CROSSING THE AETHER-NET: COMMUNITY AND THE THEATRE OF TEAM STARKID

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ABSTRACT

Communication technologies have changed the way human beings interact. Notably, our understanding of what constitutes a community has shifted from a geographic one to a spiritual one. This shift begins to question the liveness and presence that are believed to be at the heart of performance’s ontology. If we no longer need to share a physical space with our community, does our performance need to share a space with its audience? The group Team StarKid is creating work that is designed and distributed with an Internet audience in mind, and its success speaks to the growing demand for work integrated with technology.

In this study I examine the work of Team StarKid through the lens of community theatre, looking at the ways features of community theatre such as audience engagement and a connection to the community have been filtered through the Internet age. This study includes looking at the work through the lenses of both media studies a la Marshall McLuhan, as well as the participatory cultures of Henry Jenkins. Data was found through StarKid’s work, performance reviews, and interviews from the cast. The group’s use of social media as a way of connecting with their fans also prompted the use of social media for data collection: fans were interviewed about the group using Twitter.

Upon examination, the group seemed to maintain a relation with its fans that was not unlike those relationships formed between community and community theatre. Team StarKid reflects the Internet culture in which it was created, exposes that community to theatrical performance, encourages participation, and depends on its community for survival. Team StarKid’s works, and their willingness to post the shows online for free, have created an
audience base that can be labeled as a fandom: their fans are passionately engaged with the
group and attend concert tours and convention appearances that feature the group. The group’s
work should be looked at as an example of the integration of performance and technology in the
digital age, and potentially as a herald of things to come.
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To my family: thank you for your unending support. You’ve always encouraged me to push myself, and it’s because of you I’m here. To my friends: your support has meant the world to me. I will never stop feeling grateful. Finally, to my loving and very patient husband: an eternal and never-large-enough thank you. This process has been long, but you’ve been with me for every step, and I would not be here without you.
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INTRODUCTION

“We’re like long lost brothers who
found each other and
love each other like family.
You are my bro. Mi amigo.
And where I go, is where we go.”

-“The Dynamic Duet”, Holy Musical B@man!

Many of those who have made a living (or at least a hobby) out of theatre, when asked about how they caught “the bug,” will summon images of a local playhouse or a school stage. Quite possibly it’s a small one, where they worked their way up from the chorus to the spotlight, or maybe painted sets, or ran the fly system. Maybe all they did was watch, but they never missed a performance. Occasionally the memory is accompanied by a misty-eyed recollection of how everyone there “felt like family.” For me, it was Weathervane Playhouse in Akron, Ohio.

Like many other local playhouses, almost everyone was a volunteer. Others in the area had several professionals on staff that lent the productions a sense of formality. Still, the sense prevails of an earnestness, a commitment to the work, and to each other. It is certainly a rose-colored image, and one that is a popular cultural touchstone. Whether it is the rag-tag bunch of misfits making up Glee’s New Directions, the plucky band of High School Musical, or the misguided adults of Waiting for Guffman, the message is usually similar: if we work together, we can make something magic happen and touch a lot of people. We can all have our moment to shine.

I wonder how that message would come across if the image I were to conjure instead was one of me sitting alone at my desk, laptop open and headphones on, watching a pre-recorded performance in another city. It certainly doesn’t seem to have the kind of camera-ready brotherhood of the previous example. Yet I am engaged. I’m laughing, clapping, cheering, and
maybe even singing along. My laptop is chiming with notifications as my friends share in my experience. I may not have painted the set, but I feel responsible for this performance. I may not have grown up with the actors, but I feel I know them. I may be the only person in the room, but I am anything but alone.

Such is the theatre of Team StarKid, the YouTube darlings that have made their name with irreverent parody musicals you can tap your toe to. They don’t have a set performance space. They don’t have season ticket holders. They don’t really have a season. Yet their audience is growing daily, and their supporters are just as earnest as any from Akron. Team StarKid may not look anything like my Weathervane, but I find it feels remarkably similar. As we will see, our conception of what constitutes community has changed as technology has changed. Perhaps surprisingly, what constitutes our community theatre has not. StarKid may not have a physical community, but that doesn’t mean they are not an active member of one. We may not all be sharing a physical theatre space, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t community theatre.

I recognize that “community theatre” is a term that summons a lot of personal meanings. Depending on the community you come from, your understanding of what “community theatre” looks like may be entirely different. For the purposes of this discussion, I am looking at one fairly specific model that grew from the Little Theatre movement in the United States. As opposed to the devised or group-created works familiar to community-based theatre groups such as El Teatro Campesino or Bread and Puppet Theatre, I’m looking at what are essentially smaller regional theatres that cater to a specific community. Their works are created and presented to the community, and not as much by it. This distinction highlights the role of the public in the creation of the artistic offerings. These are a more passive audience, whose primary aim in coming to the theatre is more likely to be entertainment than education. To offer a distinction, I
will use the capitalized Community Theatre to indicate that I am speaking specifically about the theatre model discussed in the next section.

As much as I will begin to define what I mean by Community Theatre, and what principles of it I see at play in the theatre of Team StarKid, this text is not meant as a study of Community Theatre itself. I have found, however, that some of the terms and ideas associated with Community Theatre, specifically as presented in this text, provide a vocabulary with which we may discuss many of the facets of Team StarKid’s performance. In order to have this discussion, I need to make sure that are vocabulary is shared. As we will see, Team StarKid’s Internet theatre offers many points for examination. I am using the Community Theatre as a starting point to allow us to narrow our focus to the ways in which StarKid creates and maintains a community; to facilitate that focus, I’m offering a very specific rendering of Community Theatre.

COMMUNITY THEATRE

In their 1959 book *Community Theatre: Idea and Achievement*, Robert E. Gard and Gertrude S. Burley sought to create a picture of American Community Theatre. In the process, Gard and Burley offer a few definitions for the form. First, Community Theatre is “essentially theatre that is done at the local level, amateur or volunteer in origin and spirit, yet not necessarily unprofessional” (3). Gard and Burley, throughout the overview of their work, expand on this idea. Community Theatre being “local” and “volunteer” is echoed through their assertion that “The uniqueness of Community Theatre lies in its dependence upon the particular community in which it has its roots, and in which it conducts theatre activity by involving as much of the community as possible” (6). Community Theatre is marked by its deep involvement with and dependence on the community from which it originates. Aside from depending on the
community, Community Theatre must serve it, with its key focus being “to expose a community to continuing living theatre, and to provide a participation outlet for such theatre talents as may exist in a particular community” (6). Community Theatre should provide access to performance, as well as offer opportunities to be involved with the process.

With these descriptions, Gard and Burley are themselves expanding from a previous definition (and the coining of the term). Louise Burleigh described Community Theatre as “any organization not primarily educational in its purpose, which regularly produces drama on a noncommercial basis and in which participation is open to the community at large” (Gard 9). Gard states that a current definition would “need to be broader” to include theatre that is:

…localized in a particular community and depends upon that community for its artistic and material existence. The extent of that dependence may include complete public participation in the sense that the process of playmaking is open to any volunteer; or the group may be professional in nature in that all or a part of an acting or producing staff is employed. The essential consideration is the necessary involvement of the community itself in the well-being and continuation of the group as a recognized community enterprise in which the citizens take pride, and to which they may look for theatrical entertainment of a better-than average kind. (9, emphasis mine)

Gard and Burley expand the definition to include more models for Community Theatre making, as they recognize that the form may not look identical from theatre to theatre. John Wray Young, in The Community Theatre and How It Works (1957) also explores the multiplicity of Community Theatre forms. He posits that as the Little Theatre movement led to a boom in
Community Theatre, the lack of any type of governing bodies for these theatres meant that each theatre went through:

the rough-and-tumble of learning survival without help from a national body…
the theatres which have continued have evolved a certain rugged
individualism…In a time when so much of our living, our education, and our
entertainment has been regimented into national patterns, the community theatre
today exists as hundreds and hundreds of local structures. In many cases they hold
a fresh quality mirroring their respective towns or locales. (131, emphasis mine)

As these authors recognized, Community Theatre was about more than a specific business
structure; Community Theatre was shaped by the population it served, and responded to that population’s needs.

Adding to this multitude of models, some of these small theatres grew into popular,
professional endeavors, while others remained small and relatively unknown. Today we often
talk about Regional theatres, which can muddy the conversation about Community Theatre.
What distinguishes the two is often size and professionalism. These theatres in many cases
belong to an overarching professional organization, such as the League of Resident Theatres or
the Theatre Communications Group. They may be Equity playhouses. Regional theatres often
have more resources, larger staffs, and everyone involved is frequently a professional (in this context, meaning specifically that they get paid). As these authors have noted, however, the payment of participants does not necessarily mean that a theatre is no longer serving the community. Regional theatres can be Community theatres, based on the understanding of what Community Theatre is and does that I will offer shortly.
Another distinction I would like to draw when referring to Community Theatre is that their position as a Community Theatre is not about the type of content they provide. I don’t expect that every Community Theatre include politically motivated work. The work may be chosen specifically because of resonances with the community, and may even be new or experimental works, but they do not have to be. These theatres may offer a rehashing of the last Broadway season, or have a set series of “classics” that they pull from in rotation. What I find important in the understanding of Community Theatre is its position as a cultural contact point for that specific community. The community theatre’s productions are a response to its community’s aesthetic preferences, not necessarily its political ones (although determining the aesthetics of a community is often anything but apolitical). The theatre offers the work that they believe suits their audience: their community.

With this diversity of models, is there anything we can say for certain about Community Theatre? Absolutely. While the production and/or business model followed by each organization may be different, there can be found guiding principles evident in each. Drawing inspiration from Gard and Burley as well as Young, I find there to be four hallmarks of Community Theatre: (1) they are local, (2) the company’s beginnings or their essence must be amateur, (3) they both expose a community to theatre performance as well as engender participation, and (4) they depend upon their community for their survival. These four tenets all depend on and feed into each other, and are rooted in a commitment to the community. These four hallmarks represent a group that has an inherent sense of belonging and responsibility to the community it serves. It is not the model that makes the Community Theatre; it is the relationship between theatre and community.
Fifty-plus years later, and both *Community Theatre: Idea and Achievement* and *The Community Theatre and How It Works* are out of print. How has our concept of Community Theatre changed in that time? Have we redefined it again? The 2005 edition of *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre and Performance* gives this overview of American Community Theatre:

Amateurs gathered to present plays and musical shows as early as the colonial era; such groups began to flourish in the twentieth century and became a significant cultural and economic force… urban elites in the nineteenth century organized amateur theatricals for purposes of socializing, intellectual stimulation, and social improvement. Spurred by news of amateur art theatres in Europe and by books such as Percy MacKaye’s *The Playhouse and the Play* (1909) and *The Civic Theatre* (1912), the Little Theatre movement arose around 1911 as an attempt to revive theatre as art and in pursuit of communitarian ideals within a group of like-minded founders. While some of the little theatres (such as the Washington Square Players, Provincetown Players, the Neighborhood Playhouse, and the Cleveland Play House) transformed themselves into professional companies, others remained committed to the ideal of doing theatre for love and not for money. Groups such as the Indianapolis Civic Theatre (founded 1915), the Pasadena Playhouse (1918), and Le Petit Théâtre du Vieux Carré in New Orleans (1919) grew into complex year-round organizations with sizeable budgets but continued to rely upon volunteers in pursuit of the ‘constructive leisure’ promoted by MacKaye… Play-based community theatres survived the era of pageantry and remain a typical feature of American cities and towns. (Fearnow)
As the description notes, these theatres were founded out of “communitarian ideals.” These were amateur companies, founded by “like-minded individuals.” We still conceive of Community Theatre as theatres outside the commercial system. These theatres are working for “love, and not for money.” They still offer a more accessible alternative to the theatres of New York or Chicago, especially for those located in suburban or rural areas. It would seem, then, that while our understanding of what constitutes a community has rapidly shifted—which I will discuss—our concept of Community Theatre has remained fairly static.

