

# The Art of Reopening:

A Guide to Current Practices Among  
Arts Organizations During COVID-19





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Cover: Masked visitors at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston view the exhibition *Francis Bacon: Late Paintings*, which received support from the National Endowment for the Arts. Photo by Peter Molick, courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

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Interviewees

Scott Altman, Cincinnati Ballet  
Randy Cohen, Americans for the Arts  
Chloe Cook, Sidewalk Film Center and Cinema  
Adrian Ellis, AEA Consulting  
Eric Holtan, True Concord Voices & Orchestra  
Susan Nelson, TDC  
Nick Paleologos, Berkshire Theatre Group  
Amy Purvis and Lisa Powell, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston  
Rebecca Read Medrano, GALA Hispanic Theatre  
Bill Stephan, Lied Center for Performing Arts  
Nathalie Thill, Adirondack Center for Writing  
Amy Wratchford, American Shakespeare Center

Surveyed Groups

American Alliance of Museums; Association of Art Museum Directors; Association of Children's Museums; Association of Performing Arts Professionals; Association of Writers & Writing Programs; Chamber Music America; Chorus America; Dance/USA; Film Festival Alliance; League of American Orchestras; LitNet; National Association of Latino Arts and Cultures; OPERA America; Theatre Communications Group; Theatre for Young Audiences/USA and Young Audiences, Inc.



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# Executive Summary

Based on in-depth interviews with nine arts organizations representing various artistic disciplines, budget sizes, and geographic regions, the National Endowment for the Arts' Office of Research & Analysis has identified common practices among arts groups that successfully have reopened their doors to audiences or visitors during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to drawing from those interviews, the following recommendations benefited from surveys of national service organizations (NSOs) in the arts, document scans, and interviews with arts management consultants.

(Other COVID-19-related guidance from the Arts Endowment appears on the agency's website: <https://www.arts.gov/about/nea-on-covid-19>. See in particular *The Road Forward*, a tip sheet for arts organizations re-engaging with audiences or visitors: <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/COVID-The-Road-Forward-6.25.20.pdf>)

## In Brief—Key Lessons Learned

- 1. Strengthen ties with your immediate community.** *Aligning arts programming with local community needs is paramount, whether through indoor or outdoor programming, virtual arts engagement, or a mix of opportunities.*

Bill Stephan, executive director of the **Lied Center for Performing Arts** in Lincoln, Nebraska, led an effort to bring a mobile music stage to neighborhoods in the city of Lincoln. He remarks that it was “just really wonderful to see so much happiness that the arts were able to bring.” Nathalie Thill, executive director of the **Adirondack Center for Writing** (Saranac Lake, New York) describes an outdoor “reveal” party for poems that had been painted on the sidewalk. “We used this paint that you can only see when it’s wet,” Thill explains. “It’s also something that parents can do with their kids on rainy days. They were going stir-crazy and so it’s like, ‘Let’s go find the poems in town.’” After a video recording of the event was picked up on social media, Thill characterized the reaction of locals as, “I can’t believe I live in the coolest town ever!”

For museums, “There will be some form of permanent ‘reset’ around broadly making sure that your exhibition strategy is of a wide local appeal, particularly if cultural tourists aren’t jumping on airplanes and coming to your city,” Adrian Ellis, the founding director of AEA Consulting, based in New York and London, predicts. “That is probably going to be the case for some time.... You’ve got to really think local.”

- 2. The doctor is “in”—or should be.** *Identifying a public health professional or team to advise on reopening strategies can make all the difference.*

Mary’s Center, a community health clinic in Washington, DC, serves as **GALA Hispanic Theatre’s** health advisor. **True Concord Voices & Orchestra**, a professional chamber choir and orchestra in Tucson, Arizona, benefits from guidance provided by a medical doctor who serves on its board. Music Director Eric Holtan says: “She is presently working at University of Arizona on the frontlines dealing with COVID patients there and so really is familiar with all of the most current guidelines and recommendations from the national level down to the local county level.”

The arts organization also developed a relationship with a company that does COVID testing; the service is overseen by a resident doctor. For its part, the **Museum of Fine Arts, Houston** has been consulting with Baylor College of Medicine about the museum's latest protocol for onsite testing.

**3. Isolation? More like “quality time.”** *Creating pods or “bubbles” of artist teams can advance safety goals—and also can boost morale.*

Quarantining artists together who are part of a live production or establishing artist pods may seem severe, but the practice can give greater confidence to all involved. For artists, it can foster a sense of community and solidarity. This bubble approach takes extensive effort to maintain, but, as **Cincinnati Ballet** President and CEO Scott Altman reports, dancers now have been able to return to the stage.

