



A L P I N E T H E A T R E P R O J E C T

ATP KIDS: YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN

A MUSICAL IN ISOLATION

HOW WE DID IT

FIRST SOME BACKGROUND

We weren't planning on making a movie. Let's just state that straightaway. We were a week into rehearsals on the show with our 18 students when we went into lockdown. We'd really only rehearsed the ensemble vocals in Act 1. When the "stay at home" order came from the State, we were faced with the very real prospect of cancelling the show. Our director, Betsi Morrison, started trying to come up with solutions, but it soon became clear that any in-person rehearsal and performance was not going to be possible. However, Betsi was adamant that cancelling was not an option for us as it would send a defeatist message to both the students and our community. Frankly, that's just not our style. So, Betsi decided we were going to make a movie - albeit one that would have to be rehearsed and recorded in isolation. And, just to up the challenge, Betsi was determined to do it all within the timeframe of the original production, which meant we had 5 weeks to rehearse, record, and edit the whole thing.

Betsi began reconceiving the show for video, going back over the script and trying to figure out what it would look like. Her original concept was to have students perform "Brady Bunch Style" in boxes via Zoom video conferencing, but in front of green screens so we could control the background. She ordered green-screens and costumes via Amazon and had them shipped directly to the students' homes, as well as props either ordered or made by our Production Manager, Rachel Burke. It became clear after one rehearsal, however, that the discrepancy in timing between each student on Zoom was going to make that platform impossible to use for performance. The lag was just too great. We knew then that each student would have to record both audio and video separately and we would have to edit it all together. The idea of a "virtual choir" has been around for 10 years after composer, Eric Whitacre, launched the idea. We decided to take that idea and put it on steroids.

Also, since the students were going to be in front of green screens, there wasn't any need to keep them in box frames like we'd originally planned. We could - conceivably - create the illusion that they were in the same room together. We just had to figure out how to do it - and do it all in 5 weeks.

WORKFLOW

Creating each scene was essentially a 4-step process: (1) rehearse the music/scene/choreography, (2) create the audio files needed, (3) record and compile the video files, (4) edit the entire project scene by scene. To try and track progress, I created a giant spreadsheet in Google Drive with each musical number, scene, student, etc, listed and then a volunteer parent helped me update the spreadsheet to track what had been completed.

Step 1: Rehearsal

Rehearsal for the musical numbers mainly consisted of either Zoom conferences with the students muted where I would plunk out parts and talk about style. I would encourage the students to sing along, but they had to be muted otherwise it would have been a cacophonous mess. For solos, it was usually phone calls or Facetime to coach the student.

For choreography, Betsi would record separate videos of her performing each part and then share those with the students via YouTube to rehearse.

For scenes, Betsi would hold Zoom conferences with the students and talk through their "blocking" including exactly where to look and when to give the illusion of interactivity.

Step 2: Recording Audio

For musical numbers, I recorded "scratch tracks" where I sang each vocal part, including principals, and exported each separate scratch track. We distributed these to each student via email as an mp3 to rehearse to and eventually sing along to when recording their vocals. To record, the students would play the scratch track through headphones on a separate device and sing their parts into their phones as voice memos. They would send these back to me as mp3s via email. I'd upload the mp3s to a Google Drive folder shared with our friend Eric Michael Krop in LA, who would try and clean up the raw voice memos so they didn't sound so "phone-like, and EQ as best he could. He would then upload the cleaned files to a separate Google Drive folder. I would then take the files that Eric cleaned and mix them into a master song track using Adobe Audition that we would use as playback for the video recording. Toward the end, Eric also began mixing ensemble vocals when I got too swamped with video editing.

For scenes, audio was recorded live with the students' video recordings. More on that later.

Step 3: Recording Video

As I'd mentioned earlier, Betsi had green screens, costumes, & props delivered to each student's home. We needed as much quality consistency among the students' videos as possible, so we created a little tutorial video on how to setup the screen and create some basic lighting using whatever was around the house. Students used everything from textbooks to boxes to prop up their phones or tablets to record.

Before shooting a scene or musical number, Betsi would hold a rehearsal call on Zoom with the students to look at each costume and setup in hopes of maintaining some quality control. After talking through the scene again with students and checking last looks, they were sent off to record things on their own.