This lack of change in our understanding of what constitutes Community Theatre speaks to the importance of the tenets I’ve discussed. You cannot separate Community Theatre from community without changing it into something else. Even as the world has changed in the decades following the publication of these initial works on Community Theatre, we still find that they are local, amateur endeavors that both give a community access to theatrical performances as well as encourage participation in the work. These theatres depend on their community to survive. Is it possible, however, to see Community Theatre’s practices in an environment we do not expect? New media has flooded and changed the landscape of our culture; information is disseminated at the speed of light. Could Community Theatre’s principles have gone out through the waves as well?

A STAR(KID) IS BORN

Fifty years after the publication of *Community Theatre: Idea and Achievement*, several University of Michigan students, working within U of M’s Basement Arts program, created *A Very Potter Musical*¹—a parody musical written using characters and plot elements from the

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¹ The works in the *Harry Potter* series will frequently be abbreviated as AVPM (*A Very Potter Musical*), AVPS (*A Very Potter Sequel*), and AVPSY (*A Very Potter Senior Year*). Those abbreviations will be used throughout this text.
Harry Potter series (Pandey). Following their show’s run, they uploaded it to YouTube, where it became an Internet sensation, quickly accumulating over two million views. Websites like Entertainment Weekly (Lyons) took notice of the video, spreading it through the Harry Potter fan base and gaining the production a devoted Internet following. StarKid Productions was born, and the group began work on another musical: *Me and My Dick*. In March 2010, the Original Cast Recording for *Me and My Dick* peaked at #11 on the Billboard charts—the first student-produced album to do so (Caulfield). The month after, *A Very Potter Sequel* was performed at the University, and shortly posted online. The website Mashable nominated the video for Best Web Video (Lavrusik), garnering the group more attention.

The group—now called Team StarKid—had garnered national attention, and students involved were graduating. StarKid began to use Chicago as a home base of sorts, and premiered their fourth show, *Starship*, there. The show played to sold-out crowds and the album for *Starship* debuted at #1 on Billboard’s Cast Album chart (Borelli). The success of the show led to a national concert tour for the group: The SPACE (StarKid Precarious Auditory Concert Experience) Tour. Next came *Holy Musical B@man!* in Chicago, and another national tour: Apocalyptour, in May 2012 (Team StarKid, “About”). The group revisited the *Very Potter* world in a final installment, *A Very Potter Senior Year*, which was performed at LeakyCon²—a Harry Potter fan convention—in August of 2012. The work was performed as a fully staged reading, and featured Evanna Lynch reprising her role as Luna Lovegood from the Harry Potter film series. StarKid returned in July 2013 with *Twisted: The Untold Story of a Royal Vizier*, a

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² LeakyCon is now called GeekyCon “to better encapsulate the geeky spirit so vibrantly a part of the convention (“About GeekyCon”). The convention changed its name in 2014 to reflect the more diverse fandoms presented beyond Harry Potter.
Wicked\textsuperscript{3}-esque take on Disney’s Aladdin with Jafar\textsuperscript{4} as the misunderstood protagonist. A Starship sequel called Starship: Requiem was given a staged reading at LeakyCon that year, and Airport for Birds and 1Night2Last3Ever, both sketch comedy shows, were performed in Chicago (Team StarKid, “Shows”). The summer of 2014, Starkid ran two musicals in rep: Ani, a Star Wars parody, and The Trail to Oregon, based on the videogame The Oregon Trail (Team StarKid, “StarKid Announcement”). All of the musicals, with the exception of Starship: Requiem\textsuperscript{5}, are available for free on YouTube.

For those keeping score at home: at the time of this writing, the company has produced ten full-length musicals, two sketch comedy shows, and two national concert tours in the five years since their inception. Individually, members of Team StarKid have gone on to create an even more diverse range of content. Nick and Matt Lang, the writing duo behind much of StarKid’s work, also produce a graphic novel series called Quicksand Jack. Eric Kahn Gale, another frequent StarKid collaborator, has authored two novels: The Bully Book and The Zoo at the Edge of the World. Some members of the group were also involved in the creation of a web series called Little White Lie. The company’s prolific output, however, isn’t the only remarkable thing about them. The company has quickly become an Internet favorite: their YouTube channel has over 160 million views and 360,000 subscribers.\textsuperscript{6} Their Twitter account, @TeamStarKid, has

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\textsuperscript{3} Wicked tells the story from The Wizard of Oz through the eyes of the Wicked Witch of the West, turning her into the hero of the story.

\textsuperscript{4} In Disney’s rendering of the tale, Jafar serves as the sultan’s royal adviser, but schemes to overthrow him.

\textsuperscript{5} The reason given for keeping Requiem offline was that they hope to give it a full production one day (Fisher).

\textsuperscript{6} 174,910,595 views and 387,360 followers, to be exact, as of February 20\textsuperscript{th}, 2015 (StarKidPotter, “About.”)
over 133,000 followers. For reference, Chicago’s famous The Second City group has about 25,000 (@TheSecondCity, Twitter). The group’s irreverent take on beloved franchises as well their playful spirit and open sharing of it’s work has generated them a large and passionate fan base that spans multiple countries.

The work of Team StarKid at first glance seems far removed to the type of work being examined by Gard, Burley, and Young. As I look closer, however, I find that many of those tenets are present in StarKid’s work as well. How can a group known for making funny YouTube shows possibly be Community Theatre? StarKid has at its heart, as I will demonstrate, a commitment to and place within a strong community. While new media have changed what that community looks like and how it operates, it is still very much a community. As I have outlined, and as I will explore, the focus on and creation of community is what makes the Community Theatre, not the model. Community does not look the way it did in 1959, and as such its theatre will not either.

By viewing the Internet as a community, we can see that StarKid is very much a product of its environment. I believe the company excels because they are in tune with their medium; they aren’t just a troupe that puts their shows online; they’re a part of Internet culture. The purpose of this study is to use the framework of Community Theatre to examine the work of Team StarKid and their relationship with their audience. As such, my research will focus on what hails StarKid as members of the Internet culture, i.e. what aspects of their work reflect the medium. My research also focuses on what the communicative nature of the Internet does to the relationship between performer and audience. This relationship highlights both the position of StarKid as Internet users, as well as is indicative of the exchange of ideas associated with that medium. Using the four tenets of Community Theatre I have outlined, I can examine this relationship, and
how it is nurtured and altered in the environment of the Internet. Through this exploration of StarKid’s work and how it functions for and with its audience, I hope to demonstrate that Team StarKid presents a sort of Virtual Community Theatre: unbound by geographical or temporal limitations, they have created a thriving audience for their unique theatrical creations.

LIFE IN THE IN-BETWEENS

The work of Team StarKid falls into an interesting intersection between several different research areas. Marshall McLuhan’s work in examining the effects of new media—and Robert K. Logan’s later expansion on his ideas—points both to the fact that the introduction of new technology unavoidably alters human perception, as well as to the shift in thinking towards a global community heralded by the Internet. Media studies allows for us to understand part of the StarKid formula by opening a discussion of the ways in which the Internet functions in society, but it only tells part of the story. Thirty-five years after McLuhan told us all “the medium was the message,” Phillip Auslander’s critical work Liveness explored the foundation-rattling effect of new media on performance. Auslander noted that the ways in which we perceive performance had been fundamentally altered. Where before performance inherently meant an event taking place for an audience in a contiguous space, we suddenly found ourselves faced with a new concept: live. The boundaries between live and mediatized blur further with the growing ubiquitousness of the Internet. Auslander introduced the concept of digital liveness to address the ways in which—although we may not be interacting in a shared physical space—our online communications and experiences are happening in real time. The ramifications of the intersections between digital media, the Internet, and performance are still something that we are processing. Sarah Bay-Cheng, as I will discuss, has explored the changing landscape of theatre
historiography in light of new technologies. How we conceive of and experience the performance event itself has been fundamentally altered by the influx of digital media.

The idea of a “Digital Theatre” has been a growing topic of conversation. While these conceptions of a theatre that moves beyond the limits of a physical theatre space—discussed at length by emerging scholars such as Chris Eaket and Nadja Massura—open and color our discussion of how we define community, the type of performance event, and the effects that we are looking at seem to be quite different. I am in many ways not interested in the performance possibilities created through incorporating new media technologies into the performance event itself. I’m interested in what performance looks like in a post-Digital Revolution world. When the use of media technologies is not an experiment, or an artistic statement, but merely a way of engaging with a more traditional performance event.

Certainly these changing attitudes about liveness, connectivity, and performance are inherent in the work that Team StarKid is doing. But while these studies tell us much about the state of live performance, StarKid’s work moves beyond that discussion. For Team StarKid, the technological revolution is over. The members of the group (like much of their fan base, myself included) are what Marc Prensky would call “Digital Natives” (“Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants” 1). Technology is a fact of life; we have grown up with Internet access. There is nothing really novel about StarKid’s use of technology; what is striking is how fully technology is integrated into the group’s existence. It is this matter-of-fact use of technology, and what it allows the group to do and achieve that is of interest here. Unfortunately, it seems to be in this integration that we fall just beyond the reach of many of these studies.

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7 His dissertation, “‘Theatre-Outside-of-Theatres’: Spaces of Digital Performance” features a discussion of multimedia performances that move beyond the theatre space.
The work of Gard, Burley, and Young, categorizing Community Theatre, serves as inspiration for this text but their definitions speak very much to their time. By isolating what I find to be the core principles at play in Community Theatre, we can begin to expand the definitions further, but at the moment the discussions of Community Theatre seem to exclude work like StarKid’s. Again, the group seems to find itself on the edge of a discussion. StarKid’s audiences could (and should) be viewed as a fandom, which starts to move into the realm of fan studies. This work will include discussion of Henry Jenkins’s participatory cultures, and discussions of fan communities that stem from that work, but this is not intended solely as a case study of a fandom. Despite StarKid’s position within these overlapping fields, critical scholarship on their work appears essentially nonexistent.

With this absence in mind, I am attempting to create an overview of how Team StarKid’s work functions, and some of the ramifications their work has. I will be examining their performances, to understand what aesthetic and dramaturgical similarities they share. It is important to note that while I include their sketch comedy as part of the general discussion of the group, my close analysis will be limited to their full-length musicals as these are what first gained the group notoriety, as well as what they most often produce. My discussion of audience reception and engagement will be drawn from reviews as well as from social media, including interviews with fans conducted through social media, specifically Twitter. My principle sources of primary data will be StarKid’s performances, interviews, and performance reviews.

The nature of this study is not to redefine or renegotiate the meaning of liveness a la Auslander, but to offer a case study of a theatre group that is embodying the digital liveness that is the Internet’s hallmark. This study is also not an attempt to identify an aesthetic of the Internet, only traits of Team StarKid performance that reflect its medium. Also, while I will discuss the
culture that StarKid fans have created, this is not a study focused on fan culture writ large. My aim is to examine Team StarKid’s model and to understand how it may serve as an example for others; while I will acknowledge the other conversations in which StarKid is a part, they are not my focus here. It should also be noted that the model of Community Theatre I have outlined and will be drawing from in this text is an American model. While StarKid has international fans, and I feel that the ideas being discussed here have relevance beyond the United States, the starting point for this study is born out of an American construction of Community Theatre. This work will necessarily be broad in scope; I am attempting give an overview of the performance phenomena within Team StarKid’s work, an introduction to the form.

The four tenets of Community Theatre I’ve highlighted overlap and intersect with each other, but for organizational purposes I’ve separated the remainder of this discussion into three sections: Of The People, By The People, and For The People. While these titles might seem flippant, I believe they help point to the community-based nature of what Team StarKid is doing. “Of The People” focuses on the ways in which StarKid’s model and aesthetic favors an online audience and reflects Internet culture. Drawing from Robert K. Logan’s fourteen messages of New Media, we can see the ways in which StarKid’s model for distribution, as well as their dramaturgical choices, reflects the Internet. It is this intrinsic relationship with the Internet that allows it to achieve a sense of locality beyond a physical one. The proliferation of StarKid’s works, the mediation of their performances, their focus on parody, and their production values all create an environment to foster a community online.

“By The People” moves into audience response and the ways in which StarKid interacts with their fans. We are moving from traditionally understood means of interaction and participation into the participatory space of the Internet. This will include a discussion of the group’s presence
on social media, convention performances, and their branding efforts. “By The People” also examines the types of fan art produced by the StarKid fandom, as well as features responses from StarKid fans to the group’s work. We will see in this chapter the way StarKid’s audiences can be read as a fandom, which strengthens their ability to maintain community.

