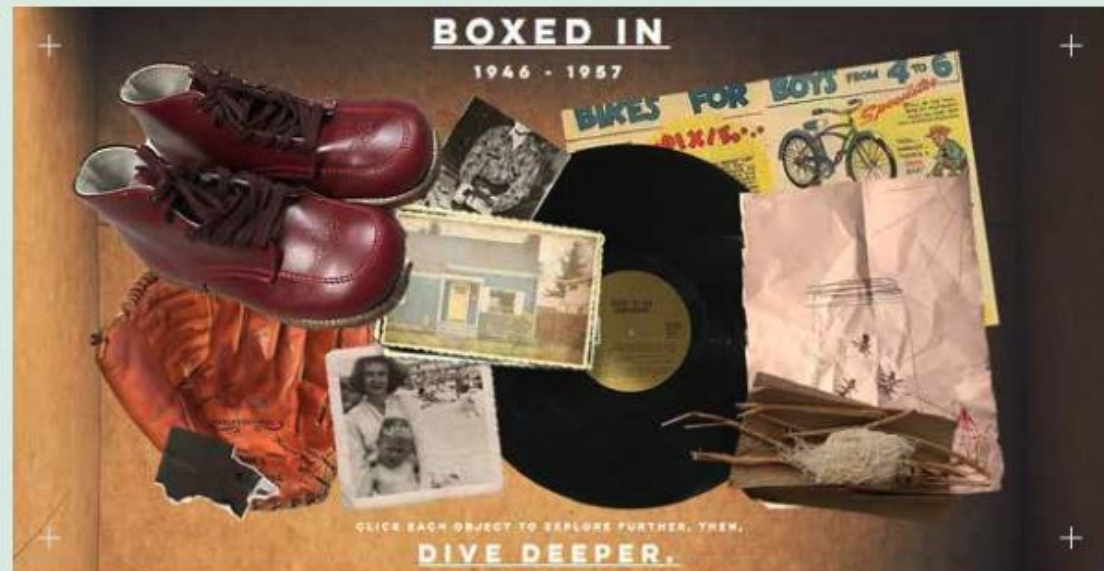


CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE

Theatre Students Reimagine
Play for Pandemic

By **RACHEL WOJNICKI**
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Director Stephanie LeBolt had been rehearsing the play *Boxed In* for two weeks when the pandemic put Chicago on lockdown.

"At first, it felt like all that hard work went up in smoke," LeBolt says. "Theatre is fundamentally a thing that happens live and in person. It seemed impossible to make theatre without being together and without a live audience."

LeBolt soon learned the way forward would take creativity and collaboration. The artistic process would uncover possibilities for art, and their careers, that LeBolt and her classmates had never considered before. With this approach, LeBolt and her team turned student playwright Connor Bradshaw's

world-premiere play into a virtual, choose-your-own adventure experience.

"The biggest take away is to just keep going," says LeBolt, a rising MFA 3 student studying directing. "I couldn't have predicted this was the thing we were going to make, but we kept at it and something emerged."

A 2020 BFA graduate, Bradshaw wrote *Boxed In* to uncover the oftentimes hidden stories of the parents of serial killers. When the pandemic shifted everyone to remote learning, LeBolt and her small team quickly shifted gears to "make something." In reimagining their production, the team had to ask questions not typically associated with theatre: How long are

people's attention spans online? What kind of performance works in a digital format? Can we capitalize on the internet itself? Can we give the audience choices and not lock them into a uniform experience?

"It was difficult," LeBolt says. "It was like we'd thrown a grenade at this play Connor had spent so much time on, and now had to figure out what to create with the pieces left behind."

After several weeks of brainstorming, rewriting, Zoom rehearsals, edits and curation, the team finished the new *Boxed In*, developed in a choose-your-own-adventure multimedia format. The interactive digital format invites viewers to uncover stories and secrets



Director Stephanie LeBolt



Playwright Connor Bradshaw

as they make their way through the spooky project:

"Today you'll go on an adventure where you can chart your own path. Like archaeologists at Pompeii after the eruption, you will have to carefully sift through what has been left behind in order to put the pieces together. But careful—some secrets might be better left buried.."

The production takes the audience through approximately 90 minutes of mystery and discovery in a portrayal of grief, love and shame. To pull the project together, the team had to design and rehearse audio recordings, create visuals and dig up historical videos, and even bring on a web designer.

"I am incredibly proud of Stephanie, Connor, and the cast and creative team for *Boxed In*," says Lisa Portes, head of directing in The Theatre School. "Their deep understanding of the story they wanted to tell anchored them as they translated the project to an entirely new format. Their ability to pivot in crisis and their wild creativity astonished us all."

Beyond being able to put together an entirely new project in such a short amount of time, LeBolt notes the collaboration of her team was her spring's biggest success.

"As a director, I'm used to spending a lot of time planning and knowing where I'm pointing the team," she says. "On *Boxed In*, none of us knew where we were

going and we had to figure out every piece together. It really was a group effort and we believe the product is better for it."

Like many who had to adjust to the new reality created by COVID-19, this experience has brought LeBolt skills and lessons she plans to carry into the future.

"I also am now thinking about my own artistic skillset and interests differently. I'd love to continue creating multimedia performance pieces in the future that engage with making art that is an event, and not relying on what is tried and true. As we've seen during this shutdown, if the arts want to survive, they need to be responsive to this moment. We need to be making art for a new generation of audiences who process information differently."

Boxed In is free to the public and available until spring 2021.