

ONLINE ACTING ‘FROM HOME’

Some tips, lessons learned, best (or at least good) practices

We find ourselves in a “developing situation” as we navigate the new quasi-normal. New ideas and discoveries will emerge. Some of what is below will fade (or run) away. This is a fluid document—but it gives us a place to start and some things to think about ahead of time to make our time together online as efficient and successful as possible.

If you haven’t done one yet, you might be surprised that online theatrical projects place a much heavier burden on one’s equipment than most people have dealt with to this point—even compared to the current all-online-activities of the plague times. It’s useful to remember that we are *constructing a performance*, not *having a meeting or chat* so everything is heightened—audio, visual, data exchange, perfection-obsession, even sometimes patience(!) It’s not a huge deal if your Aunt Barbara ‘freezes up’ or ‘disappears’ in the family online session, but in a performance...well...it is.

We have no expectations or requirements that a person will purchase new equipment solely for the purpose of doing these shows, but we DO expect that everyone will make their best effort to resolve any prohibitive IT problems discovered in process. We will provide much input/direction about maximizing what one has, including written protocols/instructions, individual consultations, etc. We can also refer you to potential equipment upgrades if you are looking to do so and might, in some rare cases, be able to assist with ‘loaner’ gear.

The operative concept: It’s a rehearsal and leading to a performance. It’s not a ‘meeting.’

GEAR and PLATFORMS

STRAIGHT TALK ABOUT YOUR DEVICE

The demands of this type of work mean that you must use a laptop or desktop computer with decent-to-good camera and microphone built in or attached.

What WILL work:

- Laptop or Desktop computer—less than 4-ish years old, no noticeable lag in your regular usage.
- Decent-to-very-good camera and microphone, free-standing (as opposed to built-in.)
- High Speed web access with 100 Mbs minimum speed, via Coaxial Cable (cable TV) or Fiber Optic.
- Modem and Router of commensurate speed with other gear above.
- Computing unit directly cabled to modem or router (as opposed to WiFi/wireless.)

What WON’T work:

- Mobile Phone or Tablet (iPad, Android, etc.)
- Mobile Phone “Hotspot” connected to computer.

What MIGHT work (which also means “might not work”):

- MS Surface unit no more than 2 years old and with substantial processing speed and operating speed.
- Built-in-to-unit cameras or microphones (if you know how and where to adjust their settings.)
- WiFi (Wireless) connection for computing unit, if all else is of pretty good quality and high speed.
- DSL web access (via phone company/phone line) if using highest possible speed and if you can remove all other users of any kind during rehearsals/performances.

DIGITAL PLATFORMS

For meetings, rehearsals, and recordings, we utilize a combination of [Google Meet](#) (formerly known as “Hangouts”), [Streamyard](#), and [Streamlabs OBS](#). **All of these work best with GOOGLE CHROME. PLEASE DOWNLOAD/FIRE-UP/SET-UP CHROME ASAP AND BEFORE THE FIRST REHEARSAL.** PS—Yes, we have test-driven all the other major platforms and several of the less-major ones; these work best for our purposes. PSS—this could change....

BAND WIDTH

Just like a garden hose, the amount of digi-stuff that can flow in and out of your abode is finite. The more things that are being 'fed' by your system, the weaker or smaller amount of data is available for each item. This is what leads to grainy or jerky images, disrupted sound, freeze-ups, generally poor quality. What are all the things in your environment that operate on Wi-Fi/data? This might include (but not be limited to): other computers, phones, Roku/Fire streamers, Alexa/Google-Assistant systems, doorbells/security systems, appliances, tablets, gaming boxes/devices, neighbors' devices(?), smart TVs, cable boxes and 'regular' old TVs, and so on.

UPSHOT--which of these things can you turn off, unplug, disable for a few hours of rehearsal or performance?

ALSO--can you direct-cable your machine to your modem, bypassing using WiFi altogether?