**American Shakespeare Center** (ASC) created an “isolation bubble” for its actors, wardrobe manager, stage managers, and backstage production assistants. They “signed an ‘isolation covenant’ that they worked out within their groups to limit interaction,” ASC Managing Director Amy Wratford explains. “They only socialized with each other during the entire rehearsal and run of show.” At the same time, routine meetings permitted group members to “talk about things that had come up during the week, or concerns they had that weren’t immediate concerns.” Consequently, she says, “cast and crew members could feel protected and less anxious.”

**4. The unexpected will continue to happen. Be transparent when it does.** *Adapting quickly to new circumstances and information, and communicating those lessons promptly and effectively to artists/staff, board members, donors, and the public will attract greater confidence in your endeavor.*

Even before the pandemic struck, many arts organizations prized nimbleness and an ability to communicate frequently with staff and patrons. Today these assets take on heightened value.

In reopening, arts organizations consulted with their staff, board, and other key stakeholders, and kept their audiences and patrons informed every step of the way. Cincinnati Ballet's Scott Altman notes: “[We] never make any unilateral decisions about—well, anything, but certainly in this case I made sure that all facets of our organization were comfortable moving forward with progress.... Things were always done under advisement and certainly with everybody in agreement.”

Berkshire Theatre Group's executive director, Nick Paleologos, advises that other theaters considering how to reopen should “work transparently and cooperatively” with unions and public health officials. “They’ll be sticklers, but, in the end, it’s better to comply than not have a good solid relationship with your local officials, so that when you need a break on parking or tent permits, or whatever, they’re there and supportive.”

**5. First principles matter. They can restore a sense of shared purpose for artists, staff, partners—and donors.** *Harkening back to the mission and artistic vision of your organization can lend momentum and vitality to your reopening strategy.*

“People need music and the arts in these dark and challenging, fraught times,” True Concord's Eric Holtan asserts. Arts organizations that stay focused on their mission and artistic vision play a critical role in meeting their community's need for the arts

and, as a result, are more likely to secure the community support they need not only to survive but to thrive.

The Adirondack Center for Writing (ACW) experienced an outpouring of gratitude when poems from its Poem Village series—all written by regional poets—were emailed directly to subscribers during the pandemic. Similar results were observed when the center sent out writing prompts on a weekly schedule. “That kind of rhythm was really calming to a lot of people,” she adds. This spirit of reassurance led to generous donations.

**6. Bring that videographer along for the ride!** *Partnering with a media/tech organization—or a media/tech-savvy artist—can help you to document your journey and find ways to reach broader audiences than you ever might have reached previously.*

The transition to virtual programming during the early months of the pandemic was challenging. Chloe Cook, executive director of **Sidewalk Film Center and Cinema**, points to “a learning curve of new technology and platforms” just as financial constraints have made it difficult to invest in new technology. Recognizing this dilemma, some arts organizations reached out to artists experienced with digital presentation formats or they partnered with teams that could bring the equipment or expertise.

“We were blessed with the fact that we have local filmmakers that jumped to our aid when we closed down in March” 2020, American Shakespeare Center’s Amy Wratchford says. “Both Deep Structure Productions—which is here in Staunton, [Virginia], and Paladin Media Group, which is based in Charlottesville, leapt up to help us [pro bono].” Once ASC launched its SafeStart reopening program, “we reached back out to both companies and actually paid them for their services this time. We also partnered with Marquee TV,” she explains, noting “we were the first theater in North America to do a livestream with them.”

Regarding the future of digital engagement strategies in the performing arts, Susan Nelson—executive vice president of TDC, a Boston, Massachusetts-based consulting firm—reports that based on early findings from an ongoing study of arts organizations’ practices during the pandemic, “there isn’t a soul we have spoken to who hasn’t said, ‘It’s not just the streaming of the performance, but it’s the stuff around it—like one of the stars or performers speaking and being interviewed, or one of the authors or one of the composers being interviewed’.... There’s some wraparound content that is enhancing” the performance. Nelson adds, “However [organizations are] thinking about digital, they all agree that it’s not a short-term holdover solution.... It will be included as part of their product when we come back to whatever ‘normal’ is.”