“For The People” examines a particular moment of Team StarKid’s performance history, a mistake in a performance at LeakyCon, and analyzes it in light of Team StarKid’s positioning as Community Theatre. This example serves a case study for the way StarKid’s work interacts with its audience. This chapter also examines a few of the ramifications and implications of Team StarKid’s work. The work could present a viable—and lucrative—alternative theatre production model, but we need to understand some of the larger conversations that their work is helping to shape. In particular, the positions of StarKid in relationship to copyright law, the shifting position of live performance, and the idea of a democratic theatre are of interest.

My position in this study is very much that of the participant observer. I self-identify as a member of the StarKid fan community, and belong to several of the fan communities from which they pull their material. My interest in their work, however, moves beyond my aesthetic enjoyment. Team StarKid serves as a clear example of the ways in which both artists and audiences alike are adapting and changing within a mediatized culture, and a potential harbinger of a new form of theatre creation and distribution. We’re spending an increasing amount of our time “plugged in:” correspondence, news, work, entertainment, and everything in-between is available twenty-four hours a day, and with laptops, smartphones, and tablets all I need is an Internet connection or a cellphone signal and I can get my techno-fix anywhere. StarKid is capitalizing on the growing desire to live our lives online, and whether or not we as theatre community support that desire, we cannot ignore that it is happening—and that our medium may
need to adapt in some ways. After all, if my television, cinema, arcade, and library have all been condensed to the point where they can fit into my shoulder bag, why can’t my theatre? Where’s my portable performance?

The ability to form community is a hallmark of the theatre: the image of artists working together in their local playhouse is a trope for a reason. We talk of the friendships forged in the heat of spotlights, the last minute changes, and the mistakes, the adrenaline rushes. The sense of community created by the theatre cannot be recreated without the shared physical and temporal presence of those involved, or so we have believed. If the performance can be extended beyond these boundaries, however, then the community can as well. Team StarKid, as we will see, is forcing us to reexamine what it means to be a theatrical community, what it means to be an audience, and how we conceive of methods of engagement in theatrical performance through a mediated lens.
CHAPTER ONE: 
OF THE PEOPLE

“No Way,” A Very Potter Sequel

The first two tenets of Community Theatre I have outlined are 1) they must be local and 2) the company’s beginnings and/or essence must be amateur. I have placed these two tenets together because I feel they capture the need for the work to both come from a specific community and to reflect that community. Locality ensures that the theatre has its roots in its birthplace. With the Internet, however, the idea of locality can be a moving target. Originally, communities needed theatres to be geographically local because that was the only way to ensure that the theatre would be reflective of the community; our conception of community, however, has changed alongside our technologies. Community is now defined as both a group of people who share the same geographical location, as well as a group of people who share a heritage, values, goals, and/or interests. Our changing understanding of what it means to be a community necessarily affects our understanding of what it means to be local.

The second tenet also has to do with the Community Theatre’s position within the community. The idea of being amateur in this sense has less to do with who gets paid and more to do with why the company exists. If the company is amateur, as I will explain in more detail below, it is more likely to be focused on the needs of the community. This focus on the community and responding to it increases the sense of belonging a Community Theatre creates. By examining both the ways in which StarKid represents their community and what marks them
as amateur, this chapter will demonstrate the local nature of StarKid by explicating the ways in which it is of its medium, and therefore of its community.

SHARING SPACES

Community theatre must be local. Certainly, there’s good reason for this tenet to be our first; it forms the basis of the relationship between community and theatre. Initially, this tenet implies that Community Theatre must share the same physical space with the community it serves; the community and the theatre must share a geographic locality. This locality is important for a few reasons: chiefly, convenience. You don’t want your audience to have to drive two states over to see your production. You will not be able to expose a community to theatre and to get the community involved if the theatre and the public aren’t accessible to each other. Being local allows for Community Theatre to be in constant dialogue with the community it serves. From their position within the community, the theatre has a front-row seat to its goings-on, and can process in real-time its changing needs or desires, e.g., selecting shows for a season that address issues prominent in the community.

The Internet is a shared space; Team StarKid does in a way share the same space as its community. For an audience that is located largely on the Internet, a theatre that is present on the Internet is, in a less physical sense, local. In his article “Ekstasis and the Internet: Liminality and Computer-Mediated Communication,” Dennis Waskull explores the ways in which spatial boundaries collapse in cyberspace:

Clearly, the internet draws users into peculiar kinds of ephemeral ‘places’ that we do not have words to adequately describe. Words that describe everyday ‘spaces’ (physical-geographic locations) and ‘places’ (social-cultural definition of the situation) do not easily or directly translate to computer-mediated environments.
The Internet, by definition, dislocates ‘space’ from ‘place.’ From the ‘space’ of an individual’s home or office they access ‘places’ on the Internet that are without ‘space’ themselves. These ‘cyberplaces’ are, instead, composed of electronic words and images that represent various geographies, people, groups, and organizations. […] In this way, the Internet is an environment that is necessarily ‘neither here nor there . . . betwixt and between’ (Turner, 1969: 95); it is a context that unavoidably juxtaposes two very different kinds of spaces and places in one unique electronic environment. (54)

Waskull draws on Victor Turner’s concepts of liminality, stating that by nature the Internet is a liminal space. It exists “betwixt and between;” it is in the space from my screen to yours that isn’t actually a space at all. We enter into this no-space, and are suddenly outside of our traditional social structure. I can be whoever I want to be on the Internet. As Waskull points out, this movement away from the structured society space and into the liminal no-space of the Internet leads us to communitas. Social boundaries are broken down, and an egalitarian space emerges. I have as much agency as you do, and so we can come together. Perhaps to a certain extent this is due to the anonymity of the Internet; there is nothing to mark my social roles if I do not confess them. There is a blending between individuals; we become the virtual community, instead of single Internet users. As we will see later, the boundaries between observer and participant also begins to blend when theatre is filtered through the Internet.

In her dissertation “Digital Theatre: A “Live” and Mediated Art Form Expanding Perceptions of Body, Place, and Community,” Nadja Linnine Masura tracks the ways the changing understanding of community and place alters our perception of the performance event. She also incorporates Victor Turner’s writings on liminality and communitas as a way of
understanding how we experience being online with others. Masura also incorporates another understanding of shared space into her writing:

Though data is transitory, the effect of a meeting of people in a cumulative place is real. A cyberspace meeting-place composed of multiple video transmissions of different inhabited places may have a cumulative sense of place…Community is that which joins the individual and society. Community is defined as either based on “common needs, interests, activities, or desires” or based on “a specific population, place or location.” However, technology conflates the two criteria as places meet forming a new shared location in which open exchange of ideas creates shared interest and content. Scholar Linda Stoneall writes, “Community as a concept has a definite center without a well-defined periphery…” the core which is centered around people “interacting in specific space and time.” To my mind, community is a perceived connection between individuals living in a group, interacting regularly, or interfacing for mutual gain or benefit of connection. (268-269)

As she points out, a virtual community can and does offer both a sense of space and place; Masura leads us beyond the discussion of the Internet as place to come together, and into the realm of space for community to form. While the Internet is a shared place and can be scene as local in that regard, our conception of what constitutes a community has shifted beyond the need for shared location.

Writing from a pre-Internet time, Gard, Burley, and Young most likely could not have conceived of a tightly knot community that was bound only by shared values and traditions, as opposed to spatial or geographic boundaries. Sociologists did not begin to explore the idea of
community as something not defined by area until the late 1970’s. Today, however, our understanding of what constitutes a community has undergone a drastic change due to the technologies available to us. Radio, television, the telephone, and other communication methods all contributed to the possibility of a virtual community, and finally the advent of the Internet made them a part of everyday life. Video conferencing, Internet dating, social networking, etc. can connect people thousands of miles apart in seconds.

The shift from physical community to virtual one has been well documented. Fittingly for Team StarKid, much of our understanding of online communities comes from fan communities that have been studied online. Nancy K. Baym comments on the shift from physical to virtual in her essay “Interpreting Soap Operas and Creating Community: Inside an Electronic Fan Culture,” stating: “Recent conceptions of the folk group require only that groups share a common factor and unique traditions or that traditions are grounded in distinct shared rules for the conduct and interpretation of speech (Baym 103).” Mary Kirby-Diaz further elaborates on the way virtual community functions on the Internet, saying, “Our online conversations (a.k.a computer-mediated conversation) can create a territory that is boundaryless; we can create a community in cyberspace. So: here is a definition of a virtual community: A virtual community is a non-geographic, non-territorial place where strangers meet and talk and become friends” (29). Both authors point to the ways in which our understanding of community has shifted from a spatial community to a spiritual one. If we have broadened our understanding of community to reflect people bound by shared culture or interests instead of geography, I believe our

8 Specifically, the work of Barry Wellman and Barry Leighton in 1979 (Diaz 27).

9 Baym cites Alan Dundes’s *The Study of Folklore* here.

10 Baym here is referencing Dell Hymes’s “Models of the Interaction of Language and Social Life.”
understanding of locality should change as well: local means it belongs to the community. If we take local to mean “of and within the community” as opposed to literally ‘close to’ or ‘in proximity of’, the effect of locality can be achieved globally. The insistence on locality is to ensure that the company is particular to that community; now, the community does not have to be physical to create a sense of locality.

By viewing StarKid as representative of contemporary virtual communities, and by reconceptualizing our view of the Internet as a shared space, we can begin to see how StarKid fulfills the first tenet. They are local in the sense of sharing a communal space, be it one very different than that envisioned for Community Theatre. But StarKid’s Internet locality goes beyond purely sharing both space and place. If a virtual Community Theatre is to claim locality, I believe it must demonstrate a belonging to its virtual community past that of merely being hosted online. In this case, StarKid’s community is, on one level, the Internet writ large. Team StarKid also could claim membership in several fan communities as well, but those communities tend to be performance-specific. For example, while the Very Potter musical series could allow StarKid to hail themselves as members of the Harry Potter fan community, Holy Musical B@man! Does not. For StarKid to be a virtual Community Theatre for the Internet, it needs to reflect that community as a whole. While the diverse and overwhelming nature of the Internet would initially indicate too much multiplicity to create a discernible culture, by examining the Internet as a medium we can see certain patterns of behavior (or at least, usage) emerge. These identifying features of the Internet are evident in StarKid’s performances; in this way they reflect the culture of their community.
PLUGGED-IN PRODUCTION

Marshall McLuhan’s work in Media Studies is often referenced with the bumper-sticker-ready catchphrase, “The medium is the message.” As Nicholas Carr writes in The Shallows, “…in the long run a medium’s content matters less than the medium itself in how we think and act. As our window onto the world, and onto ourselves, a popular medium molds what we see and how we see it—and eventually, if we use it enough, it changes who we are, as individuals and as a society” (3). Carr’s book is not a warning about the changes that may come; it documents the changes that have already occurred. Team StarKid’s members have all grown up with the Internet as I have, and its ubiquitousness is as ingrained in their habits as it is in mine. It’s no wonder the work reflects the medium: they’ve been wired to function plugged-in.

In Understanding New Media: Extending Marshall McLuhan, Robert K. Logan identifies fourteen messages presented through new mediums. These fourteen messages are inherent to the Internet, and I believe many of them permeate the work of StarKid as well. As outlined by Logan, the principles are:

1) Two-way communication
2) Ease of access and dissemination of information
3) Continuous learning
4) Alignment and integration
5) Community
6) Portability and time flexibility (time shifting), which provide their users with freedom over space and time
7) Convergence of many different media so that they can carry out more than one function at a time and combine, as is the case with the camera cell phone that operates as a phone but can also take and transmit photos

8) Interoperability; without which convergence would not be possible

9) Aggregation of content and crowd-sourcing, which is facilitated by digitization and convergence,

10) Variety and choice to a much greater extent than the mass media that preceded them, and hence the “long tail” phenomenon

11) The closing of the gap between (or the convergence of) producers and consumers of media

12) Social collectivity and cooperation

13) Remix culture, which digitalization facilitates; and

14) The transition from products to services. (48-49)

Of course, many of these messages are seen merely by the fact that StarKid hosts its work online, and the messages are transmitted through the medium. Several of these messages have, however, become evident in StarKid’s work itself. That is, some of these ideas are present in how StarKid creates and presents their work. Separating these messages from each other, like separating the tenets of Community Theatre, is a tricky business. They feed into one another, and a sign of one is easily also a sign of another. I have chosen a few messages specifically to discuss because they provide us the easiest entry into exploring how StarKid’s work functions within an Internet setting. The messages of ease of access and dissemination; portability and time flexibility; variety and choice; the closing of the gap between producers and consumers; and remix culture—which Logan defines as “creating new cultural artifacts by remixing prior cultural
“elements” (70)—are all very present in both the way StarKid operates as well as their performances.