CUMULATIVE EFFECT

Over time, use of data-heavy processes like video and audio build up 'choke points.' More simply, your set-up and signal might be clear and clean at the start of rehearsal and be grainy, jerk-y, lag-ey, an hour later. It is very likely that you will have to restart your computer, modem, router, and everything else in the middle of a rehearsal to re-set your equipment--sometimes by request of Director or Stage Manager, sometimes by your own discovery. Being attentive to reducing what is using your Band Width as noted above, will help avoid this.

EARBUDS/HEADPHONES

A common challenge is when Person A's voice/talking comes through Person B's speakers and refeeds back into the system through Person B's microphone. This can be avoided by everyone using earphones or earbuds. They don't need to be fancy or expensive--they only need to allow you to hear what's going on. Avoid 'big headphone' type units.

LIGHTING-

The most important thing in getting you to be seen clearly and brightly (enough) is to have adequate FRONT LIGHT; that is, your main light source shining directly in your face at eye level or slightly above. Further, 'back light' (source behind you) should be minimal, and 'down light' (fixture above your head) should generally be avoided. This does not need to be a complicated undertaking--a table or desk lamp (or two) set out in front of you a couple feet can do the trick! Of course if you have or want to get a fancier 'ring' light that is made for this purpose (and is used by all your interweb influencer-types and your talking-heads on cable news,) that's up to you! NOTE--light from your computer screen may or may not be helpful in this regard.

GLASSES/SPECTACLES

We want people to be able to see your eyes, and sometimes glasses' lenses create glare that works against this. If you need to wear glasses, we'll need to explore further how to adjust light source and screen glare to minimize glare.

AUDIO AND VIDEO QUALITY

Oftentimes, cameras and microphones have better or more effective settings than their 'default' ones. We suggest you look into how these adjustments work on your equipment, so you know how to make adjustments if necessary.

NOTE: higher quality audio and video settings usually = use of more 'bandwidth' of data. This might or might not create other/more/different problems (lag, out-of-sync, slow-downs of data exchange, etc.) A happy medium is the goal!

DEVICE CHARGED AND PLUGGED IN

Even the best batteries will not withstand a 3 hour rehearsal or performance that includes heavy data/audio/video processing. Dead battery in the middle of rehearsal is not our friend. Please have your unit fully charged and plugged in before every rehearsal.

TROUBLESHOOTING SOUND, MICROPHONE

FIRST: Check Internal settings in the online program (Meet, Streamyard) for camera, sound.

Some Other Things to Try (MS/Windows)

System search for file: %temp%

Open that file.

Highlight everything in it.

Delete it all.

Windows/Settings/System/Sound/Sound Control Panel/Recording/Microphone/Properties/Levels...and probably turn it up to about 75-80%

Settings/System/Sound/Input-Device Properties (choose the correct device)/Additional Device Properties (right side of screen)/Microphone properties/Listen/"Listen to this device" (check box.)

You may need to restart machine for it to take effect.

You may want to turn it off again for actual use b/c of echo or what not...

Click MS Flag-Thingy in lower left of screen: Then Settings > System > Sound.

Under Output click Device Properties.

In Device properties click Additional device properties.

Click the Advanced tab.

Uncheck "Allow hardware acceleration of audio with this device" and "Enable audio enhancements."

Click OK.

Go back to Sound.

Under Input click Device Properties.

In Device properties click Additional device properties.

Click the Advanced tab.

Uncheck "Enable audio enhancements."

Click OK.

"I'm using an old Blue Icicle. Fix for very low volume and poor quality was to:

1) right click on volume icon and select "Troubleshoot sound problems"

2) click on "Yes, Open Audio Enhancements", then select "Advanced" tab.

3) In the dropdown Default Format pick a sample rate that matches the mic

For an Icicle Blue it is "Sample/Word: 44.1K/16bit" -- The lowest value on the menu.

Default was much higher rate and 24bit.

I was never able to fully resolve my problem, but I "treated" it by turning on "Echo Cancellation" in Microphone Properties under the Enhancements tab. I also boosted my Levels up to 20 db so people could hear me.

My mic still relays my computer's audio, but its tolerable now. I further reduced the issue by going to Speaker Properties and turning on "Environment" and "Loudness Equalization" in the Enhancements tab."