Rehearsal for Berkshire Theatre Group's *Godspell*. It was the first production sanctioned by the Actors' Equity Association for COVID times. Photo by Emma K. Rothenberg-Ware, courtesy of Berkshire Theatre Group



# Introduction

*Right now, art, art-making, and creativity in all its forms are more important than ever..... It is one of the key things sustaining us while we are cocooning at home—keeping us connected to friends, family, and strangers around the world through collective concerts, creative uses of museum collections, and lots of archival materials now publicly accessible. And it is what will nourish us as we adjust to the new normal of a post-COVID-19 world.*

—Amy Gilman, Director, Chazen Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin–Madison<sup>1</sup>

Given the social and economic distress that has arisen from the pandemic, the need for the arts has seldom been greater, yet many arts businesses are shuttered due to health and safety concerns and government-mandated restrictions on public gatherings. According to data from Americans for the Arts, 41 percent of nonprofit arts organizations surveyed were open as of early November 2020, while 59 percent remained closed.

This report combines survey and interview data to produce tips and insights for arts organizations looking to reengage with audiences and visitors in physical spaces. In April 2020, the National Endowment for the Arts surveyed 16 national service organizations (NSOs) in the arts about their members' readiness to reopen when public health circumstances permitted doing so. Then, in September 2020, the Arts Endowment conducted follow-up surveys with the same NSOs to understand the extent to which their members already had reopened, and to identify common challenges and solutions in working safely and effectively with artists, staff, and patrons during the pandemic.

The September 2020 survey results showed that while most arts organizations had not reopened their doors to patrons, far more museums than performing arts groups had done so. NSOs also affirmed the importance of social distancing, mask-wearing, and sanitization protocols to their members' reopening plans, and they identified issues of staff and artist morale and social and emotional well-being as top concerns for member arts organizations. The survey data also highlighted the difficulty of many arts organizations in providing virtual arts content during the pandemic, though this practice also was named as integral to a broader reopening strategy. (See Appendix A for key findings from the surveys.)

Following these surveys, the agency's Office of Research & Analysis conducted in-depth interviews with several arts organizations recommended by their peers for successfully reengaging with audiences during the pandemic. These groups represented different budget sizes, artistic disciplines, and geographic regions. The conversations were supplemented with interviews of arts researchers and consultants and with scans of

<sup>1</sup> G. Rice (2020), The Necessity of the Arts in a Time of Pandemic: How the University of Wisconsin-Madison is Responding. <https://artsdivision.wisc.edu/2020/04/16/necessity-of-arts-in-pandemic/>



literature and news coverage. From these sources, the following lessons emerge for arts organizations beginning to reengage with in-person audiences and visitors.

## In Full—Key Lessons Learned

1. **Strengthen ties with your immediate community.** *Aligning arts programming with local community needs is paramount—whether through indoor or outdoor programming, virtual arts engagement, or a mix of opportunities.*

COVID-19-related restrictions on public gatherings and travel encouraged people to stay close to home, initially during spring and summer 2020. While virtual opportunities quickly emerged in the arts, many people are attracted to opportunities to engage with the arts in person. Bill Stephan, executive director of the Lied Center for Performing Arts (Lincoln, Nebraska), led an effort to bring a mobile music stage to neighborhoods in the city of Lincoln and remarks that it was “just really wonderful to see so much happiness that the arts were able to bring.” For many arts organizations, local audience engagement is a vital source of much-needed revenue, but it also fulfills social and community needs.

### EXAMPLES:

- **American Shakespeare Center** (Staunton, Virginia), normally a “destination theater,” quickly became more popular among locals, Managing Director Amy Wratchford says. She estimates that prior to COVID-19, only 15 percent of ticket-buyers came from the immediate vicinity of Staunton, Augusta County, and Waynesboro, Virginia. “What we saw this summer,” she said, is that not only did audience members come from these local areas but also from Charlottesville, Harrisonburg, and Lexington, “our general circumference of region.”

More families also came for the outdoor performances. Even pre-COVID-19, at pre-show and intermission, musicians play “everything from Motown to Katy Perry.... I mean, we had one show that did a version of [AC/DC’s] ‘Thunderstruck,’ but for a banjo,” Wratchford recalls. In general, such moves made “the experience in the [Blackfriars] Playhouse feel like a party the moment you come in,” creating a “low-pressure opportunity” for patrons. “It allowed people to come and not feel like they didn’t know how to dress or they didn’t know what to expect or—ooh, Shakespeare, it’s hoity-toity and fancy.”

