

# AMPERSAND



I managed to beat the rush hour traffic and make it to the Ruby Theater a few minutes before curtain. A few costumed audience members lingered outside with devil horns and fluffy halos. I forgot that it was almost Halloween, and felt out of place in my corporate attire. I ran into my friend, almost spilling a cocktail on my white button-down. Piling into the small, dark theater, cozying up to our velvet seats, we watched the show.

That was nearly a year ago, in 2019, when the term “corona” still evoked thoughts of beer—not fear. But I distinctly remember the start of that show.

The brief moment of silence in between cues, when lights go down but the music has yet to start, is magical. Seeing live theater is a singular and communal experience. There is something personal and intimate about sitting in a theater among strangers.

While I personally miss that sensation, I think I am not alone. Everyone has their own story as to what they miss during the COVID-19 pandemic. What do you miss?

In speaking with friends and peers, there is a longing for the singular experience of live performance.

“Feeding off of other people’s energies,” “being able to give space and time to other people to tell a story,” “the vulnerability,” and “the dare to go wrong” were some of the specific reasons why my friends and peers miss from live theater.

We will most likely miss these feelings for a while. Dr. Fauci, a household name and the nation’s leading infectious disease expert, said it is unlikely theater will return to normal until mid 2021.

But when there's a will, there's a way. Theater artists are looking to adapt. One company trying to do this is It's Personal, a Los Angeles-based solo performance company founded by Riley Billingsley and Liz Kummer.

I was able to see one of the company's live productions last October. *It's Personal: Horrifying!* was a collection of personal stories of varying 'horrifying' themes—from forgetting to wear a Halloween costume in elementary school to moving overseas without warning. We were invited to watch these intimate vignettes from the performer's personal lives.

When the show ended, most of the audience remained in the theater as cast members came from the wings in their normal attire and Halloween costumes. I felt as though I had left a show and been invited to someone's Halloween house party. Given the often lonely and disconnected nature of Los Angeles, this sense of community was the most striking sentiment of the night.

I think the most ironically horrifying thing is that *Horrifying!* is the last advertised show on the It's Personal website under the, "[Come See Our Show](#)" page. It's a page that is no longer listed after they revamped their website. The photos of the cast and the show information make me feel like I've stumbled upon a digital relic from The Before Times of COVID-19, which has left even the largest theaters shuttered indefinitely.

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Liz Kummer (left) and Riley Billingsley (right) onstage during rehearsals for *It's Horrifying!* pre-pandemic.

When I first interviewed Billingsley and Kummer, it was after *Horrifying!* They were planning on also releasing a podcast and eventually exploring film performances.

Nearly a year later, the podcast is up and running, they host online classes, and their newest performances are all filmed—over Zoom.

To prepare for their shows, the cast usually begins by swapping personal stories and selecting what is the most compelling.

“I think both Liz and I were feeling a little creatively stuck when we started [It’s Personal], and now we just keep having the momentum to keep going, to create your own work to survive in Los Angeles,” Billingsley said.

Billingsley and Kummer became friends while they both were studying at Columbia College Chicago. The two took a solo performance class and wanted to use that form of storytelling when they moved to Los Angeles to pursue their careers.

Their first show was right after the 2016 election, which left them helpless and eager to give back to the community in some way. One major aspect of their in-person productions is charity. A portion of sales from each performance goes to different charities in Los Angeles like Planned Parenthood, the Downtown Women’s Center, or Inner City Arts.

“It’s been truly amazing how many people have donated,” Kummer said. “It’s been really nice to learn about different charities basically in our backyard and just to know that we are privileged enough to be making art and helping the community learn about these different charities.”

A sense of community has also formed around the company, in part due to the personal nature of their storytelling.

“It’s like therapy in a sense where people can feel like it is a safe space where they can really share how they feel,” Billingsley said.

Julia Stier has performed with It’s Personal a few times and the company was her first experience with solo performance.

“It was something that I’ve always been really interested in, but was terrified to do it,” Stier said. “I also was never sure that I had a story worth telling. They just made me realize that my personal experiences and my attitudes towards my personal experiences is [sic] a story.”

Solo performance has meant a lot to Billingsley and Kummer individually. “It saves me,” Billingsley said. She worked as a waitress at one point and felt that having a place to share her thoughts was important as she spent so much time catering to

others. “It’s Personal saves me from that part of starting as an actress in L.A. when a lot of the material you’re doing is not necessarily creatively fulfilling or very personal to you. You get to talk about the things that you care about and you get to feel like you’re being heard.”

Now that theaters are closed, this work and sense of community has become even more important to them and those who work with them.

“I think that our team kind of benefited,” Billingsley said. “Not that COVID was a positive thing, but because the majority of our crew was unemployed or furloughed, they had this time all of a sudden.”

Before COVID-19, Billingsley and Kummer took on a great deal of responsibilities in the company. Being both friends and business partners, the two spent a lot of time together. “I text Riley more than my husband,” Kummer said with a chuckle. The company truly is a passion project, requiring long hours and complicated schedules when trying to also audition and work two full-time jobs. Shutdowns due to COVID-19 lessened that stress slightly.

There was a learning curve when transitioning online. “It kind of felt like starting over, we finally got into this formula of understanding how our offline shows worked and then all of a sudden it was like, no, gotta start from scratch,” Kummer said.

Their first online performance, *Survival*, broadcasted in May. The two realized there were more factors at hand than they initially considered, like internet connection, lighting, memorization, and costuming, that are harder to make the show feel cohesive.



Billingsley and Kummer on stage during It's Personal rehearsals for *Horrifying!* pre-pandemic.

But the heart of their performances—personal storytelling—remains unchanged.

“I still am very emotional about many of the pieces that I’ve seen,” Billingsley said. “People just sitting in a room, telling a story with no audience present, because it’s real stories. It’s their real life. I think our brand of theater lends itself really well to just hearing people talk.”

While the performances are recorded and rewatchable, there is still an ephemeral quality to their work. “What I do really love about It’s Personal is...you get to [use] what is affecting me right now and put it out there,” Stier said.

Since their content is original, they were also able to record their previous live performances and publish them online for an audience outside of Los Angeles. Their digital production process also allows for members to contribute from outside of Los Angeles. In our last interview, Billingsley was packing to spend a few months in Michigan.

“I would never normally move away for any extended period of time because I would miss out on my company and my acting, all of these things,” she said. “But it’s actually fine right now, because it’s all online.”

No matter the medium, the company’s focus is to help people share their own stories and connect to others. “I think everyone has a story to tell,” Billingsley said. “No matter if there’s someone who went to acting school and doesn’t want to act, whether it’s someone who’s never been on a stage before in their life, whether you know their writer or they don’t feel like they’re a writer or whether they think I have something personal to say or not. It’s all about [how] everyone has something to say and everyone can go on stage and talk about something personal.”

I felt that energy the minute I first stepped into the theater to see *Horri-fying!* last October, watching the audience members and cast mingle and connect, in person, over their experiences. Now, a year later, the company created a new version of *Horri-fying!* for a digital audience.

When watching the online performance, I couldn’t help but reflect on my in-person experience at their show a year ago. How far away it feels. The topics have changed, but the echoes of the connections they sparked remained in the livestream comments that flit by next to the video—confined to a small, black box, hypothetically just as they were before.

<http://www.ampersandla.com/getting-personal-onstage-and-off/>