For musical numbers, students were sent an mp3 of the song with a mixdown of vocals. Students would either use a separate device to playback audio while recording video or they would wear earbuds.

Scenes were the most difficult. After much trial and error, we decided it was best for all students in the scene to video record their performances simultaneously, while talking to each other via phone (or group phone call). It was the only way we found to get a semblance of timing and organic reaction out of the students. Obviously, this created a lot of extraneous dialog in each student's recording. For instance, in Andrew's (who played Frederick Frankenstein) videos, you could always hear the other people in the scene coming through a speakerphone. These all had to be edited out eventually.

Once the scene/number was recorded, students would upload their videos to a shared Dropbox folder. We also had to use iCloud and, in some cases, run USB drives back and forth to homes when internet speeds prohibited uploading quickly.

Step 4: Editing

Once we had all the raw files, it was time to put it all together.

The first step was to cut out each student and get rid of the green screens. We used the Keylight effect in Adobe After Effects to take out the green screen and export the new file with an alpha channel so we could layer the students and put in backgrounds.

Betsi would research and compile backgrounds & effects she wanted. We used services like Videohive, Pond 5, and Shutterstock for these. This also included any After Effects templates, like the newspaper template in "Together Again."

Each day, Betsi and I would sit down in our little office at home (when we weren't homeschooling our 8 year old twin sons) and Betsi would talk me through how each scene should look, what backgrounds to use, and where each actor should be placed. She had the whole thing storyboarded out in her script. We compiled the whole thing in Adobe Premiere Pro. I would edit each scene as a separate "sequence" in Premiere Pro so as not to have a single, two-hour-long sequence to export at the end.

A lot of trial and error happened during this phase. We were teaching ourselves as we went along, consulting YouTube tutorials, message boards, and texting industry friends. There were times where we had to adjust things because a student had shot too close, or looked the wrong way, or dropped a line, etc. There were only a few instances where we asked the students to reshoot. Keep in mind, they were getting swamped with distance-learning work from their school teachers, and we tried to be sensitive to that. We were all finding our way.

Each of the 4 steps in this workflow was happening simultaneously: we were recording/mixing audio on later scenes while we were recording/editing video on previous scenes we'd already recorded audio for, etc. The tracking spreadsheet became more and more valuable to figure out what we'd completed and what still needed work.

We eventually exported each sequence/scene in Premiere Pro as a separate mp4 video file and then pieced all those together into one master sequence. We then exported that as the final video and uploaded it to YouTube. That whole process took about 6 hours - 5 hours longer than we'd hoped. We were determined to have the video uploaded and live by 7pm on April 26. It finally went live at 12:30am on April 27.

LESSONS LEARNED

We had major technical problems. We had originally planned on doing everything on our company's 2012 iMac and Macbook Air. After working on one scene, we found out neither had the graphics processing power even close to what we needed to accomplish this in the time allotted. We ended up borrowing our Board President's 2019 iMac with a beefed up graphics processor. We also had a major data storage issue, and didn't realize it until we'd maxed out the 3TB of storage on the iMac and had to shut down editing. We ended up buying a new 4TB hard drive and transferring all files to that, which put us back a day.

I'm sure there were plenty of times when the kids had no idea what was going on, either, since they didn't know what the final product would look like, but they trusted Betsi and gave it their all. Betsi was in constant contact with the students giving them positive feedback (or pushing when appropriate) to keep them energized and motivated. I am so impressed with the students' willingness to jump into the void and give it their all despite performing in a complete vacuum.

The end result stands as a marker of what we as a group were able to do together to keep a project alive despite seemingly insurmountable obstacles. It is not perfect, and certainly rough in a few spots, but the experiment was to create it within the original timeframe. We also had to do it with the money and personnel available.

In the final analysis, though, the entire project was really to show the students (and us) that creativity and hard work can provide solutions to tough challenges. Creativity will show you new paths and hard work will help you move forward down those paths. We here at ATP have a mission to imagine, create, and inspire for the betterment of our community all those who interact with us. And when the mission is all that matters, you'll find a way to keep it going. Of course, you have to be just crazy enough to think it's possible.

If you have any further questions on this project, feel free to contact me at luke@atpwhitefish.org. Thanks for reading.