- **Cincinnati Ballet’s** (Cincinnati, Ohio) outdoor Ballet in the Park event, staged in one of the city’s parks, attracted a large local audience. Reservations for the Friday, Saturday, and Sunday matinees, and a Saturday evening event, sold out within minutes, drawing more than 1,200 attendees over the weekend. The audience included some of the company’s traditional audiences but also a “healthy mix of people in the community that had heard about it and came out to see it.... It was not our usual group,” President and CEO Scott Altman says. Families attended in much larger numbers than is typical at the ballet company’s performances. Within their designated seating circles, children moved around and danced to the delight of staff.

- Recognizing the challenges associated with presenting films in indoor settings during the early months of the pandemic, the **Sidewalk Film Center and Cinema** (Birmingham, Alabama) took films outdoors in a manner that also engaged new local audiences. A weekend popup drive-in series held in Birmingham in the parking lot of a closed retail establishment presented cult classics or family-friendly film programming. Local attendees thanked staff for programming that broke the monotony of staying at home. Sidewalk Executive Director Chloe Cook comments: “We were having people roll their windows down as they were driving out, screaming ‘Thank you!’ and clapping for our staff.”

Sidewalk also changed the location of its annual Sidewalk Film Festival from Birmingham’s historic theater district to the Grand River Drive-in in Leeds, a nearby suburban community, to allow for socially distanced activities. The festival schedule played out across seven nights on the drive-in’s four screens, presenting around 160 feature-length films and shorts. Roughly 6,000 people attended the event, considerably fewer than the festival’s typical yield of 15,000, due in part to attendance being capped at 50 percent of the venue’s capacity. The venue change drew a new audience in addition to the festival’s usual attendees.

“We rented this drive-in facility that’s about 25 minutes away,” Cook recalls. “We saw people that are closer geographically to that area come out and just sort of try out the festival for the first time. Perhaps it’s something that they’d heard about before, but had not ventured downtown to participate in. We were sort of in their backyard a bit more and some people I think frankly were just ready to get out of their home, and this seemed like a safe way to do that and be entertained.”

For some arts organizations, engaging with local artists has been central to their reopening strategy. After all, artists and arts workers have been among the most afflicted by the COVID-19 pandemic, financially speaking. (For performing artists, the situation has been especially grave. From January to August 2020, employment at U.S. performing arts companies fell by 52,500 workers, or nearly 55 percent. In the third quarter of 2020, the unemployment rates for actors and dancers and choreographers exceeded 50 percent; for musicians and singers it was 27 percent, and for producers and directors it was 17 percent. Compare those figures with the unemployment rate for all U.S. workers during this period: 8.5 percent.)

## Coping with the Declines in Cultural Tourism

As early as May 2020, a report by SMU DataArts and TRG Arts, titled *Arts and Cultural Organizations: In It for the Long Haul*, forecasted: “Organizations that shift focus outward to communities will build stronger ties for a post-COVID-19 revival.” The report added: “How an organization carries out its purpose should vary over time as it innovates in response to changing community needs.”

Given the blow dealt by the pandemic to cultural tourism, it will be more important than ever for arts organizations to connect with local community members as part of any long-term audience development strategy. Fortunately, in many cases, a renewed focus on community will require no “pivot” whatsoever. Amy Purvis, chief development officer of the **Museum of Fine Arts, Houston** (MFAH), estimates that fewer than 10 percent of its visitors are tourists.

Purvis reasons that “the people who were loyal to us, going into this, have been loyal to us virtually and through fundraising efforts.” When the museum reopened in May 2020, she says, “most of the people waiting in line to get into the museum were long-term patrons who said things like, ‘I missed this place’ and ‘I wanted to be back here’ and ‘I couldn’t wait for you guys to reopen!’”

- **GALA Hispanic Theatre's** co-founder and executive director, Rebecca Read Medrano, attributes the company's reopening decision partly to the knowledge that "our Latinx artists across the board...were unemployed since March, and finding it difficult to survive. These are Spanish-speaking artists.... There's not a lot of work available."
- Nebraska's **Lied Center for Performing Arts** rallied support for local artists through an online concert series it launched during the early weeks of the pandemic. On Friday nights, the Lied Center featured free concerts by a variety of artists, many of whom were Nebraskans, with viewership ranging from 200 to over 1,000 people per week. The Lied Center paid all the artists and encouraged audience members to make donations to support the program, Executive Director Bill Stephan says. The program enabled the Lied Center to connect with local and regional artists and to "share the great talents of Nebraska" with a national audience for this concert series.