Ease of access and time flexibility are both represented in StarKid’s choice to mediate their performances, and then provide free, repeatable access to those performances. StarKid’s recording of their performances is nothing new; recordings of performances have been created since the technology to do so was made available. What makes StarKid’s use of the technology unique is two points: intention and access. Firstly, the recording of their work is not for archival purposes, like those recordings housed at the New York Public Library. The first performance, *A Very Potter Musical*, was put online almost as an afterthought, but subsequent productions have all been filmed with an audience beyond the performance space in mind. Team StarKid is aware that their live audience is not their largest; in fact, it is only a small portion. The intended audience for StarKid’s productions is largely the audiences at home. The live shows can be viewed like a television sitcom; StarKid records in front of a live audience, which provides a sort of response track to give cues on how to audience the performance. This understanding that much of their audience shapes some of the decisions StarKid makes when it comes to production. In *Twisted*, special effects such as a magic flying beetle were added in postproduction; the audience in the theatre would have seen only a different light cue. For *Ani*, subtitles were needed to interpret the alien Sebulba’s dialogue. Those subtitles were again added in postproduction; if you were a part of the live audience, or watched a livestream of the event, you had to rely on context clues. In *The Trail to Oregon*, one family member must be chosen by the audience to die of dysentery. For those watching at home, at the moment the character must be revealed a dialogue box appears offering links to all potential endings,

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11 Sebulba and Anakin (Ani) have a history. Their confrontation in a bar takes place entirely in a language called Dug, unique to the Star Wars universe.
allowing you not only to choose, but to watch the others as well. By mediating their performances they reach an audience who lives much of their lives on the Internet, and in doing so are able to expand that audience.

They’ve also created an accessible model; I can pull up their work anywhere at anytime (provided I have an Internet connection). StarKid also allows for me to choose my method of engagement. When a new StarKid performance is announced, there are typically three ways to view it: the first is to buy a ticket and view the performance in person. The second is to watch a livestream of the event. These streams also have a cost of admission, but can be viewed both in real time during the performance event or at a later date. The final way of viewing a StarKid performance, and what has gained them the most fame, is to wait a little while (usually a few months) for the show to be put up on YouTube. Once the show has been released online, I have total control over the time or location of the performance. The accessibility of their work frees me from being tied to one location or one time for performance. Their mediation and recording also allows for repeated viewing, so that audiences can engage and re-engage with the work. Audiences may be able to catch lines or references they didn’t here before, and the shows become quotable; StarKid becomes a meme.12

StarKid certainly provides variety of content. StarKids are multi-taskers, from sketch comedy and musicals to graphic novels. Audiences are able to engage with StarKid in a number of different contexts. Team StarKid is always concerned with the Next Thing. Nick Lang, in an interview with American Theatre, noted the frenetic pace of StarKid’s production:

12 In this usage, a humorous image or quote that is shared rapidly among members of the online community. For example, an image that reads “Keep Calm and Be Totally Awesome,” combines a well-known image and a quote from AVPM and can be shared quickly.
“For us, once we do a show, we go, ‘Okay, that one is done. Let’s go do another one,’” says Lang… For his part, Lang is more interested in churning out musicals in the YouTube cycle, and admits that he finds the long slog of musical development tedious. While [A.J.Holmes] and [Kaley McMahon] are pursuing producer interest for *Twisted*, Lang is more focused on the next musical. (Evans)

They both seem to accommodate the stereotypical shorter attention spans of the Internet, as well as embody it a bit themselves. The group is continuing to play with multiple offerings and diverse content. In honor of their five-year anniversary, in the summer of 2014 StarKid offered a complete season: two shows, running in repertory from July 3rd to August 10th (Lang, Announcement).

The company seems to show no sign of slowing down in their effort to produce quick, accessible, and diverse content. Not listed as a message of new media, but I believe connected to variety of content, is the idea of speed. StarKid works on a production model that generates new material at a quick rate. There is a “rapid refresh” effect: their shows keep up with the speed of information. Time is relevance on the Internet, and the constant stream of new work allows them to stay fresh. Team StarKid has adapted their production model to meet an audience with a shorter attention span.

As Logan noted, the Internet plays on Remix Culture. StarKid draws on a very contemporary taste for parody and recycling by creating work based in already existing worlds. While remixing itself is nothing new, Logan points to the ease with which new cultural products can be made thanks to new media, stating:

… the phenomenon takes on more significance in the digital age because of the ease with which a creator of a new cultural artifact can “steal,” to use Stravinsky’s
terminology. Music, text, and images are easily transferred from one digital device to another especially because of the Internet, which allows this phenomenon to take place on a global scale… Because of dissatisfaction with the status quo the consumer remixes the work of the producers and thereby also becomes a producer. Remix allows the latent creativity of a person to emerge.

(71)

The ease of and desire for creation of mash-ups and remixes is an inherent part of the Internet’s culture, and StarKid’s musicals tap into it. Their shows are drawn from and based in existing universes, with sprinklings of other pieces of popular culture mixed in. The Harry Potter novels and movies form the basis of A Very Potter Musical, A Very Potter Sequel, and A Very Potter Senior Year, but the shows dissect and reconstruct the canon to produce their own timeline of Harry’s adventures at Hogwarts\footnote{The magical Wizard school that Harry Potter and his friends attend.}. One of the Horcruxes\footnote{A pivotal part of the Harry Potter canon, Horcruxes are enchanted objects that contain a piece of the villain Voldemort’s soul. They can be any object, but must be destroyed to defeat him.} to be destroyed in AVPM is an enchanted poster of Zac Efron\footnote{Zac Efron was one of the stars of the popular High School Musical film series (2006-08), and was seen as a teen heartthrob.}, and Dumbledore\footnote{The headmaster of Hogwarts.} is shown to quote the High School Musical series. In AVPS, when teaching the students to perform a Patronus\footnote{A very important spell that wards off evil beings called “Dementors” in the series.} charm, Remus Lupin\footnote{A teacher at Hogwarts.} encourages them to think of a happy thought. The students respond with the question, “Any happy little thought?” referencing the Disney animated Peter Pan. In fact, StarKid’s
performances are so richly referential and remixed that multiple viewings are required to pull out every allusion.

Beyond the fact that their work is drawn from the popular culture lexicon—Harry Potter, superheroes, Star Wars, Starship Troopers, Disney—what makes Team StarKid’s parodies so popular is that they manage to both love and mock their source material. In Ani, their Star Wars parody, Grand Moff Tarkin\textsuperscript{19} and his date (an Imperial stormtrooper\textsuperscript{20} named Emily) run into a very drunk Obi-Wan Kenobi\textsuperscript{21}. Emily asks Obi-Wan to explain the Clone Wars\textsuperscript{22}, and StarKid gleefully takes the opportunity to point out some potential flaws in the universe’s logic:

\begin{quote}
Grand Moff Tarkin: (referring to a betrayal) You didn’t even suspect foul play?
Obi-Wan Kenobi: Well, our vision was clouded. And, we were very stupid. But, to our credit, we were being tricked. You see, both the Republic and the Separatists\textsuperscript{23} were secretly being controlled by the Emperor. He was fighting a war against himself, for control of a galaxy that he already had control of. (Ani, Act 2, my transcription)
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{19} A primary villain from the first film in the Star Wars films, Episode IV: A New Hope

\textsuperscript{20} The foot soldiers of the evil Galactic Empire in the series.

\textsuperscript{21} A famous Jedi (a religious order and force for good).

\textsuperscript{22} The Clone Wars were an important historical event in the Star Wars canon were an army of droids fought an army of clone soldiers, and led to the creation of the Galactic Empire and the eradication of the Jedi.

\textsuperscript{23} The opposing sides of the Clone War.
But while *Ani* seems to delight in poking holes in the canon, it also features a warm and sensitive portrayal of Jar Jar Binks\(^\text{24}\), a character near-universally panned. The character is presented as a kind, downtrodden figure, exhausted from years of public critique. The *Very Potter* series also plays with this style of loving parody. While they never miss an opportunity to make a joke at their subject matter’s expense (“That textbook is like a thousand years old! It still refers to Dementors\(^\text{25}\) as Ringwraiths\(^\text{26}\)!” Lupin moans), *A Very Potter Senior Year* ends with a seeming love letter to the series:

> Voldemort\(^\text{27}\): No. Just… Let him go. You know… Harry Potter, he, he helped me once. He taught me something. He taught me that it’s alright to let go… of things that hurt us. He taught me to open my heart up to what’s new. Harry Potter gave me a new family. He taught me how to love. And I guess that’s kind of what Harry Potter is all about. But you know, there comes a time when you have to move on, Quirrell\(^\text{28}\). A time when we have to let even Harry Potter go. And that’s okay… (*A Very Potter Senior Year*, Act 2, Scene 7)

Team StarKid manages to walk the line between love and mockery very well, creating work that appeals to our desire to remix and parody, without offending the fan bases that make up the largest chunk of their audience. Their musicals play with remixing, remaking, reimagining these...

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\(^\text{24}\) An alien character who was intended to provide comic relief, but that many fans found grating and racist (Marikar and Heron).

\(^\text{25}\) Ghostly beings who suck all the joy out of someone.

\(^\text{26}\) Ringwraiths come from the world of J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*. Lupin is making a joke that the author of Harry Potter “borrowed” the idea for Dementors from Tolkien.

\(^\text{27}\) Voldemort is the main villain of the Harry Potter series.

\(^\text{28}\) Quirell is a former teacher at Hogwarts, and servant to Voldemort. In StarKid’s series, he and Voldemort are in a relationship.
worlds with a healthy dose of respect for the source material, and in doing so manage to strike a resonant chord. Audiences can laugh at the joke, knowing (or at least, assuming) that StarKid loves the source material as much as they do.

Logan’s discussion of remix culture also alludes to another message: the convergence of producer and consumer, which will be addressed more completely in the next chapter when I address fan participation. Convergence is a focus of Logan’s messages for new media; this sense of convergence and multiplicity is at the core of the nature of the Internet, and I believe at the core of StarKid’s work as well. Put simply: there’s a lot going on. From the speed at which StarKid generates new material, their use and repurposing of pop culture, and the ease with which StarKid’s work may be accessed and disseminated to the sheer volume and variety of work members of the group have produced, StarKid not only keeps pace with the frenetic energy of the Internet, but manifests it. Team StarKid is a model Internet citizen, a representative member of its community. While that community may not be the sort traditionally envisioned, it is real and very strong.

THE STARKID AESTHETIC

The second tenet, that the group must be amateur in origin or spirit, at first seems out of place when compared to the other three tenets. The others all have a focus on the group’s relationship to the community, and yet this one seems concerned with the group’s amateur status. It does not, however, dictate that the group must be non-professional. It just asserts that the group’s beginnings or “essence” must be amateur. Why would the company’s amateur nature affect the community? Surely a group of professionals could provide quality entertainment. If those professionals were familiar with, or even drawn from, the community itself they could also
certainly reflect that community’s values. So what is it about an “amateur” quality that adds to the Community Theatre?

In order to determine why a Community Theatre should be amateur, we need to look a little closer at the word. As with our understanding of “local” and “community” our understanding of “amateur” may need to change as well. The root of the word “amateur” is the Latin *amator*, or lover, from *amare* to love. Insisting on Community Theatre being amateur is not about making sure no one is getting paid. Companies can be semi or even fully professional and maintain an amateur essence. What this insistence means is that this theatre should exist for the “right reasons.” It needs to be clear that what this theatre is doing is coming from a place of love, both of craft and of community. In effect, the amateur tenet is to ensure that a company “has its heart in the right place”, as it were.