“Broadcast” setting, see ‘auto echo cancellation’—it may help to turn this OFF or ON, depending on your problem.”

A troubleshooting page with lots of things to check out:

<https://www.makeuseof.com/tag/fix-microphone-problems-windows-10/>

MY ACTING SPACE

CAMERA DISTANCE AND SPACING

-You need to sit closer to camera than you think-- 12-15 inches from nose to camera lens!

-You'll get some feedback initially about this from director, videographer, or stage manager, and then you'll want to be cognizant of your spacing consistently. On a related note--you'll want to get used to holding relative 'stillness' in the frame when you are 'on.' This is especially important when you are 'in' a scene but someone else is talking (just like on stage most of the time...)

-If you leave your 'acting' area in your house, when you return you need to take care to sit and position in exact same spot. Your 'square' in the video program will stay constant throughout, so you must fit in it the same all the way through.

SILENCE ALL AROUND

Ancillary noise can be one of the biggest challenges of 'performing from home'--harder to control, sometimes unexpected, often distracting to the performer and the viewer/listener. Think about your 'performance' space--can you close it down? dampen outside noise somehow with blankets or etc? remind roomies? placate pets?

LOOK DIRECTLY INTO THE CAMERA-



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this is trickier than it first appears. The tendency is to look at the person/people you are talking to--and your camera is above or below or beside those images. It just takes some practice.

SOUND AND VID CHECKS

Because of how streaming and broadcasting systems rely on things happening in real time, it becomes difficult to save or carry-over all the various connections from your 'stream' along with 10 other people from one rehearsal to another. Please be forewarned that you may have to log onto the 'system' as much as two or more hours ahead of go time in order to get your stream correctly linked and situated in the operations program.

SCRIPT—ON PAPER, OR...?

We will provide one. We can provide a paper one in or for a 3-ring binder, but many people discover that they prefer to use a digital/pdf/online version, because a paper one can disrupt the smooth flow of their digital acting space—monitors, machines, wires, lights, etc. Also please note that paper rustling noise can be very loud to the listener if it happens close to your microphone.

WHAT'S BEHIND YOU?

The director or videographer may talk with you about seeking some kind of uniform background. If not, a good starter goal is to find something that is neutral in color, not too bold or distracting in shape or line or 'perceivable items' (photos, toys, etc.) It is also helpful to have some space of a few feet between you (your back) and your 'back wall.'

"OFF-STAGE" TIME

Remember that when you are 'off-stage' from being in a scene, you will usually need to remain connected to the video meeting platform at all times. This means you will also need to be mindful and practiced at turning your microphone off (and back on) in the online program. A lot.... We'll make sure you know how to do that.

CHECKLIST:

MUST DO'S" BEFORE EVERY REHEARSAL AND PERFORMANCE

- Restart unit before every rehearsal.**
- Restart wi-fi including modem, router, etc.—unplug, replug, start, etc.**
- Turn off WiFi connection on your phone.**
- Clean off camera lens with soft cloth and Windex-ish fluid.**

OTHER REALLY IMPORTANT STUFF

- turned off or disengaged all non-essential systems re: WiFi system.
- confirmed with housemates to avoid use of WiFi-connected machines.
- connected direct cable from modem to machine (if possible)
- switched off Wi-Fi on my phone.
- earbuds connected and working.
- front light/s at or slightly above eye level set up and turned on.
- back light/s minimized.
- down/overhead light/s off or seriously minimized.
- device fully charged AND plugged into power source.
- doors, windows, shades closed to reduce noise in 'acting space.'
- roomies and pets reminded about noise.
- Sound-dampening items in place.
- screen, microphone, and other stuff is correct distance from my face
- You need to sit closer to camera than you think-- 12-15 inches from nose to camera lens!
- If you leave your 'acting' spot in your house, when you return you need to take care to sit and position in exact same spot. Your 'square' in the video program will stay constant throughout, so you must fit in it the same all the way through.
- back wall in place, neutral, and a correct distance from chair.

- aware and ready to turn audio (and maybe video) off when I'm "offstage."