Another Lied Center program that supported local and regional artists was Music on the Move—an outdoor program that took music to neighborhoods in the Lincoln area during June and July. "People were still staying at home, for the most part, so we brought the music to the neighborhoods, to the people's community, to their front lawns. We had a portable stage that had a sound system and a bike that pulled this portable stage through communities. It was a different neighborhood every week," Stephan explains. "We had people dancing in their front yards, on their porches, gardening.... We were supporting Nebraska artists, paying them for their time and their talents, so that was a way that we could also support our local artists."

- **Sidewalk Film and Cinema** partnered with filmmakers to offer online workshops on filmmaking topics, including screenwriting, cinematography, assistant directing, financing, adaptation, and more. After witnessing how the pandemic affected filmmaking colleagues, who found themselves suddenly out of work, Sidewalk split proceeds from these workshops with participating filmmakers. While the demand for the online workshops has ebbed slightly over time, Sidewalk is interested in maintaining this type of programming in the post-COVID future.

## 2. The doctor is "in"—or should be. *Identifying a public health professional or team to advise on reopening strategies can make all the difference.*

As part of developing a reopening plan, arts organizations have reached out to medical experts—often through board members or patrons—who can offer guidance and ad hoc consultation on safety and testing protocols. In some cases, arts organizations have partnered with a local university medical center or community hospital for expertise and worked directly with COVID testing companies. Access to medical expertise can help arts organizations sift through guidance from city, county, state, and federal entities and identify protocols appropriate for their facilities and programs.

### EXAMPLES:

- **American Shakespeare Center (ASC)** worked with its local community hospital—and, in particular, with an infectious disease expert on the hospital's staff who "happens to be a huge Shakespeare fan," ASC's Amy Wratchford notes. The expert, a longtime patron of the Staunton, Virginia,

theater, agreed “within 20 minutes” to be a “sounding board” for the theater’s SafeStart reopening plan, she recalls. This person did a two-hour walk-through and, given her previous knowledge of the theater space, was better able to advise on which safety measures would be most effective.

The expert “debunked a few things that we were really concerned about,” Wratchford notes. It was decided, for example, not to put Plexiglas shields around the box-office area as the employees and patrons already were wearing masks. Similarly, the expert counseled ASC not to “worry about disinfecting cushions on the benches in the [theater] or tapestries on the wall” but to focus on “wiping down all high-touch surfaces...in the common areas.” ASC also referred to its expert any questionable entries that theater company members might have reported on a daily COVID-19 symptom-tracker, so that a decision could be made about their health status.

- **The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH)** has been consulting with Baylor College of Medicine about MFAH’s latest protocol for onsite testing. “Baylor is now advising us on how to communicate to our staff the new and changing dynamic of COVID,” Chief Development Officer Amy Purvis reports. “We have assembled a team to help us think through this, to help us move through this really challenging time. The team helps us navigate the different and evolving thoughts about how the disease is transmitted, its incubation period, and the viral load.” Purvis also hopes that the Baylor partnership can improve the cost-efficiency of MFAH’s onsite testing.
- **True Concord Voices & Orchestra** (Tucson, Arizona) benefited from guidance provided by a medical doctor who serves on its board. Music Director Eric Holtan shares that this expert “is presently working at University of Arizona on the frontlines dealing with COVID patients there and so [is] really familiar with all of the most current guidelines and recommendations from the national level down to the local county level.... She’s guided all aspects of our operations from how the artists have been housed and transported and how they’ve been able to assemble to how we assembled audiences...with everybody’s safety and well-being in mind.” True Concord also developed a relationship with a company that does COVID testing. The testing is overseen by True Concord’s “resident medical doctor.”

### 3. Isolation? More like “quality time.” *Creating pods or “bubbles” of artist teams can advance safety goals—and also can boost morale.*

Quarantining artists and staff who are part of a live production or establishing artist “pods” may seem severe, but the practice can give greater confidence to all involved. For artists, it can foster a sense of community and solidarity. It can take extensive effort to maintain this degree of social isolation, but as Cincinnati Ballet reports, one result has been that dancers have returned to the stage. Technology also offers a way to connect artists and arts administrators during rehearsals while maintaining safety protocols.

#### EXAMPLES:

- While rehearsing and producing *Godspell* during the pandemic, **Berkshire Theatre Group** (Pittsfield, Massachusetts) put its actors “in a bubble”—in this case, by lodging them in the Thaddeus Clapp House, a historic home that the organization acquired in 2013 but opened only last year, after a

restoration. “We were able to put the entire cast in that house,” Executive Director Nick Paleologos recalls. “They would leave the show, and they would walk across the parking lot... They were living together.”

