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NO-BLAST ZONES

PHILADELPHIA AND NORFOLK, VA.: Social media like Facebook and Twitter dance on a fine line between marketing and content, reality and virtual reality. Theatre publicity departments that don't yet know the steps of that dance might take some cues from a pair of innovative 2009 productions. While some deep-pocketed Broadway shows have professional new-media flacks on the case, both *//romeo&juliet/* at Virginia Stage Company and *Fatebook*, a production by New Paradise Laboratories that ran in September's Philadelphia Live Arts Festival, employed actors to portray characters and enact a kind of narrative outside the theatre's four walls.

"There's a difference between earnest, sincere community and marketing, and people can feel the difference," says Whit MacLaughlin, who created *Fatebook* with a dozen actors. An interactive site, www.fatebooktheshow.com, launched in July, along with Facebook and Twitter accounts for each of the show's characters, months before the show's run at Live Arts. The social media pages garnered around 2,000 followers, while the *Fatebook* site attracted 9,200 visits from 91 countries. Those are hardly blockbuster numbers, MacLaughlin admits, but in social media, as in theatre, quality of interaction trumps quantity. "I wrote individual invitations to about 1,500 people over a two-month period," MacLaughlin says. "I made a rule: No blasts."



Joe Delafield and Mahira Kakkar in *//romeo&juliet/*.

Director Patrick Mullins, whose *//romeo&juliet/* put cellphones and live video into a teen-oriented but otherwise faithful staging of the tragedy, had Romeo and Juliet's understudies manage their Facebook pages, doling out the play's story with updates over the show's two-week run. Followers were in the hundreds, but, echoing MacLaughlin, Mullins says, "Even though the breadth of their friendship wasn't wide, the penetration was deeper than marketing can accomplish."

MacLaughlin was heartened by the results: 80 percent of the audience for *Fatebook*, he estimated, was "new and under 27." Granted, it doesn't hurt that, as MacLaughlin says, "We were making a show for them." For plays that are less form-breaking or immersive, social media can still be a boon if used creatively. "It's not just a new mouthpiece, it's a new medium," MacLaughlin sums up. "It requires some narrative devising."

—Rob Weinert-Kendt