Looking at their performances, we see the ways in which StarKid’s aesthetic speaks to and from the group’s humble beginnings, starting as a group of undergraduate students at the University of Michigan. Part of StarKid’s appeal, however, is that it maintains the low-budget aesthetic of its earlier productions, even as their budget and resources flourish. StarKid has a very DIY look, and maintains an atmosphere of “college theatre group.” The film of the first show that was done on a professional stage, *Starship*, was described as “a video so flatly produced it could have been shot by a parent with a camcorder (Borelli).” The quirky, low-budget look has become part of the appeal of StarKid, offering an alternative to slicker professional companies. “As 16-year-old Allegra Rosenberg, of Skokie, put it: ‘It's so lo-fi, it's like something I could do, with a pop lexicon to dig into.’ […] Meaning, the StarKid sensibility
is inside-joke, knowingly amateurish, opaquely subversive, Up With People with irony, ‘Rocky Horror Picture Show’ without sleaze” (Borelli). Team StarKid is hanging on to a basement aesthetic, and it’s adding to their popularity. This desire for low-budget aesthetics seems to echo one of the goals of the Little Theatre movement: to represent a move away from commercial theatre production. Team StarKid’s look places them in an anti-establishment position, in a way. To borrow from the music industry, they haven’t “sold out.”

The group is aware that their performances lack polish. Nick Lang stated, “We had some interest from producers after we did Starship and some offers to take it to New York, but we just thought the show wasn’t good enough to be out there and have our names attached to it. It’s out on the Internet, but we didn’t want to send it to New York and have producers look at it and go, ‘What is this? This is two hours too long and for little girls’” (Evans). StarKid recognizes that their work isn’t Broadway fare. Instead of changing their aesthetic, however, they themselves have perpetuated their ‘indie’ mythos, saying in interviews, ”Our marketing team is Twitter and teenage girls telling their friends” (Borelli) and “Nothing we ever do is intentional” (Fisher). Their musical The Trail to Oregon also plays on their lack of sleekness, gleefully singing: “You could go next door and see something professional, we wouldn’t blame you a bit. It’d beat sitting through this Ore-shit!” StarKid works to maintain their image: they are aren’t the polished, commercial theatre of Broadway, they’re the silly outsiders.

This aesthetic makes their art accessible, something that could be created by the fans themselves with a few friends and a camera. The Internet (and especially YouTube) has fostered the idea that anyone can be a celebrity; these could be your friends and neighbors. Team StarKid

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29 A music group that features messages of positivity, love, and tolerance. The large casts perform all over the world promoting their messages. The group has come under fire for resembling a cult.
works to maintain that feeling, the “They’re-just-like-me” sensibility that makes them seem relatable. In a performance, Meredith Stepien remarked:

I feel very lucky to have found this group. Because I grew up, personally, um, a nerd and a weirdo. I was a total stereotype: I had glasses, I had a unibrow, I had crooked teeth, and a moustache, so… So it took me a long time before I felt like I was really cool. The I met this group of weirdoes, you know the kind of people who are like, “Dude, you saw Lord of the Rings nine times in theatres? Cool.”

Anyway so this next song is for all you girls out there with moustaches. You’ll find your group of weirdoes and your magical Darren Crisses one day. Know that you are cool, alright? (S.P.A.C.E. Tour, my transcription)

In the same monologue, she discussed the difficulty of not being able to defecate on the tour bus, a comment unlikely to be seen in a more rigid production house. The company works to maintain its down-to-earth feeling. There is a sense of nostalgia, of friends coming back together to play. Darren Criss in an interview described the feeling, saying, “I think we are desperate to hold on to that idea that we are just kids having fun, growing from whatever small beans we've been handed” (Borelli). The laid-back feeling of just a few friends making theatre maintains the amateur spirit of the company’s beginnings.

The fun, positive, be-yourself energy that comes from the group continues in their work. The Up With People vibe that seems to be at the heart of the group permeates their shows, which always have a positive message to share. Recurrent themes include the importance of friendship, believing in yourself, pulling yourself up by your bootstraps, and standing up for what you believe in. Often the themes of a StarKid performance can be boiled down to a phrase worthy of a “Hang-in-there” poster. Twisted reminds you to put others before yourself. Starship and Ani
encourage everyone to shoot for the stars. The Very Potter series focuses on the magic of believing in yourself and the power of friendship. Holy Musical B@man! lets you know that you don’t have to be alone. While these messages may seem so simplistic as to be trite or even insincere, Twitter fans embrace the positivity and the “…stories of love and friendship (@LarkElizabeth).” User @starkid_tristan said, “when I hear StarKid, I think family, friends, home, etc. I love the messages they put into their work, while keeping it fun,” and described them as “inspirational. Also passionate. I think everyone can relate to AT LEAST one production they have done. At that’s amazing.” @HThetford said, “If I’m ever feeling down I know StarKid videos will cheer me up- even the announcement videos make me smile,” and noted that StarKid always had “…good storytelling and a touching message behind the jokes and silliness.” The group manages to break and remake the subject matter with a healthy dose of feeling, which wins fans over. They are not only seeing characters they care about, but messages they care about as well. StarKid has demonstrated with its productions that it has heart in spades, but the amateur quality of the work continues to cultivate that heart. Between the positivity, the amateur look of their work, and the relatable face they present, Team StarKid offers a view that they are creating their work for the love of it.

CREATING COMMUNITY

Examining the first two tenets, that the theatre must be local and amateur in beginning or essence, allows me to examine part of what has made Team StarKid so popular. First, Team StarKid is generating content that reflects its home: the Internet. By tapping into what makes the medium so powerful, StarKid is able to seem timely and relatable. Their ease of access also allows them to constantly be in contact with their community. As Twitter user @threepwillow succinctly puts it, “They’re totally geared toward the 2010’s/the future both in terms of finger-
on-the-pulse and of business model/accessibility.” Team StarKid’s Internet locality is aided by their amateur appearance. Both serve to make the company relatable; the embodiment and use of the Internet, coupled with their friendly, indie image serves to reflect the Millennials who largely make up their audience.

The result is a fan base that does not view Team StarKid as celebrities, high above them, but as part of their own community. Twitter user @HThetford described Team StarKid as “a group of friends who never expected to become well-known. Still fans themselves & perform for the love of it.” User @unisarvinen Tweeted, “i love them bc [sic] they don’t take themselves too seriously in their works. They laugh at themselves together w/ the audience.” The relationship between Team StarKid and their fans is what I believe truly makes this group unique, and worth studying. As we will see in the next chapter, the community that Team StarKid has created is a passionate one. This fan base is born out of these first two tenets. StarKid is very much a product of its medium, and given that the Internet is such a dominant cultural force today, they’ve gained a lot of social capital. We recognize them as members of the Internet community, a community that has swelled over the past decade. They endear themselves to that community by positioning themselves as “just like us.” They do not present a strong commercial feel; instead they project an earnestness and energy that makes them seem like friends. This environment has created an audience with a strong sense of community.
CHAPTER TWO: 
BY THE PEOPLE

“Follow the Golden Rule!
That’s how I choose to live.
Woah, simple reciprocity
is always my philosophy.
I get back what I give.”
-“The Golden Rule,” Twisted

While all four tenets I have outlined concern the creation and maintenance of a community, the final two explore the relationship between community and theatre, or more specifically, theatre group and audience. Community Theatre (3) both exposes a community to theatre performance as well as engenders participation, and (4) depends upon their community for their survival. These tenets examine the role played by the audience in the life of the company, and vice versa. The relationship between Team StarKid and it’s audience is a powerful one; it would have to be to have turned the group into the Internet juggernauts they are becoming. Beyond the fans’ ability to turn Team StarKid into a sensation, however, is the seeming amount of care on both sides. Team StarKid genuinely has a relationship with its fans. As we examine these last two tenets, we will see that Team StarKid has developed an open and friendly relationship with its audiences that may look very different from traditional Community Theatre, but has the same goals at its core: exposure, engagement, and interdependence.

EXPOSING THEMSELVES

Team StarKid is certainly adept at exposing a community to theatrical performance. In fact, the type of performance that Team StarKid is exposing their community to is fairly traditional. Their most popular performances are two-act book musicals on a proscenium stage. What sets Team StarKid apart is not what type of performance they are exposing their audience
to, but their means of doing so. As I discussed in the previous chapter, they use the Internet to disseminate their work quickly and to a huge audience. Their musicals are placed online for free; there is no ticket price. While StarKid’s concert tours and sketch comedy shows are not available for free, they are unlikely to be as cost-prohibitive as many live performance options: DVDs of these performances run from $19.99 to $24.99, and digital downloads from $9.99 to $14.99 (Store, AnnArborTees).

Beyond offering their shows online, Team StarKid also allows for different levels of exposure to theatrical performance, ranging from the live, the mediated live, and the recorded. StarKid’s performances are always filmed in front of a live audience, and occasionally livestreamed as well. This means that fans have the option of attending live performances and interacting with the material in that way as well; these events are ticketed, and as such include a ticket price. While this option is not nearly as frequent, and because of temporal/spatial/financial barriers not as accessible to their entire fan base, moments of live contact are available. StarKid has also demonstrated that fans of their mediated performance become interested in seeing them live as well: the success of their shows led to two national concert tours. These concerts are also filmed and are available for digital download, creating a cycle of live theatre becoming mediated performance becoming live theatre becoming mediated performance. In this way, StarKid maintains a generative performance cycle driven by the audience’s desire for continuous performance exposure. The ability of the group to offer repeated opportunities for exposure to theatrical performance contributes to its ability to engender participation.

PARTICIPATION POINTS

The third tenet deals closely with the relationship between performance and audience; that is, what role the audience takes in relation to the performance. Community Theatre has a
responsibility to both provide access to content for its audience, as well as encourage audiences to become active participants in the work. We can view this relationship in terms of Logan’s producers and consumers. In a theatrical setting, the relationship between producer and consumer is often clearly marked: the performance is prepared and then presented for an audience, who views the performance and then moves on. With a Community Theatre setting, these lines become a bit more blurry, in that members of the community are able to participate in the creation of the work, through performing, working the box office, painting sets, etc. With StarKid, the boundaries between participant and observer seem to become even more permeable. As Logan discussed, one of the messages of the Internet is the convergence between producers and consumers, and StarKid certainly troubles a clear-cut distinction between the two. While

That is not to say that there are not boundaries: Team StarKid has a recurring cast of company members, many of whom have been with the group since its inception, and that cast doesn’t seem to be changing any time soon. The group is fairly closed in that regard: I can’t just pack up my belongings, move to Chicago, and become a Team StarKid member. Unlike perhaps other forms of Community Theatre, the production is firmly in the hands of a minority. The distinction between producers and consumers is still troubled, however, because StarKid allows for fans to participate in a myriad of other ways which can be just as immersive and personal as taking part in the theatrical production itself. While the distinction between producer and consumer can of course never be fully erased, StarKid fan interaction allows for fans to take ownership of the material in a way that previous audiences have been unable.

I should note that until this point, I have used the words “fan” and “audience” relatively interchangeably. My reason for this use of both terms is that with StarKid, there is extensive overlap. As others have noted, the definition of fan is a contested one. As Claudia Rebaza notes,
Different strands of study have focused on ‘fan’ as a communal participant (Tulloch and Jenkins 1995; Lewis 1992), as well as “fan” as an individual interacting idiosyncratically with a fannish text (Hills 2002; Sandvoss 2005). The definition of ‘fan’ or ‘fandom’ varies among fans as well as academics. Just as with other social groups, questions such as who is a member, what constitutes a community, and how people signal membership to one another, are matters of continual negotiation. (147)

While Rebaza notes that defining what a fan is or does exactly is difficult, she also examines behaviors typically associated with fan groups. Despite being unable to place fans neatly into categories, we still are able to study the way in which these groups function. The fact that many of Team StarKid’s audience members refer to themselves as fans, or members of a fandom, causes them to behave as such. StarKid fans are able to maintain a relationship with the work that is not unlike those of *Star Trek*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Harry Potter*, or *Star Wars* fans.