“We told them ‘Don’t do this’ and ‘Don’t do that,’ ‘If you have to go to the [store], make sure that you wear your mask,’ and ‘Don’t interact with anybody other than your fellow cast members,’” all of whom were testing negative for COVID-19, he explains. Paleologos refers to “bonding” among cast members. “They’re all in the same house, so they’d be sitting out on the porch, or they’d be congregating in the dining room or the living room, and all they did was talk about the show and talk about the experience, and they forged relationships with each other that normally wouldn’t happen in these circumstances.”

- As contributors to the *AGMA/SDC Return to Stage and Performing Arts Playbook* (a product of the American Guild of Musical Artists and the Stage Directors and Choreographers Society), **Cincinnati Ballet** led the way for many ballet companies in terms of safely bringing dancers back to work. In addition to the introduction of many health and safety protocols in their facility, the ballet company initiated the use of isolation groups or pods for their dancers. While in rehearsal, dancers work in small pods, limited to no more than eight. Each pod uses designated spaces (studios, bathrooms, hallways) and staggers their rehearsal times to avoid other pods.

The company invested in new technology: cameras were installed in each of the rehearsal rooms so that staff and dancers can be connected virtually from home or from elsewhere in the facility. This feature allows the ballet master to give direction to any or all of the pods from his or her office, or for dancers to participate in remote training or collaboration with choreographers. It also allows dancers to continue working with their pod if they are temporarily quarantined.

- **True Concord Voices & Orchestra** launched its fall season with a series of outdoor concerts. For the first concerts, 18 of the company’s singers arrived in Tucson on Oct. 9 from all over the country. After being tested for COVID-19, the singers were individually isolated for the first ten days, after which they went into shared housing. Their housing groups remained isolated from other groups throughout the five-week season.

“We drew some of our inspiration from the NBA and the WNBA and their bubble approach,” True Concord’s Eric Holtan says. “We thought if we could bring the artists in one time, for a concentrated amount of time, that limits the amount of travel they would have to do...and [if] we isolated them and of course tested them and kept them in this bubble, we could be quite productive over a period of four or five weeks.”

**4. The unexpected will continue to happen. Be transparent when it does.** *Adapting quickly to new circumstances and information, and communicating those lessons promptly and effectively to artists/staff, board members, donors, and the public will attract greater confidence in your endeavor.*

Even before the pandemic struck, many arts organizations prized nimbleness and an ability to communicate frequently with staff and patrons. Today these assets take on heightened value. For all the uncertainty, American Shakespeare Center’s Amy



Wratchford advises using transparency within your organization and with your patrons: “The more information you can provide for them, the better everyone feels.” Arts organizations consulted with their staff, board, and other key stakeholders, and kept their audiences and patrons informed every step of the way.

#### EXAMPLES:

- Berkshire Theatre Group** (BTG) can give a master class on how to navigate the unexpected during a reopening. Executive Director Nick Paleologos says: “Even when we had [safety] protocols that we thought we understood, the whole process got interrupted in a week because the stage manager wasn’t happy with the way...that the staging was adhering to what we needed to do—and we had to go back to the drawing board creatively and, literally, restage the show with only a week to go.” Describing the “roller-coaster nature” of BTG’s planning activities, Paleologos notes that on opening night of *Godspell*, the Massachusetts governor announced a 50 percent cut in seating capacity for outdoor performances, “effective immediately.”

Despite such inconveniences, Paleologos advises that other theaters considering how to reopen should “work transparently and cooperatively” with unions and local officials.

BTG persevered and was rewarded by, among other plaudits, a favorable piece in the *New York Times’* Arts and Leisure section. It was also the final production reviewed by legendary theater critic Ben Brantley. Then, “as if the gods needed to knock us back down to earth,” a cast member tested COVID-positive, Paleologos states. The diagnosis turned out to be a false positive, but the theater had to use an understudy until the requisite number of confirmatory tests were taken.

## Finding Unexpected Demand in a Prison Population

Considering the range of programming that the Adirondack Center for Writing (ACW) has continued to offer throughout 2020, Executive Director Nathalie Thill says “the biggest surprise of all” has been ACW’s Prison Writers Program, a partnership with the Federal Correctional Institution in Ray Brook, New York, that has received support from the Federal Bureau of Prisons and the National Endowment for the Arts. “The prison staff actually have a lot of work to do themselves, but they’re really thrilled to have some programming for the inmates. Usually when inmates are in lockdown, it’s punitive, but this time it wasn’t—and so they felt really helpless trying to provide things for the inmates to do,” she explains.

