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Not Writing New Rules, Merely Rat-ifying: Musical Theatre Goes Digital in Ratatouille
A Performance Review of Ratatouille: The TikTok Musical

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Performance Review of *Ratatouille: The TikTok Musical*

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Not Writing New Rules, Merely Rat-ifying: Musical Theatre Goes Digital in *Ratatouille*

On TikTok, a popular online app for creating short videos, #TheatreKids spent the spring and much of the summer of 2020 publicly reckoning with auditions and productions that had been cancelled as COVID-19 swept the planet. They posted mourning memes and clips of bedroom performances paying homage to those that would never occur onstage. In August, Emily Jacobsen published a short video of her singing a song about Remy the rat from the Disney movie *Ratatouille*. In it, her a cappella, digitally sped-up voice plays over pictures of the animated rat.¹ From there, *Ratatouille The Musical* took off, with dozens of creators—composers, lyricists, choreographers, and designers—collaborating on the imaginary musical and eventually garnering media attention outside TikTok (see, for example, Fitzpatrick, 2020).² This culminated in a January 1, 2021 benefit performance of *Ratatouille: The TikTok Musical* (hereafter just *Ratatouille*) that garnered over 350,000 views and earned two million dollars for The Actors Fund.³ *Ratatouille* served as a proving ground for TikTok’s potential to function as a digital gestation chamber for theatrical collaboration.

Without the ability to safely perform in person, artists have spent the pandemic exploring the ways in which theatre—a medium often defined by its liveness—can operate digitally. TikTok creators have been experimenting with collaborative digital storytelling in various forms since well before the pandemic. While a creator certainly *can* simply film themselves speaking into their phone without using any external sounds or editing, the app’s features encourage and aid more

involved content creation and collaboration. Creators are encouraged to use songs or sounds generated by others in their videos, either as a complement to their own audio or to lipsync along with. When a creator uploads a video, their sound immediately becomes available for others to use, creating a network of shared sounds and thoughts. This sharing of intellectual space can easily become a sharing of screen space with the use of a duet function, allowing users to appear alongside each other onscreen to interact side by side. Conversations and creations can move easily between written and filmed mediums through features allowing filmed responses to written comments. These tools make it easy for people to play together even from afar, in contexts varying from sprawling “live”-action roleplay adventures to *Grocery Store: The Musical*.⁴

TikTok outsiders may have been surprised by the massive crowd-sourced creation of *Ratatouille*, but the app (at least in short form) solves many of the challenges of more traditional digital musical theatre creation at a distance. Capturing and mixing multiple voices and instruments is labor-intensive, especially when those tracks need to sync with each other *and* with film. TikTok audio doesn’t rival a professional recording setup, but both the duet feature and the ability to record oneself speaking, singing, or playing over a sound make musical recording relatively easy. The app ecosystem removes the challenge of sending large audio or video files back and forth, risking corruption and requiring download, upload, and encoding time or attempting to work around a Zoom lag; creators can share and respond to content nearly instantly in the app, generating an immediate record of their work. Visual effects mean that even solo choreographers can demonstrate their choreography in ensemble contexts through the use of technology to clone themselves (as seen in the *Ratatouille* stream on several occasions), allowing dance and movement to become an organic part of the early creative process along with music and lyrics. There’s no need for composers or lyricists to track down actors who fit the parts for which

they're writing if they don't choose to do so; TikTok convention means that they can simply post text onscreen labelling themselves as any character and do their best without being particularly concerned about a less-than-stellar performance ruining the reception of clever lyricism or catchy music. (After all, if people like what they make enough, someone with a skill set they lack can quickly come along and add themselves to the conversation.)

Content creation on TikTok functions like a theatrical exquisite corpse, messy and kaleidoscopic and multivocal; the component parts of *Ratatouille* were generated amidst a scramble of pitches of music, lyrics, costume and puppetry design, contributions from accounts both well known and unknown. (At the time of writing, #RatatouilleTheMusical, #RatatouilleMusical, and #Ratatosical—the tags under which most content was posted—have over 350,000,000 views combined.) This method of creation makes it possible to generate a great deal of content fairly quickly and removes the barrier to entry for unknown creators—anyone can use anyone else's sound or duet a video with duets enabled, and TikTok's mysterious algorithm means that it isn't unusual for creators with tiny followings to have the occasional video reach a lot of people. It does *not*, however, lend itself easily to catalogue or curation, as there is no way to view the contents of a given tag in any particular order or to view all duets of a specific video (only all duets with a given user). While *Ratatouille* is billed as a TikTok musical, then, it took significant curation to shape the working tags into the linear, coherent, Disney-authorized property streamed for home audiences.