There are two reasons that StarKid is able to create a fan community from their audience. The first is that StarKid’s work is drawing from source material with built-in fan communities. They begin as textual poachers themselves. This position not only allows for the fans to recognize their own love for the subject matter in StarKid, but it encourages their fans to create their own art as well. There is a sense of, “if they can do it, I can too.” The second reason StarKid is able to create and maintain an active fan community is their use of mediation. One of the reasons Team StarKid has such high view numbers on YouTube is that their online audience is often fans who watch and re-watch the performances. The ability to engage and re-engage with the text is an essential part of the fan experience. In *Textual Poachers: Television*

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30 Henry Jenkins’s term; *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture.*
Fans and Participatory Cultures, Henry Jenkins’s compares the birth of a fandom to the children’s story *The Velveteen Rabbit*:

The value of a new toy lies not in its material qualities…but rather in how the toy is used, how it is integrated into the child’s imaginative experience… The Rabbit is fearful of this process, recognizing that consumer goods do not become “real” without being actively reworked… Reassuring him, the Skin Horse emphasizes not the deterioration of the original but rather the new meanings that get attached to it… (50)

Jenkins goes on to explain that the “loose joints and missing eyes” are the marks of love that make an object real. When we break apart, toy with, experiment, forge our own associations with a text, we make it real. I believe it is StarKid’s repeatable nature that allows them to develop a fan community from an audience. Fans can return again and again to the text and break it apart, toy with it, experiment with it, in a way that an audience viewing a theatrical performance could not. Jenkins begins his chapter on “Making Texts Real” with the following quote from Umberto Eco:

What are the requirements for transforming a book or a movie into a cult object? The work must be loved, obviously, but this is not enough. It must provide a completely furnished world so that its fans can quote characters and episodes as if they were aspects of the fans private sectarian world…I think that in order to transform a work into a cult object one must be able to break, dislocate, unhinge it, so that one can remember only parts of it, irrespective of their original relationship to the whole. (Jenkins 50)\(^{31}\)

\(^{31}\) Jenkins’s cites Eco’s *Travels in Hyperreality* 197-198.
Team StarKid’s recording of their performances allow fans to do just that, to live in the world of the text as if it were their own, to remember details independent of the whole. This need to be able to reengage with a work in order to become a fan is why we see fan communities popping up around long-running shows such as *The Phantom of the Opera* or *Wicked*. These shows are, in a sense, repeatable. Fans can return again and again to the material, and while different performers will of course alter the performance, the core text is unchanged. These texts are successful at forming fan communities because they also, like StarKid, are dealing in preexisting worlds, or have alternative mediums to engage with. *Wicked* features familiar faces from the *Wizard of Oz* books and film. While the novel *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* by Gaston Leroux did not have a Harry Potter level following, it offers audiences a chance to re-enter the world of the characters they care about, to learn more beyond what is just depicted on stage. Similarly, *Wicked* is based on a Gregory Maguire novel, allowing fans to revisit Elphaba’s Oz, and now with an understanding of what it looks like. The ability to repeat—and reimagine—is what creates this community, and that repeatability is what is lacking in many other performance events. The fans of Team StarKid are more likely to feel a part of a community, more likely to feel connected to the work because they can return to it again and again, versus a performance that exists only in memory.

Unlike audience members at a local playhouse who might see a performance, go home, and forget about much of it later, Team StarKid’s audiences are frequently viewing and re-viewing the work. They are able to quote the show, sing the songs, and draw the performers. They engage with the performance differently than a live audience might; Team StarKid’s fans participate in forms of participation seen in other online fan communities. Principally, this means that the fans have been using StarKid’s work to generate their own creative acts. The fans have
proven themselves to be a generative group, allowing their own remix culture to flourish. Fans take the work created by StarKid and repurpose it themselves, in turn sharing that work online for other fans to engage with. This creation has proven to be particularly fruitful in the form of fan fiction and fan art.

The amount of StarKid fan fiction online is hard to ascertain. First, it can be scattered and shared in a variety of places; there is no one site for sharing the work. Also, because StarKid creates its works using other pop culture canons, it can be hard to identify at times whether it is Harry Potter fan fiction or *Very Potter* fan fiction, unless the author tags it as such. *Starship* in many ways has the most distinct subject matter, as its characters are original creations. Currently, FanFiction.net, a popular site for hosting these stories, has approximately 800 pieces of fan fiction marked as concerning Team StarKid. While creating fan fiction is certainly a different participation experience than auditioning for a show or running a spotlight, it can offer just as much personal engagement.

As Francesca Coppa notes, the authoring of fan fiction (specifically media fan fiction) is essentially a dramatic performance as well. Like the theatrical artist, a fan fiction writer takes an existing text and creates a unique story or event from it. Like a director, the fan fiction writer is considered with moving bodies through space, and filling in gaps in the text. These authors are engaged in a creative act in the same way that theatre artists are; they may not have contributed specifically to a Team StarKid production, but they have been able to create many of their own since seeing it. Coppa writes, “…the writer is part of an interactive community, and in this way, the production of fan fiction is closer to the collaborative making of a theatre piece then to the fabled solitary act of writing” (242). These authors may in fact feel more personally involved or
connected because they have a constant community to support them. There is no closing night for the fan fiction author.

What I find particularly interesting is that these fan fiction stories are written not only about the characters in StarKid shows, but about the company members as well. The stories cover a wide range of genres including humor, drama, suspense, sci-fi, adventure, and romance, some of which feature erotica. Like many fan fiction communities, a sort of shorthand has developed to let readers know which “ships” (relationships pairings) are contained with the story. A title may be tagged with Breredith, LaurWalk, or Crisspez as a clue to which StarKid company members will be romantically involved in the work. These authors are not only able to generate creative performances using the characters of StarKid’s universe, they are able to generate performances of everyday (and not so everyday) life with the cast. Within fan fiction, StarKid fans are able participate in the lives and work of the company. Although this form of participation is most likely not within the realm of what has previously been imagined, by taking part in fan fiction, audiences are showing an active engagement with the material.

The proliferation of StarKid fan fiction is also interesting in light of the fact that Team StarKid’s work is, in itself, a form of fan fiction. They are drawing on pre-existing worlds and creating detailed stories, even incorporating elements from other worlds (AVPM’s close relation to High School Musical, for example.) The fan created works then are almost an extension of the work that Team StarKid is doing; they are all playing the same sandbox. Although I may not be able to perform with the group, I am engaged in a similar act of creation. My work becomes an echo of theirs.

This engagement continues through the fan art produced. As with fan fiction, the art features not just characters from the works, but the company members themselves. Occasionally
this takes the form of already popular Internet memes, such as the “Keep Calm and Carry On” poster being reworked to feature StarKid quotes. The works may also be completely original, e.g. cast portraits, cartoons of scenes from the shows, posters, etc. A popular trend is “Starkid Confessions,” where a fan can anonymously post an image of either a company member or a still from the show with text over top that relates a way in which StarKid changed the author’s life. Without directly participating in the creation of StarKid’s productions, the fans are deeply involved with their work, to the point of emotional connection outside of a theatre event.

While the creation of work that does not appear on the stage may not resemble previous modes of Community Theatre involvement, it is still an act of participation. Returning to Logan’s producers and consumers, we see that the distinction between performer and audience member (or fan) has begun to blur. Fans are engaged in the acts of consuming Team StarKid’s art while simultaneously being a producer of their own. They also can audience each other’s works. This blurring between producer and consumer, and the resultant community it forms goes beyond the work it produces. The fans have a large degree of access to the performers themselves.

Team StarKid and its members are extremely active on social media. The company maintains a Twitter account, as do many of the company members. Fans can tweet the actors and company, and StarKid will occasionally run contests, offer special content or have Q & A’s using Twitter. They company also maintains a Facebook account as well. YouTube is their primary mode of fan communication, offering their musicals, trailers for their shows, and important announcements. For the five year anniversary of AVPM StarKid threw a watch along event on YouTube, where you could view a livestream of the cast watching AVPM while you

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32 Twitter is a social media platform that allows users to “Tweet” their thoughts for other users to see by creating a post that must be 140 characters or less.
simultaneously viewed the show, like a live DVD commentary. They also recorded their livestream, so you can go back and re-watch them watching themselves while you watch along. StarKid uses social media to connect with audiences, and allow for fans to feel personally connected to the company members and productions. When asked what made Team StarKid so special, Twitter users commented on StarKid’s ability to connect to their fans. “But what’s unique is how they connect with their fans—on the Internet and at their shows and concerts. This is unprecedented! (@LarkElizabeth).” Another user said, “Their connectivity and involvement with their fan base (@technicallie).” Fans are able to feel a personal connection to the performers, which increases their sense of community. Their ability to communicate directly with the group can be seen as another form of participation in their work.

Being a part of the StarKid “Twitterverse” does not just connect you to the StarKid team, but it connects you to other members of your fan community. As “@StarKidScholar” on Twitter I was able to observe fan response, as well as interact with my fellow fans. Although my sample size was small (alas, I’m not Twitter-famous) and the evidence gathered was anecdotal, I find it to be very representative of the type of energy created by the fan community. In the process of recruitment, I sent a Tweet to @TeamStarKid asking for their aid, and they shared my Tweet on their page, which caused my followers, in about two hours, to jump by 100. All together, fifty of them used Twitter to talk to me. To help, @starkid_tristan tweeted “Hey, fellow @TeamStarKid fans, go follow @StarKidScholar and help her out with a school thesis on StarKid. We’re a family, right? Go help!” The connections I made through using Twitter as a means of contact also extended into my research field. Other scholars who had researched StarKid, or were interested in fandom studies reached out to me. @lesaboylesmedia told me, “I wrote my undergrad thesis on HP fandom with a focus on StarKid, would love to talk through ideas with
you,” and @DanFreem said, “Writing my thesis on ableism, identity, and issues of authorship in YA fiction. Would love to chat!” As they had not published any work, I would not have found them in an online database or a card catalogue; on Twitter, as fellow fans, I found them in moments. Social media use allows StarKid’s fans to interact with both the group and each other, creating a feeling of being part of the gang.

The desire to feel like a part of the group continues through the group’s branding efforts. The Team StarKid logo and quotes from the shows are applied to t-shirts, bags, stickers, shoes, posters, blankets, and more. Replica costume pieces—a pair of pink sunglasses and a blue sweatband being popular examples—are available as well. Aside from being an excellent marketing tool, the effect of this branding is twofold: first, it allows a fan to again feel connected to the company. They wear the same sweatband as Ron in all three Potter musicals, or they wear their favorite Starkid quotes to demonstrate their involvement; they are in the know, a part of the in crowd. Secondly, these items can help mark other community members. Without sharing a physical community with someone, it is hard to tell who your “neighbors” are. If I see someone in a StarKid shirt, I can recognize them as a part of my community. In this way, my virtual community begins to blend with my geographic one.

Audiences not only contribute indirectly to the work produced through fan art, social media, and branding, but directly as well. Fans can engage in a method of involvement that would most likely be familiar to theatre patrons: fundraising. Aside from merchandise and ticket sales, StarKid has used Internet crowd funding to produce their work. For Twisted, Team StarKid employed Kickstarter to fund the show. The campaign had a goal of $35,000, but ultimately

33 Harry Potter’s best friend.

34 Kickstarter is a website where people can propose and donate to various funding projects.
raised $142,564 with 3,544 backers. The campaign started on March 22\textsuperscript{nd}, and by March 25\textsuperscript{th} it had approximately $100,000. By pledging $40 or more, donors could receive tickets to the live show (Kickstarter). From the beginning, however, fans were assured that the performance would be available online. Because the work would be accessible without having to travel, they received funding from fans all over the world. While fundraising may be a more familiar way of participating in Community Theatre, the Internet has made it possible for the scope to be much broader, and potentially more effective because of the wider donor pool.

