lose valuable personnel from the industry because of poor supports that do not acknowledge the unproportionate effect restrictions have on arts and live events.

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

Grace: Thankfully, I have been involved with some live events with Galway International Arts Festival's Autumn Edition. I was also lucky enough to attend a play by Rough Magic at Kilkenny Arts Festival, 'Solar Bones'. Both events were unusual in that there were less than 50 people present, everyone was temperature checked before entering, seating was distanced and face coverings were worn throughout.

What was surprising was how normal these things all felt and how they didn't impact on the enjoyment from being present at either event. I believe with appropriate measures, live events can begin now.

We are a highly trained task force who are used to working with safety in mind and solving problems creatively. However, I don't believe anyone will be given the opportunity to do so at any great scale until at least April 2021.

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?

Grace: As part of my dissertation, I surveyed 300+ people and asked this question.

I hope that the industry will reflect on its work practices and its sustainability. I believe that this forced pause will make us question the necessity of 12 hour calls as standard. Irish Equity has opened membership for technicians and those who work behind the scenes. I hope this will help prevent burnout and make the industry one that values the people within it as much as the art they make.

In practical terms, we will have to implement understudies and deputies more often. We will rely on video calls for meetings and we will design all shows and events with live streaming in mind.

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

Grace: I think these changes are sustainable and I think there is merit in continuing some of them. Individuals should be able to call in sick without worrying that the show can't happen without them, regardless of a pandemic. It was not a sustainable workplace before Covid-19 and so I think a reflection on work practices is necessary.

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

Grace: I have been inspired by all those who have adapted and persevered to create work. Whether the shows were allowed to happen in the end, I hold immense value on their temerity and passion to try.

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

Grace: I think this video sums it up well. Sometimes we have to get sick before we get better and perhaps hindsight is 2020... youtu.be/Nw5KQMXDiM4

