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The voter registration table at the Public Theater in New York City. (Photo by Emily DeSilva)

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FEATURE | OCTOBER 28, 2020 | 0 COMMENTS

Stage the Vote: How Theatres Are Helping GOTV

How companies across the U.S. are using their talents and networks to encourage and help folks make their voices heard.

BY **ALLISON CONSIDINE**

The conflux of the novel coronavirus, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the looming presidential election has seemingly whipped the world as we knew it into a tailspin. In this time of uncertainty and unrest, theatre companies are finding innovative ways to support their communities with at-home learning opportunities and much-needed virtual entertainment. In the run-up to the election, community outreach and education departments have also focused on civic engagement with efforts to get out the vote.

[Dad's Garage Theatre Company](#) in Atlanta, which has shifted all its programming online, will offer its space as a polling location on election day as part of the county's efforts to reduce the overall number of voters at large facilities. But for many companies across the country, providing [lobby space for voter registration](#) and events has become all but impossible in the era of social distancing, and 2020 efforts have thus been squarely online.

"How could we as a theatre company use our voice through the online platform to encourage people to get out and vote?" asks [Tim Bond](#) (he/him), the newly appointed artistic director at [TheatreWorks Silicon Valley](#). "Democracy, voting, and the upheaval that's been going on in our country the last three and a half years has been very much on my mind and on my heart."

For his part, Bond curated "Voices of Democracy," a video series of poetry by Beau Sia and Langston Hughes. The trio of poetry performances, read by artists from the Bay Area and Silicon Valley, touch on the importance of voting and address racial injustice. "Those two things are really important pillars of our democracy, and they're both under attack right now," says Bond. "I wanted to create something to speak to that." The final poem will be released on Oct. 30. The "Voices of Democracy" initiative also includes the streaming of the company's 2018 production of [Hold These Truths](#), which is available through Nov. 3.

We Out Here by Pyro and Q the Sun



Milwaukee Repertory Theater partnered with [Wisconsin Conservation Voices](#) on its “Voice the Vote” campaign, which features a series of videos encouraging young people to request absentee ballots, show up to the polls, and participate in the census. The collaboration includes four short videos performed by local hip-hop artists, including a few first-time voters. The [videos](#), which were captured outside with social distancing measures, offer snapshots of the current moment. The only parameter for the artists—beyond staying six feet apart—was that the pieces had to be political but not partisan (i.e., advocating for issues but not specific candidates). The songs created for the series will be broadcast on local radio stations during the week of the election.

“It was led by youth voices,” says Jeffrey Mosser (he/him), associate director of education at MRT. “While we had the chance to inform them and give them the message about *why* it is important to vote, they’re the ones who really started to understand it and put it into words and lyrics. They created some really beautiful, awesome, powerful content that I am proud we can share here at Milwaukee Rep.”

Chicago’s [American Blues Theater](#) went straight to the nitty-gritty and created an extensive online [voter registration guide](#) with information about how to register to vote, order mail-in ballots, and find polling places. “We’re also inviting folks to spread the word on their own and to print out posters that we’ve made available to encourage everyone to exercise their fundamental right,” says Francisco Lopez (he/him), the company’s artistic affiliate and director of marketing and communications. Posters have also been distributed to local aldermen, city leaders, and businesses across the Windy City.

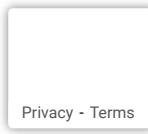


With onstage performances paused, many communi’ partnerships are also on hold, and this project gave American Blues the opportunity to collaborate with other local organizations. As part of the “Our Home, Our Vote” initiative, American Blues Theater is selling civic-minded merchandise, including “Vote” T-shirts and hoodies, with proceeds supporting the nonprofit organization [Chicago Votes](#).

“Our mission has always been to explore stories about the American identity—and there’s probably nothing more American than

exercising your right to vote.”

For its part, [Repertory Theatre of St. Louis](#) brought some levity to the COVID-impacted voting process with an animated how-to guide written by [Annalisa Dias](#). Featuring a flock of colorful birds, the YouTube video was created in partnership with the [Missouri Voter Protection Coalition](#) and outlines how to request ballots, notarize mail-in ballots, and make a plan for in-person voting.



Nearly 30 theatre companies across the U.S. have partnered with “Act Out: Vote 2020” special event created by [Danai Gurira](#), Stephen Daldry, and [Lynn Nottage](#) that will stream on Oct. 29 at 9 p.m. ET. The event will feature monologues and songs centered on getting out the vote. (Other interested companies interested in boosting this event on social media can join the project [here](#).)

“Voting matters for every election, but this Nov. 3rd is even more important,” said Lynn Nottage (she/her) in a statement. “We believe that if the entire theatrical community—a community that has been shut down for six months and will be shut down for a year more—voted, we could help make real, necessary change. Everyone vote!”

The hour-long event will include works from Nottage, Gurira, and Daldry as well as Luis Alfaro, [Saheem Ali](#), Ngozi Anyanwu, [Will Arbery](#), Jocelyn Bioh, [Lileana Blain-Cruz](#), Steven H. Broadnax III, Yvette Nicole Brown, Stephen Daldry, [Lady Dane Figueroa Edidi](#), Danai Gurira, [Ryan J. Haddad](#), Brian Tyree Henry, [David Henry Hwang](#), Lloyd Knight, Lisa Kron, [Tarell Alvin McCraney](#), [Lila Neugebauer](#), [Sandra Oh](#), Martha Redbone, [Heidi Schreck](#), [Leigh Silverman](#), Whitney White, Christopher Wheeldon, and Rhiana Yazzie.

The “Act Out: Vote 2020” event, as well as the aforementioned nonprofit companies, are all spreading the message to vote through a non-partisan lens, as mandated by nonprofit law. Commercial theatre, though, is not bound by such restrictions, and so has come forth this election in support of Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden. The [Broadway for Biden](#) initiative, backed by industry professionals and theatre fans, has been organizing virtual events and concerts to increase voter participation. Its next event will be “Whipped into Shape: For Biden with Nina West” on Oct. 29 at 12 p.m. ET.

Even as the election nears, theatre companies and artists in both the nonprofit and commercial sector recognize that efforts to engage with their respective communities will continue long after votes are tallied. “Our work in dealing with reclaiming our democracy and getting people’s voices out there is not just not only something to be done right now in election season; it’s going to be an effort that we’re going to continue forward with,” says Bond.

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