

ONE BROKE ACTRESS

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GUEST AUTHORS: FINDING YOUR CREATIVITY & RUNNING A THEATRE COMPANY IN A PANDEMIC.



We were in the middle of prepping a new show, with a new cast. The photoshoot had been completed. The sweat and heart had been written into each individual story. “Growing Up”, a storytelling show where our performers told stories of childhood and growing pains, was due to air on Thursday, March 26th. When COVID put a stop to our in person shows, we paused. We had a system and we were being told we had to pivot.

As artists and small business owners, we begin to think what does this mean for theatre? What does this mean for film? Storytellers? Actors? When we created our storytelling theater company 'It's Personal' in 2016 we had no idea it would succeed. We just wanted to have a safe space to share personal stories and a platform to have our voices heard, and we suspected other people might feel the same way. Our first show came two weeks after the 2016 election. Our first show, with an audience of about 30 people, became a beacon of light and art and connection in a time of chaos and heartbreak. We are no strangers to the uncomfortable. In light of the world in 2016, we decided to add a charity aspect to our shows, raising money and awareness for different charities each show.

Over the years we have gained popularity and have continued to have performers want to join our company and share their story. We've made money at each show in ticket sales, but have rarely been able to break even with the expenses of theater rental, props, marketing, rehearsal space...the list goes on. But we don't continue It's Personal to make us rich (although that would be nice), we continue it because we love it. When theaters in LA closed, it was the first time we thought...do we have to stop doing what we love? When will we ever be able to perform again?

Our executive team hopped onto Zoom and the brainstorming began. After a month of thought and, "is the world ending?" We decided to turn our show into a Youtube Live show. At first we were adamantly against bringing our show online. The safety of a performer telling personal details of their life to an audience in a closed room is gone when anyone anywhere can stream it. We kept thinking "this will pass and we can do a show in May...or August...or October". The reality started to slowly sink in. This was our new normal.

Our show had to change for this **new online format**. We had to navigate telling a story with no audience applause or laughs. Tell our performers to look into their camera and not at themselves while talking (a sticky note works great to block your self view on zoom). Being grounded vs

being a bit bigger for stage had us adjusting our directing style. Be thoughtful of how much an audience member can listen to someone talking at them rather than being actively in the theater with you. The biggest hurdle was the technical side. 10 different people at 10 different locations with 10 different wifi connections gets tricky. Plus making sure the live stream works and the audience can access it. All this makes for a very stressed and very sweaty director by “lights up”. But miraculously it worked! And people tuned in. And our audience and performer base grew from our small Los Angeles community to all over the country.

The question we most commonly get asked as creators and actors; when do we get a paycheck? Our tiny theater company was pouring every cent into renting a space and buying props pre COVID. Could we even charge for an online show during these incredible tough times? We went back to our mission statement and the heart of why we do what we do. We create because we want to make a difference within our communities. We don't charge for online shows, but we do ask for audience members to purchase a Pay What You Can ticket if they are able. Most of our audience, like us, are unemployed, so we only want people to spend what they are comfortable with spending. We also decided to keep up our core mission of giving back to our community, since so many people need help right now. 25% of total ticket sales received from our online shows goes to a local charity that is close to our hearts.

Pivoting to a completely online platform has been confusing and challenging, but being able to still provide a space for people to share their stories when we really need human connection has been extremely rewarding, and has helped us as much as it has our audience. Taking a step back from our little blackbox theater has helped us in many ways. We've been able to provide dozens of free Zoom classes since the start of quarantine, grow our It's Personal podcast, work on a Playwright Development Series, and develop several scripts to transition It's Personal to film. We will always be a

theater company at heart, but dare we say we're excited for what 2021 will bring.

NEXT SHOW:

It's Personal: Horrifying is a storytelling show about all things horrifying. The performers tell real stories about their horrifying encounters, whether it be with a zoo animal, a ghost story, or a fictional crush. It's Personal: Horrifying airs on Youtube live October 22nd at 5:30 pm PST. To purchase a pay what you can ticket go to itspersonalonstage.com.

It's Personal is a theater company in Los Angeles created by Liz Kummer and Riley Billingsley. You can find tickets for their upcoming Youtube show 'Horrifying' on itspersonalonstage.com. 25% of ticket sales will be donated to Fair Fight. Listen to their podcast 'It's Personal the Podcast' for a deep dive into the making of their storytelling show wherever you listen to podcasts. Learn more about It's Personal on instagram [@itspersonalonstage](https://www.instagram.com/itspersonalonstage).