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Arts Groups Focus on the Future Following a Year of Uncertainty



SURVIVING A DIFFICULT YEAR: The Princeton Festival, shown here in a 2016 production of the opera “Peter Grimes,” is among the local arts organizations that has weathered the pandemic.

By Anne Levin

According to data released this week by the organization Americans for the Arts, COVID-19 has had a devastating effect on arts and culture in the United States. Seasons have been canceled. Actors, dancers, musicians, and the staff who support them are out of work.

But a survey of several local performing arts organizations reveals that while none have escaped unscathed, all are still in business. Once unfamiliar with reaching audiences via technology, they have come to appreciate its ability to dramatically extend their reach.

While these groups acknowledge their struggles, they are cautiously optimistic about the future. They have partnered with each other — American Repertory Ballet with the Princeton Symphony Orchestra, Princeton University Concerts with McCarter Theatre Center, and so on.

“We all still know that going forward, there is more that we don’t know than we do know,” said Marc Uys, executive director of the Princeton Symphony Orchestra, which has had no live performances since the pandemic began. “We’ve had to adapt in a big way to keep our various constituents engaged, meaning our musicians and our audience. But this has been a huge opportunity to expand our reach.”

The orchestra’s recent “Buskaid” programs reached an international audience of about 5,000, which would have been unheard of in pre-pandemic times. The same is true for The Princeton Festival, which canceled in-person performances but attracted some 4,000 viewers online via its “Virtually Yours” streams.

“Once we realized how bad the situation was, we turned on a dime and created this online programming,” said Greg Geehern, acting artistic director. “All of our seasons going forward will integrate many of the things we have learned out of necessity — how best to use technology not only to present, but also to market and expand our outreach not just in the community, but all over the world.”

Julie Diana Hench, executive director of American Repertory Ballet, said the company’s Princeton Ballet School switched successfully to online classes and now provides a hybrid model of in-person and Zoom instruction. “Online audiences have joined from as far as Finland, Australia, France, and Malaysia,” she wrote in an email. Guest artists have worked virtually with dancers in the company, and there have been outdoor performances thanks to funding from grants and individuals.

To come up with creative solutions and keep their companies alive, arts leaders turned to their individual and corporate supporters. The response has been heartening.

“I have felt so comfortable through this that McCarter is really beloved by the community,” said McCarter Theatre Artistic Director Sarah Rasmussen, who began her job mid-pandemic last August. “Our main takeaway is that we’re just so grateful to the community for rallying behind us. It has put us in a great position to come back.”

McCarter plans to reconnect with audiences starting April 25 with a series of live, Sunday afternoon concerts on the green at Palmer Square. A range of musicians performing rock, pop, jazz, swing, reggae, and more, will be making their McCarter debuts. As for a return to performances on its two stages, McCarter is planning to reopen its Matthews Theatre in the fall.

“We will lean on presented events,” said Rasmussen. “Produced theater events will start in the winter of 2022. That allows us to be a bit more nimble. As we look into next year, we hope to use both spaces. Stay tuned.”

David Saint, artistic director of New Brunswick’s George Street Playhouse, was able to arrange a series of “Putting it Together” videocasts when a patron with an empty, spacious house invited him to stage productions there. “We did one every week for 26 weeks,” he said. “We were able to host not only the plays, but a lot of behind-the-scenes things with sets, costumes, writers, actors, and directors, that people don’t usually get to see.”

Both the Princeton Symphony Orchestra and Princeton University Concerts call the University’s Richardson Auditorium home. But when they will be able to return to its stage depends on the University.

“The really tricky thing is that for those of us who are dependent on venues we don’t own, there are a lot of competing priorities,” said Princeton University Concerts Artistic Director Marna Seltzer. “Its not only about COVID. When is the University going to feel comfortable welcoming audiences back to campus? That’s going to be a very different calculus than if you’re Carnegie Hall.”

Seltzer and her staff are hoping to resume presentation of live concerts in late fall. The formal season will begin later in the year, though plans have yet to be confirmed.

American Repertory Ballet dancers have been split into two pods in recent months, working on three new ballets to be filmed onstage at the new Brunswick Performing Arts Center next month. “Our hope is that we can return to in-person theater performances this fall, and *Nutcracker* in November and December,” said Hench.

Princeton Symphony Orchestra is hoping to be playing to live audiences in the fall. “I don’t know any specifics right now,” said Uys. “But I feel there is optimism in the air. We will definitely be back, we’re just not sure exactly when.”

“We are all super eager to come back, and it looks like we are on track, which is amazing,” said Seltzer of Princeton University Concerts. “There is a lot of reason to be hopeful.”

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