Based on this need, ACW converted its in-person class format to a distance-learning program. “For any given workshop that we might do, we usually have about 15 people,” Thill says. “That’s a normal workshop. For the first one we offered [during] COVID, we had 50.” Unusually, the center selected grammar and not creative writing as the workshop topic. “One of the things that the [prison] staff had recommended was that we don’t want [a student writer’s] prized manuscript going back and forth because [of] the likelihood of it getting lost...in the shuffle.”

“The teacher noticed that there [was] a different population” engaged with the distance-learning program than with the in-person format. It included “a lot more students for whom English was a second language,” perhaps “because they didn’t have to be in a class with other students [and] maybe they were too shy in the past to have taken classes,” Thill suggests. Also, the amount of extra work that the prison staff was willing to perform “is a real testament to how much they value the program.... I didn’t realize how important this was” to the prison staff, “so we really do feel very excited that we were able to offer [it].”

- Arizona's **True Concord Voices & Orchestra** planned for reopening using a task force that was comprised of board members and staff. The organization consulted with artists and audiences (via survey) as part of their decision-making process on reopening and restarting live programming. True Concord surveyed all constituent groups—audiences, artists, and volunteers—and incorporated feedback into the final plan for reopening. For example, True Concord learned from audience surveys that there was great trepidation about attending indoor performances, yet two-thirds of respondents shared they would be comfortable attending outdoor events. Music Director Eric Holtan stresses that listening to stakeholders is behind True Concord's successful reopening.
- To guide its own reopening process, **Cincinnati Ballet** consulted with the American Guild of Musical Artists (AGMA) medical team, but also fully engaged with its staff and governance. Board members were consulted and kept fully apprised, while ballet company staff—ranging from human resources, operations, and administration, to the ballet masters and artistic director—were engaged in determining the operational plans. The Cincinnati Ballet was also one of the first companies in the country to have a signed agreement—a back-to-work COVID agreement—for its dancers.

Scott Altman, president and CEO of the Cincinnati Ballet, offers, “[We] never make any unilateral decisions about—well, anything. But certainly, in this case, I made sure that all facets of our organization were comfortable moving forward with progress either in the academy or education outreach and performing when dancers return.... All of those things were always done under advisement and certainly with everybody in agreement.”

**5. First principles matter. They can restore a sense of shared purpose for artists, staff, partners—and donors.** *Harkening back to the mission and artistic vision of your organization can lend momentum and vitality to your reopening strategy.*

“People need music and the arts in these dark and challenging, fraught times,” according to True Concord’s Eric Holtan. Arts organizations that stay focused on their mission and artistic vision play a critical role in meeting their community’s need for the arts and, as a result, are more likely to secure the community support they need to not only survive but to thrive.

EXAMPLES:

- **Berkshire Theatre Group’s** Paleologos recalls that in mid-June 2020, while waiting for clearance from the Actors’ Equity Association for the theater’s planned production of *Godspell*, “The cost of it is going through the roof and it’s making my head explode, because we can’t pay for it—even with 100 people and selling out and charging 100 bucks, which is higher than we’ve ever charged for anything, it still is going to lose a ton of money.” Suddenly, during a board meeting via Zoom, two board members “just blurted out, ‘You know what? I will make a pledge...for the summer to help this thing happen,’ and another one jumped in and said, ‘I’ll match that pledge,’ and I almost started crying.”

“I think they felt—and rightly so—that this is an organization that’s been around for almost 100 years, and we’ve been performing through the Great Depression, through World Wars I and II, the Stock Market Crash, 1968, [and]

9/11. This is one of those moments," Paleologos says. The board members "felt like a band of brothers and sisters. It was really a galvanizing meeting. And so, when they came through it, we all breathed a sigh of relief, saying, 'Well, all right, I guess we can do this.'"

Contributing to that positive energy was the choice of musical, *Godspell*, which spoke to the current crisis "in a way that I couldn't even have imagined," Paleologos notes. The musical's composer and lyricist, Stephen Schwartz, also hailed this impact in a personal visit to the theater.