I WANT YOU TO WANT ME

StarKid owes its survival in many ways to its fan community. From a practical standpoint, they receive material support from merchandising, ticket sales, and fundraising campaigns to continue being profitable. Team StarKid could not financially survive without their fans. They don’t operate with grants or have sponsors; they subsist purely on what their fans contribute and pay for. Their dependence on the community also comes from the tremendous support base they have from their fan community. The group has done much to create as little separation as possible between themselves and their fans. “For starters, the term “StarKid” refers not only to the members of the performance troupe, but to its fans as well. ‘We call (the fans) StarKid, they call us StarKid,’ [Brian] Holden said. “It really does help break down the separation between us’ (Pandey).” Fan StarKids will follow members through their other projects as well. Support has been provided for other projects featuring Team StarKid’s members, even if it is not an official StarKid production. A web series (Muzzled! The Musical) featuring Joey Richter and Lauren Lopez, issues of the Lang brother’s graphic novel series Quicksand Jack, and performer Jim Povolo’s band Jim and the Povolos have all received either financial support or emotional support (in the form of Twitter followers, free publicity, etc.) from
StarKid’s fan base. The support of the fans, however, is not limited to following StarKids to other projects that they can enjoy. The fans will support even projects that they largely cannot be a part of.

Several of the StarKid performers were involved with a production of The Last Days of Judas Iscariot while at the University of Michigan. Later, they discussed remounting the show in Chicago. In order to fund the project, the group started a Kickstarter. The funding campaign began on March 29th 2013, with a goal of $36,000. The show was fully funded on April 3rd, and eventually finished its campaign with over $62,000. Despite the fact that this was not a StarKid production, did not feature exclusively StarKid performers, and was not a pop culture parody, StarKid fans still came out en masse to help. Most importantly, the production was copyrighted material, which meant that the production could not be posted online. Fans still donated, despite being unable to see the performance. Donors could receive a documentary made by the cast about the process, but no footage of the show would be available. StarKids still offered their support, saying they would be with the cast in spirit, and that they were happy to help the cast succeed (Kickstarter). The survival of StarKid depends on the community that helped propel them to stardom.

The relationship between fan community and object of affection that we see with Team StarKid is not unfamiliar. Truthfully, the fan response is nothing new; the ardent admirers of Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories would today be considered a fandom (Brown). Fanzines like those seen for Star Trek developed the trend, helping to foster virtual communities, and in the age of the Internet fan communities are a well-documented phenomenon. The fans that follow the group’s performances and tours are not unlike those seen at a concert. Brian Holden said in an interview, “We do get the screaming girls...They wait outside our buses for autographs
and stuff (Handey).” What is striking about Team StarKid is that this is a type of response we don’t typically see for theatrical performances. Their use of social media also changes the relationship between fan and object of affection. Many fans are engaged in parasocial relationships, either with the characters or performers associated with their fandom. This means that while they know (or feel as if they know) the character or performers, the fan is unknown to the character/performer (Stever & Lawson 349). In the case of performers, as Stever and Lawson noted, social media—and Twitter in particular—allows for fans to become known (or at least, more known). The relationship is still parasocial (fans know much more about the StarKids than they know about their fans personally) but it provides more give-and-take than parasocial relationships without mediated contact.

Perhaps because of this changed relationship, Team StarKid has created an active and passionate group of supporters that I find fulfills and exceeds the goals outlined with tenets three and four. They offer a wide variety of formats to engage with their work, allowing open access by hosting performances online. @Larkelizabeth described the group as “generous” for sharing their work with the world. This openness has encouraged the fans to be open with their own creative works, sharing fan fiction, fan art, experiences, favorite moments, memorabilia, and passion in their online community. This passionate fan base has allowed Team StarKid to flourish, and the team is grateful. The relationship between audience and performer in the work of StarKid is one of the many aspects of their work that could provide insight into ways of connecting to and creating new audiences. As we will see in the next chapter, the Team StarKid represents some changing power and engagement structures that could alter the way theatre is created, distributed, or perceived.
CHAPTER THREE: FOR THE PEOPLE

“So I say no to status quo. 
Who wants to be like the rest 
and deny the best that I’m meant for? 
I will show the status quo. 
Who cares about normal? I’ll never conform- 
I will be content to resent the status quo.”

-“Status Quo,” Starship

The gang of misfits who come together through the art of theatre and change some hearts and minds along the way is a trope for a reason: we understand that the theatrical event is inherently linked to a formation of community. Community Theatre, as I have discussed, has at its core a commitment to the community from which it stems. Its defining feature is its relationship between performer and audience, between playhouse and community. The work that Team StarKid is doing embraces and reshapes that relationship, allowing for an audience to become a community beyond those moments when they are in the theatre watching the event. It allows for an open communication between community and artist. It allows for the formation of a community that is perhaps more closely bonded and somehow simultaneously more expansive than previous theatrical audiences.

As I’ve argued, StarKid’s work has been more far-reaching than many other companies its size; they have managed to create a loyal fandom that supports their work and forms a strong community. While it may not look like a traditional Community Theatre, it seems to exemplify the type of work early authors hoped Community Theatre would do. Although its means may be different, StarKid comes from the same place of love and care for the community that typifies Community Theatre. I don’t intend for this argument to position Team StarKid as a new form of theatre; their work draws upon already established practices and attitudes that stem from
Community Theatre, as well as fan communities. StarKid seems to have achieved an ideal combination of theatrical performance, popular culture, technology, and community, in a way that appeals to a large audience. This examination of their work is an effort to understand what makes them work, and to provide framework to discuss the elements at play. As a way of synthesizing the discussion up to this point, I will highlight a specific moment of StarKid performance. In doing so, I hope to highlight the way these tenets I’ve discussed come through to effect an audience.

F**K THE TIE

On August 11, 2012, Team StarKid performed a staged reading of the final installment in their *Very Potter* series: *A Very Potter Senior Year*. They performed the reading at LeakyCon, a Harry Potter fan convention presented by The-Leaky-Cauldron.com, a popular Harry Potter fan site. The event was notable for few reasons. Unlike previous StarKid performances, this was done as a staged reading. While the performance was fully staged, with costumes, musical performances, and props, the event was performed with scripts in hand. The event was the first in the *Very Potter* series to be performed outside of the University of Michigan. The performance featured Darren Criss reprising the role of Harry Potter, but he was returning to the role after becoming a breakout star on *Glee*. The performance also featured Evanna Lynch as Luna Lovegood; Lynch had played the role in the series of Harry Potter film adaptations as well. This context, as we will soon see, supports our tenets of Community Theatre. Even beyond the circumstances for the performance, however, there is a specific moment within the performance I would like to discuss.

In the final act of the musical, following the song “Everything Ends,” Darren Criss puts on his Gryffindor tie; in the process of placing the tie, he manages to button part of the tie into
his shirt without realizing it. He begins singing “Going Back to Hogwarts,” the de facto theme song of the Very Potter series. The final lyric of the opening verse is “Voldemort’s been plottin’, but there’s one thing he’s forgotten: I’m still alive!” Between “forgotten” and “I’m” there is a pause in which Criss attempts to straighten his tie, but realizes something is wrong, looks down quickly and back up, and shrugs while the audience laughs. He carries on with the rest of the verse, occasionally tugging at it to see if he can set it right, but he finishes by performing the final line as follows: “Hey it’s no mystery, it’s all so clear to me now: (spoken) Fuck the tie. I gotta get back to Hogwarts!”35 The audience goes crazy cheering, clapping, and laughing.

While a small moment, I find that this event, and the context surrounding it, provides an excellent example of how the principles discussed here play out in StarKid’s work, and how it functions differently than previous models for Community Theatre. In a previous model, this moment would become a story. The actor might run backstage and commiserate with his fellow performers. Oh my gosh, did you see what I did? Did you hear what I said? The crowd seemed to like it... After the performance, audience members might tell the story to a friend while discussing the show. It was an okay performance, but the funniest thing happened towards the end. See, the actor was wearing a tie... It may be talked about for years to come as one of those crazy performance stories, the audience members may retain it as a favorite theatrical memory, but in a way the event will always belong specifically to that moment, and to the people who were present. Certainly, this is a type of community in itself; this group shares a moment together that no one else can be apart of.

What is unique, and for me fascinating, is the way in which this moment is processed through the StarKid model. The performance was recorded, and like their other performances,

35 In this line only, italics are used to indicate lines that were sung as opposed to spoken.
posted on YouTube. As such, Criss’s mishap was broadcast to an audience beyond those who were in attendance. It became, in effect, a part of the performance. Fans can watch and rewatch the performance, enjoying the slip-up again and again. They can quote it to each other as part of the canon. Redbubble.com offers “Fuck the Tie” t-shirts and canvas prints. Fan art includes the quote alongside scripted quotes. The moment that would in a traditional Community Theatre belong only to those who were physically present at the time belongs in StarKid’s model to the whole community. I believe we can read in this event and in the larger context for the performance the tenets of Community Theatre.

_They are local._ Team StarKid was performing at LeakyCon, a Harry Potter fan convention, allowing them to already achieve a sense of being of the community. The show was of course posted online, allowing it to exist in the liminal community of the Internet again. The performance also featured the pop culture references and taste for parody that play into the remix culture of the Internet: references to Spiderman, *The Hunger Games*, *Twilight*, etc. abound, and the show is an amalgamation of callbacks to previous Potter shows as well as the source material.

_The company’s beginnings or their essence must be amateur._ The performance had props, including large basilisk and dragon puppets, and costumes that were of a higher quality than those used in their initial Potter performances. They were performing at a convention in front of a large audience, a far cry from their small Basement Arts beginning. Darren Criss, and Evanna Lynch were both big names for this crowd. Yet somehow, despite star performances and a venue upgrade, Team StarKid still feels like a college troupe. Mishaps such as character breaks and the tie incident add to this feeling. As @HThetford put it, “the spontaneous comedy that comes from things going wrong is hilarious and makes me feel more involved in the performance.” Team
StarKid plays on the popularity of these mistakes, singing, “Who will forget their name, then who will get the YouTube fame?” in *The Trail to Oregon*. This event in particular, with actors holding scripts and slip-ups such as Criss’s tie, maintained the casual, fun feeling that draws audience members in. It is unpolished, there are lyric flubs; the performance maintains the StarKid aesthetic of earnest, DIY theatre.

*They both expose a community to theatre performance as well as engender participation.*

This event was a Harry Potter convention, not a theatre festival. Bringing their performance to the convention allowed StarKid to present a theatrical event for an audience that might typically be interested in them, but were interested in the subject matter. The tie incident stimulated the StarKid fandom’s participatory impulse, leading to the creation of “Fuck the Tie” fan art. The saying becomes one more means of me marking my belonging to the Team StarKid community; if I proudly wear my shirt displaying a cartoon of the misshapen tie, it marks me as a StarKid fan, not a Harry Potter one. As discussed by Jenkins, my ability to quote this moment separately from its context elevates the moment. I, like the velveteen rabbit, make it “real” with my love.

*They depend upon their community for their survival.* Team StarKid is performing at this event because of the success of their YouTube videos. Without a loyal fan base to help make them a popular Internet fixture, they would not have been able to perform. Team StarKid has since become a fixture at LeakyCon, performing every year. In 2014, the group performed a one-night only reading of *Starship: Requiem*, a sequel to the musical *Starship*. Despite the fact that LeakyCon was originally organized as a Harry Potter event, Team StarKid has been invited to share material beyond their *Very Potter* series. Their community has been so supportive, that they are being encouraged to bring alternative work in.
In this performance we can see the way Team StarKid’s Community Theatre functions. The unscripted moments become a part of the script; those moments that would be lost to time become an enjoyable part of the experience for those not physically present. The ability to repeat that moment over and over again allows it to become part of the Starkid canon, becoming a shibboleth for the community. In this way, they continue to foster their community. This ability of Team StarKid to move seamlessly between physical world and virtual allows them to not privilege one audience (live or virtual) over the other. This egalitarian community aids in the fostering of a strong bond between theatre and community.

DIGITAL HORIZONS

Now that I have explicated some of the ways in which Team StarKid’s work functions, I will begin to examine the implications this type of work could have; they may be more expansive than a stronger connection with their audience. Their success makes them a group to watch, and in observing their work it becomes clear that there are other conversations in which their work can and should be a part. Each of these warrants a larger discussion that is beyond the scope of this work, but I feel they bear some preliminary discussion here. The type of work they create and the means in which they share it raise questions about both authorship and audiencing. Specifically, Team StarKid’s work reflects important discussions on copyright disputes, the role of mediation in the audience’s experience, and a potentially more democratic means of theatre production.