The musical featured music and lyrics created by a wide variety of TikTok users (Danny Bernstein, Gabbi Bolt, Kevin Chamberlin, RJ Christian, Nathan Fosbinder, Emily Jacobsen, Sophia James, Katie Johantgen, Daniel Mertzlufft, and Alec Powell), choreography by Ellenore Scott, set designs by Blake Rouse, and key art by Jessica Siswick with music orchestrated by Macy

Schmidt and played by the Broadway Sinfonietta. BIPOC artists and women were well represented in not only the company, creative team, and musicians, but also the cohort of TikTok creators, a particularly significant gesture in a field that remains largely the domain of white men at its highest levels and within an app that has been frequently accused of suppressing marginalized creators. Actors appeared in costumes in front of home sets or virtual backgrounds, each filming from their own spaces and occasionally edited into split-screen configurations allowing for them to appear in scenes with each other. Most dialogue was either directly pulled from the film or very closely adapted from it, but the evening's focus was the TikTok-generated music and lyrics. Throughout the musical, Tituss Burgess played Remy the rat, describing plot events between musical moments in extended chunks of narration.

At its best, *Ratatouille* captured the flavor of the lively autumn of its creation, balancing the intense earnestness of enthusiastic creators finding community in a season of isolation with the playfully metatheatrical references of a community of assumed theatre insiders. The opening number, "Anyone Can Cook," offered the thesis of both the musical and the movie source material: the renowned chef, Auguste Gusteau, wrote a cookbook called "Anyone Can Cook" that inspired Remy's culinary ambition. The number was a winking collection of musical theatre tropes, quickly introducing each main character in the show, briefly referencing "Cats," and featuring a rapidly-costume-changing dance ensemble achieved by actors Joy Woods and JJ Nieman using a TikTok filter that allowed them to create multiple versions of themselves dancing in unity, complete with the obligatory hard breathing in the finishing pose at the end of the number.

On the other end of the spectrum, Andrew Barth Feldman played Linguini (the hapless human Remy elevates to chefhood with his help) with absolute earnestness, treating "Anyone Can Cook (Reprise)" as a high-stakes "I Want" song, even if it is about hiding a rat in a hat. Likewise,

André De Shields – as food critic Anton Ego, the man who threatens to ruin the restaurant at which Remy works before having a radical change of heart after his experience with Remy’s ratatouille – brings every bit as much gravitas to *Ratatouille* and his recitation of Ego’s climactic food review as any of his onstage roles. When the professional actors treated the material with the same sincerity as its creators (whether that was a great deal or none at all), at-home audiences were able to experience the material in a way similar to its original context.

Ratatouille was “adapted for the stage” by Michael Breslin and Patrick Foley. Under the umbrella of theatre/media company Fake Friends, Breslin and Foley have extensive experience combining theatre with digital spaces—*Circle-Jerk*, their “live-stream hybrid theater experience,” garnered broad acclaim, including a 2021 Drama League Award nomination.⁵ The Fake Friends website describes their collective and the work it produces as queer and complex, painting a picture of layers upon layers of meaning, references, and techniques, with collaborators frequently shifting roles in the collaboration process, a process that sounds not unlike TikTok’s model of creation.

Given this apparent alignment of style, it is surprising how much of *Ratatouille*’s TikTok flair—and some of the context that accompanied it—disappeared in the musical’s translation from a series of sketches to a quickly finalized form. Some useful conventions of TikTok were lost without being replaced: while TikTok generally understands staring directly into the camera to mean that the speaker is looking at their conversation partner, there were many awkward moments throughout the evening where performers were speaking to each other at odd sightlines or alternating between visibly reading a script off-camera and looking at themselves on their screen, potentially distracting the viewer. The slapdash “closet cosplay” costuming convention is standard for TikTok, but inconsistencies in costuming conventions across *Ratatouille* characters felt underdesigned. Some performances—including, for the most part, the protagonist’s—found

neither the sincerity nor silliness of the source material, instead opting for broad, brisk styles that seemed more interested in getting through the courses of a novelty performance than offering new art a properly plated presentation.

