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## For Arts Groups Closed During Shutdown, Online Content is a Lifeline Worth Keeping



**KEEPING AUDIENCES ENGAGED:** When American Repertory Ballet streamed excerpts from its recent production of “Giselle” to patrons, the favorable response encouraged the company to continue presenting online content once it is safe to return to live performances.

*By Anne Levin*

Last Thursday evening, Princeton University Art Museum Director James Steward delivered a public lecture online. A total of 965 people participated, more than the museum would ever be able to squeeze into its auditorium.

On May 2, McCarter Theatre Center streamed an online tribute to outgoing Artistic Director Emily Mann, with tributes from several well-known actors and theater professionals. More than 3,000 people watched from their homes.

Originally envisioned as a way to keep patrons engaged during the COVID-19 shutdown, the use of online content by arts organizations has turned out to be more than just a stopgap measure. Locally, nationally, and internationally, museums, theater companies, dance troupes, orchestras, and presenting organizations are finding a favorable response to the variety of programs they are making available online — so much so that they are planning to incorporate it into their regular schedules and repertoires.

“There is a set of outreach opportunities that is now possible because of the digital efforts we’ve made. Why would we not try to sustain them?” said Steward. “Going forward, it has to be both. Once you open the door and discover that people not just locally, but in geographically remote areas are actually hungry for your content, it presents a wonderful opportunity.”

The museum clocked more than 1,300 viewers at an April 30 lecture online by David Adjaye, the architect designing a new home for the institution. “People were dialing in from all over the globe, and staying on,” said Steward. “So we’re assuming that digital programming will be a mainstay in the future, even when the vaccine [for COVID-19] comes along.”

While the stages are dark at McCarter Theatre, Mann and Resident Producer Debbie Bisno have been busy curating and producing a series of online videos, interviews, and classes. “We’re super happy about the response,” said Managing Director Michael Rosenberg. “I think it will absolutely be a part of our future. Especially with programs like the recent online interview with Emily and Oskar Eustis [artistic director of New York’s Public Theater], where they dug into their shared experiences and what they think the future is going to be like. It offers our audience an insight that wasn’t there before.”

Rosenberg and Bisno have been thinking about ways they can use online content to help introduce incoming Artistic Director Sarah Rasmussen, who will take over from Mann in August. “Hopefully, we won’t still be on lockdown by then, but we won’t be able to get people together in large numbers,” said Rosenberg. “This can be a way to not only introduce her, but also the artists she wants to bring to McCarter. It’s a great chance.”

At the Arts Council of Princeton, more than 30 classes for the spring semester have been held online. Enrollment has been strong, not only for the classes but also for “Conversations with Artists” programs and collaborations with Princeton University Art Museum. “We expect that even after we’re able to do classes in person, we will still offer some content online,” said Acting Executive Director Jim Levine. “We see that there is an appetite for it. And it gives artists a wider audience.”

The digital programs also expand the Arts Council's geographic reach. A patron recently enrolled a grandchild who lives in North Carolina. "What's that saying? Necessity is the mother of invention," said Levine. "It's necessary, and we've been able to invent."

The Princeton Symphony Orchestra's (PSO) Musical Director Rossen Milanov recently posted on Facebook an excerpt from Beethoven's Symphony No. 5 by musicians from the three orchestras he leads — the PSO, the Chautauqua Symphony Orchestra, and the RTV Slovenia Symphony Orchestra. "A Musical Bridge" is just one of the programs the PSO has developed to keep audience members engaged. More than 3,000 people listened. That posting was in addition to "Music Mondays," the weekly performances by members of the orchestra; and "Cooking with the PSO" segments.

"The plan is to keep the digital content going in some capacity," said Marketing and Communications Manager Carolyn Dwyer. "I think everybody realizes that at this time, it's sort of a pivot. We're reaching new audiences this way, and that's on everyone's agenda."

After canceling six concerts at the end of its spring season, Princeton University Concerts (PUC) asked all of the internationally known musicians and performers who had been booked to create a video message for patrons. All of them participated. For the organization's popular "Up Close" series, which brings audiences on stage with the performers, the number of viewers was four times what it would have been in person. PUC also runs a list of streaming resources that is updated daily, keeping patrons informed on opportunities to experience a wide range of performances online.

"There is something sort of eye-opening about the platform," said Director Marna Seltzer. "There has been this incredible appetite for viewing music online and staying connected. Right now, we're discussing all sorts of solutions for fall, given we don't know where we'll end up by then. While nothing is ever going to replace a live concert, this gives us an opportunity to think about our audience in a different way."

American Repertory Ballet (ARB) and its affiliated Princeton Ballet School have embraced the digital world and plan to keep the opportunities going once life returns to some semblance of normal. "Like everyone, we're doing our best to adapt in this ever-changing time," said Executive Director Julie Diana Hench. "We're hoping to continue connecting with audiences and all of our constituents to see how they engage as well."

A mix of behind-the-scenes and meet-the-artists footage is part of ARB's digital content. In addition, the ballet company recently posted excerpts from its production of *Giselle*, which premiered in February. Future plans include streaming ballets from the "New

Heights” program that also premiered this year. The stay-at-home order has resulted in opportunities for dancers to try their skills in choreography and composition. “There have been some wonderful surprises,” said Hench. “They are expressing themselves in different ways and I think that’s going to be really exciting to see.”

The ballet school has also moved online, offering more than 100 classes a week that are a mix of pre-recorded video and live. “What’s surprising is that we have dancers in Japan, Italy, and Alaska who are able to have access and take these classes,” Hench said. “We all can’t wait to be back on stage and in the studio, but this process is inspiring new kinds of programming. We’re doing scenario planning right now. What is exciting is the new content and new ideas emerging from this process. We’ll see what happens.”

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