Team StarKid uses well-known properties in their art; it has helped them amass their following. Dabbling in pre-established popular culture worlds has been their trademark, but it also keeps them on the cusp of legal trouble. Their manager, Pat Brady, describes her initial conversation with the group after *A Very Potter Musical* was posted online:
So I did, I watched it and then I called Darren the next day and told him “I want you and all your buddies in my conference room tomorrow.” They all came in and I said “Okay guys, you’re screwed. Take that down right now, make a public apology to Warner Brothers that you didn’t mean to step on any toes, let alone the goddess herself J.K..” They did and it was, as you probably saw it, a beautiful apology. They edited it and put it back on the air. Darren got a call the next day from the head of legal at Warner Brothers saying “we need to talk to you,” and he goes “Oh god! Talk to our agent!” So I talked to her and she just said she was very happy that we were so professional. And because we acted professionally and we nipped it in the bud before Warner Brothers had to tell us to, we have been extremely positive with Warner Brothers. (Interview, OrderoftheStarKid)

According to anecdotes passed among fans, originally the show was titled *Harry Potter: The Musical*. Following the group's discussion with Pat, the show was renamed *A Very Potter Musical*; the recording on YouTube also now features a title card reading “This Fan Musical is produced and performed solely for the personal, non-commercial enjoyment of ourselves and other Harry Potter fans. It is in no way sponsored, approved, endorsed by or affiliated with J.K. Rowling or Warner Bros. or any of their affiliates.” The group had to quickly position themselves at a distance from the original in order to avoid a copyright infringement suit.

Team StarKid’s work can certainly be recognized as parody, which should allow for the group to use Harry Potter under the Fair Use doctrine of U.S. Copyright Law. The terms for fair use include an examination of:

(1) the purpose and character of the use, including whether such use is of a commercial nature or is for nonprofit educational purposes;
(2) the nature of the copyrighted work;

(3) the amount and substantiality of the portion used in relation to the copyrighted work as a whole; and

(4) the effect of the use upon the potential market for or value of the copyrighted work.

("Fair Use")

One could argue that these performances are not in competition with any protected works, and that the parody has successfully moved beyond just mimicking the source material into creating an entirely new work. I would imagine that the area in which Team StarKid could come under fire would be in the commercial aspect of their work, and the substantiality of their usage.

*Twisted* features extensive quotation from Disney films, as well as directly copies costuming and other images. The *Very Potter* series also uses extensive material from the novels, and does not change any names. Team StarKid has been able to continue their Potter work largely because they don’t make money off their *Very Potter* shows. They don’t license their shows out, they don’t sell their soundtracks, and the shows are online for free. The Basement Arts performances did not charge admission, and while LeakyCon has and admission fee, Team StarKid was only a small portion of their programming. Tickets were not charged specifically for their performances. The group seems to follow a “better safe than sorry” approach: by only receiving financial support through merchandise sales (which specifically reflect their original content) and through crowd funding, StarKid is able to fly under the radar of copyright trouble. The details of copyright law, and the nuances that go along with determining what constitutes fair use are beyond the focus of my discussion here. I feel, however, that to avoid addressing the fact that StarKid occupies a tenuous legal position would be an oversight. Certainly if companies or
performers were looking to follow in StarKid’s footsteps it would be an important factor in how

to proceed.

The next implication of Team StarKid’s work is that it represents a changing

understanding of the relationship between audience and performance when media is introduced.

We often point to the theatrical event as being a unique moment in time, a coming together of

actor and audience that can never be repeated. As Peggy Phelan claims:

Performance’s only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded,
documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of

representations: once it does so it becomes something other than

performance…Performance occurs over a time which will not be repeated. It can

be performed again, but this repetition itself marks it as “different.” The document

of the performance then is only to spur a memory, an encouragement of memory
to become present. (Phelan 146)

As I mentioned, StarKid does not privilege live performance over mediated. Sarah Bay-Cheng

has noted this shift on multiple occasions, as she seeks to reconfigure theatre historiography in

light of technological shifts. She proposes that “Within the context of mediated conversations,

visual and textual resources, and references” performance is “not a privileged site of temporary

encounter but instead yet another form of mediated interaction with the text, context, and

artifacts” (33). Live performance becomes just one form of engagement. The Tweeting, the fan

art and fiction, the YouTube videos, the live performances all become the StarKid experience,

with options to encounter the work in a number of ways. Bay-Cheng explains this performance

matrix: “… performance itself functions not as a discrete event but as a network of inter-related

components, both on- and offline, both overtly mediated and immediate to various and dispersed
recipients” (35). This understanding moves us away from the performance as event a la Phelan. By conceiving of work in this way, we de-center the performance event as the “real” performance. In a way, fans of Team StarKid are engaged in an act of continual audienceing; beyond sitting in darkened theatre, they are Tweeting, they are writing, they are painting, they are constantly reengaging with the work beyond its status as an event. Unlike broadcasts of performances or concerts in cinema, or the production of live televised musicals like *The Sound of Music* or *Peter Pan* NBC has recently attempted, Team StarKid is not seeking to recapture the feeling of liveness in a mediated way. They’ve moved beyond the necessity of liveness to constitute performance. As Bay-Cheng notes, “live” performance is just a different form of mediation; the live or immediate performance is only a small piece of their performance network, and does not require special privileging. This does not mean the live performance event is unnecessary; quite the opposite. The recording and the event are “mutually constitutive” (Bay-Cheng 37). The pieces of the network depend upon each other to exist. StarKid uses the live event as a generative point for its recordings, and those recordings generate more live events.

One of the largest ramifications of this form of theatre is also its biggest threat: Team StarKid offers a potentially more democratic way of creating and distributing theatre. Before the advent of the Internet, if my friends and I wanted to put on a performance, we were limited in our reach. With flyers and word-of-mouth we could spread the news through our geographic community, but the odds of a great number of people having access to our art were small. With the Internet, I can instantly give the world access to my work. While this does not guarantee me a crowd—not everything goes viral—it certainly gives me more of an advantage than I had before. I do not need to pass any sort of aesthetic gatekeeper to put my work online. Sites such as YouTube have guidelines against sexually explicit content, or hate speech, or extremely violent
or gory content ("Community Guidelines"), but they are one of a myriad of platforms from which to host your performance. I do not have to pass a board of directors, or a season selection committee, to get my work out there. If I do not have the resources to put my production on a Broadway stage I can still ensure it reaches an audience, even a small one. This can be unsettling idea; what is the role of those in positions of power within the theatre community? If we are the sentries at the gates of taste, what do we do when no one bothers to knock? Team StarKid suggests a world where the inmates have taken over the asylum; they have no need for regulations and guidelines dictating what type of content they choose to produce. Of course, as I discussed, StarKid has had to tread carefully in terms of copyright law. Perhaps the position as outsiders looking in has more to do with aesthetics than actual rule breaking. The appearance of creating the art we want when and how we want it is in the spirit of StarKid, if not in the police records. A thorough discussion of the nature of taste and it’s political positioning is beyond the scope of this writing, but understanding StarKid’s position on the fringes (even if it is only in perception) adds one more piece of StarKid’s success puzzle.

These three discussions all highlight that Team StarKid’s work is timely. The Internet has generated a multitude of questions about ownership, authorship, identity, community, and taste, and Team StarKid seems to be right in the middle. What StarKid has managed to do is to create an experience that captures some of how it feels to live in the age of the Internet. If art imitates life, StarKid fits the bill. Team StarKid is the Internet’s modern art; it is thoroughly of its moment.
CONCLUSION:
THE FUTURE IS NOW!

Convergence is another of Logan’s messages of new media. What makes Team StarKid unique is the convergence of all its features. Team StarKid is, in a sense, a perfect storm. They use technology, and with it capture the spirit of the Internet. They feel like your friends and neighbors, and they have a fantastic fan community. They have uplifting messages, and just enough raunchy material to keep things from being too much like a children’s show. They have pop culture references. They have got catchy songs. They’re young. Any of these phenomena on their own might make for a viral hit, but Team StarKid is demonstrating staying power.

Understanding what it is about the group that gives it this longevity could be a critical step in creating theatre that serves similar functions. Perhaps we’ll see teams of StarKids; maybe this group could represent a form of performance on the verge. Team StarKid isn’t replacing Community Theatre, or even completely reinventing it. They’re giving Community Theatre a facelift. What makes Community Theatre what it is can still be present, even if its form has changed. The Virtual Community Theatre created by Team StarKid is doing what Community Theatre is meant to do: serve the community from which it springs. And if their success is any indication, we may see a Virtual Little Theatre Movement before too long. Digital Theatre, a U.K.-based company works with British theatres to record performances and offer them for purchase or rental. Their catalogue features classic drama such as All My Sons or A Doll House, as well as opera and ballet productions. These productions are clearly professional efforts from some of the top theatres in the United Kingdom, which sets them apart from the work StarKid is doing, but it serves as another sign that the Internet may be the next step in theatre distribution.

If StarKid is offering a new way of approaching community and performance, what exactly is being offered? StarKid’s model of theatre distribution indicates a shift from traditional
physical theatre spaces being the home base for community performance. StarKid is not virtual performance, the way the Neo-Futurists\textsuperscript{36} and others have experimented with it, nor is it heavy with multi-media elements. The use of technology in StarKid’s work is not a focal point or a novelty, but a fact of nature. Plugging in as a way of life is a choice large segments of our audience are making, and StarKid may offer a way of dealing with that choice in our art. By making this shift, their theatre begins to challenge boundaries between audience and performer, allowing fans to participate in the work in ways not previously anticipated. Aside from allowing fans to participate in their work, the humble beginnings and Do-It-Yourself aesthetic of StarKid could inspire fans to make their own. In this way, the work of StarKid can represent a democratic move for theatre production, allowing for smaller companies to find a platform for their work, without needing to compete alongside larger houses. As the theatre of Team StarKid begins to blur lines and explore new modes of audience engagement, they also offer tactics that more traditional, physically based theatres can employ, like social media use and Internet crowd funding. Further research into how Team StarKid functions as a fandom, and the ways in which they simultaneously engage with live and mediated audiences could yield even more information about the relationship between performer, audience, and event. The next generations of theatre patrons will all have grown up in a society deeply immersed in technology, and examining the work of a group like Team StarKid can offer a way of understanding how to reach those audiences.

If art is reflective of the time period from which it generates, it stands to reason that an immersive, technologically based theatre would be emerging now. While continuous, reliable wireless Internet is still a privilege, open WiFi hotspots are growing, and the amount of homes have grown, open WiFi hotspots are growing, and the amount of homes

\textsuperscript{36} Postmodern performance group that, among other things, has experimented with the use of multimedia and virtual performance.
with Internet access are on the rise as well. The world is simultaneously shrinking and growing, with instant connections being made across the globe and an unprecedented amount of access to limitless content. Team StarKid is offering theatre that keeps pace. They are able to use the tools of the Internet to create and distribute their work to a wide audience, and in the process create a strong, devoted audience that rivals that of a traditional Community Theatre. Perhaps before long, other companies will endeavor to do the same. To borrow from StarKid, “The future is now,” and I find that “totally awesome.”
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APPENDIX A: HUMAN SUBJECT REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

DATE: November 13, 2014
TO: Sarah Coon, B.A.
FROM: Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board
PROJECT TITLE: [661962-2] Audience Reception & Actor Experience in the work of StarKid Productions
SUBMISSION TYPE: Revision
ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: November 12, 2014
EXPIRATION DATE: October 26, 2015
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review
REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of Revision materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is available as a published Board Document in the Review Details page. You must use the approved version of the consent document when obtaining consent from participants. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please add the text equivalent of the HSRB IRBNet approval/expiration date stamp to the “footer” area of the electronic consent document.

Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

You have been approved to enroll 215 participants. If you wish to enroll additional participants you must seek approval from the HSRB.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on October 26, 2015. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Good luck with your work. If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.
This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board's records.