Publicity around *Ratatouille* consistently painted the one night musical event as a rags-to-riches story. Felicia Fitzpatrick’s dramaturgical playbill essay promised to trace the musical’s development “from humble beginnings” as the creation of a group of random TikTokers “all the way to the big time” of a streamed performance curated and delivered by Broadway professionals.⁶ This narrative dovetails nicely with the story of *Ratatouille*: with benevolent guidance from the experts, rats can be master chefs and creators on an app best known for silly challenges and teenage dance routines can have real professionals perform their material. This is underscored in the program, which features bios for hired artists and cute *Ratatouille*-focused interviews with TikTok creators. Tidy narratives aren’t a specialty of TikTok, however, and they rarely accurately represent reality. While *Ratatouille: The TikTok Musical* itself can only *legally* exist as a result of the benevolence of Disney and Broadway officials, the work of TikTok composers, lyricists, and choreographers is not unskilled or a simple novelty. Of the twelve TikTok creators credited as contributors in the program, only one—Emily Jacobsen, whose TikTok initiated *Ratatouille*’s creation—was not a creative professional at the beginning of the pandemic, with many creators boasting performance credits on Broadway and national tours. The creation of *Ratatouille*, then, was not an example of how industry professionals *might* create digital theatre and crowd-source collaboration through TikTok, but an example of how they already are.

Like theatre, TikTok demands presence for those wishing to enjoy the full experience. The app’s dedication to eschewing chronology (or, indeed, any form of organization outside of hashtags) means that the only way to truly experience creators’ digital storytelling collaborations

as intended is to watch as they unfold in close to real time. The development process of *Ratatouille: The TikTok Musical* offered a glimpse of one way this process might be channeled off-app into other, more broadly accessible art; with luck, its success will lend encouragement and legitimacy to the TikTok theatre artists seeking new ways to deliver the fruits of their collaboration, digital or otherwise.

¹ Emily Jacobsen, (@e_jaccs). “A love ballad #remy #rat #ratatoille #disney #wdw #disneyworld #ratlove #ratlife #rats #Alphets #StanleyCup #CanYouWorkIt.” (TikTok, August 10, 2020). https://www.tiktok.com/@e_jaccs/video/6859521038418447622.

² Felicia Fitzpatrick. “Presenting: The Official (Fake) Ratatouille Playbill.” (2020). Accessed June 9, 2021. <https://www.playbill.com/article/presenting-the-official-fake-ratatouille-playbill>.

³ Dan Meyer. “Ratatouille: The TikTok Musical Raises \$2 Million for The Actors Fund.” *Playbill*. (January 11, 2021). <https://www.playbill.com/article/ratatouille-the-tiktok-musical-raises-2-million-for-the-actors-fund>.

⁴ Referenced as an artistic precursor to *Ratatouille* in much media coverage of the musical, *Grocery Store: The Musical* was a collaborative TikTok creation initiated in fall of 2020 by Daniel Mertzlufft. The song parodied Louisa Melcher’s “New York Summer”—another TikTok sensation—and featured a man singing in a grocery store aisle with captions explaining how the song was playing on musical theatre conventions. Other creators duetted the original video hundreds of times, adding layers of music as new characters’ internal realities joined the song. For more context, see: Chen, Tanya. 2020. “This Guy Posted A Silly Video On TikTok And Accidentally Created A Whole Musical Number.” Accessed June 12, 2021. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/tanyachen/epic-tiktok-chain-musical-fighting-in-a-grocery-store>.

⁵ Fake Friends. n.d. "About Us." Accessed June 10, 2021. <https://fakefriends.net/about-us>.

⁶ Dan Meyer. "Ratatouille: The TikTok Musical Raises \$2 Million for The Actors Fund."