- Nathalie Thill, executive director of **Adirondack Center for Writing** (ACW), noted an outpouring of gratitude when poems from its Poem Village series—all written by regional poets—were emailed directly to subscribers during the pandemic. "We got so much response from people just saying how calming it was to read these poems. It was something to look forward to," she says. Similar results were experienced when the center sent out writing prompts on a weekly schedule. "That kind of rhythm was really calming to a lot of people," she says. This spirit of reassurance led to generous donations.

Regarding ACW's Spontaneous Storytelling series, which involved Thill telling live, improvised stories over Facebook Live based on audience suggestions, "we didn't have lofty goals" for it, Thill acknowledges. "But we met them—and even exceeded them." She reasons, "I think it's because people were just... afraid for their arts organizations, and also were aware of how much they were using reading and writing as tools to cope. So they were just appreciative of it."

ACW also saw heightened value in its organizational mission when it held its Anne LaBastille Memorial Writers Residency on Twitchell Lake, New York, in October 2020. Every year, the six writers selected for the two-week, free residency are thankful that ACW is "providing this gorgeous place for them to work on their writing," Thill says, but "this year the gratitude...was [on] a whole other level."

Thill and the writers sat at "this ridiculously giant table.... We're sitting very far apart and, obviously, you had to take your mask off to eat." She recalls, "I'm just making sure that the conversation is very, very easy and light—I do that anyway because I feel like people are at their creative best when they're comfortable—and the next morning, two of the people said that it was the first time they had laughed since March [2020]."

- **GALA Hispanic Theatre** is "such an important institution for the community," Co-Founder and Executive Director Rebecca Read Medrano affirms. "We felt we owe that to our community: to maintain the theater and at the same time, as quickly as possible, reopen for some sort of activities. First, for the community itself, that's been so hard-hit by COVID. And not just because you want to do theater but because the theater is really a gathering place for the community and a place to come together—a place to feel safe."
- During the pandemic, while planning for its fall season, GALA Hispanic Theatre took the opportunity to renovate its space. Similarly, Susan Purvis, the chief development officer of the **Museum of Fine Arts, Houston** says, "We've reinstalled our American galleries during this shutdown. We've taken all of our Impressionist work, repainted the walls, and reinstalled it. It looks fabulous. In

some ways, the shutdown gave us a lot more time and focus to do some things that we had wanted to do for quite a while.” The museum also devoted more time to its \$476 million expansion project, which opened in mid-November 2020.

**6. Bring that videographer along for the ride!** *Partnering with a media/tech organization—or a media/tech-savvy artist—can help you to document your journey and find ways to reach broader audiences than you ever might have reached previously.*

The transition to virtual programming during the early months of the pandemic was challenging. The need was great, but many arts organizations found themselves without the expertise, software, or equipment to produce quality online programming. **Sidewalk Film Center and Cinema’s** Executive Director Chloe Cook reported the biggest challenge to be “the learning curve of new technology and platforms” at a time when financial constraints made it difficult to invest in new technology. Recognizing this dilemma, some arts organizations reached out to artists experienced with online presentation or partnered with an organization that could bring equipment or expertise.

EXAMPLES:

- “We were blessed with the fact that we have local filmmakers that jumped to our aid when we closed down in March,” **American Shakespeare Center’s** Amy Wratchford says. “Both Deep Structure Productions—which is here in Staunton, [Virginia], and Paladin Media Group, which is based in Charlottesville, leapt up to help us.”

“Paladin Media Group edited all seven shows pro bono.... That is how we were able to launch the online initiatives so quickly,” she says. Once ASC launched its SafeStart reopening program, “We reached back out to both companies and actually paid them for their services this time. We also partnered with Marquee TV,” Wratchford explains, noting “we were the first theater in North America to do a livestream with them.” Those productions were *Othello* and *Twelfth Night*, both also available on demand throughout the season.

- **Adirondack Center for Writing’s** Nathalie Thill describes a relatively low-tech approach. “We spray-painted poems on the sidewalks in town, but we used this paint that you can only see when it’s wet,” Thill recalls. For the “reveal” party, one of the poets came and we just threw water balloons on the site.... We had a local videographer make a video of the whole [event.] And it was pretty great, actually. He had drones and everything.”

“That was also just something that the whole town really embraced...sort of making lemonade out of lemons,” she comments. “And it’s also something that parents can do with their kids on rainy days. They were going stir-crazy and so it’s like, ‘Let’s go find the poems in town.’” The video brought the event to a wider audience. “The village had their own social media mechanisms.... And the downtown advisory committee in Saranac Lake posted about it. I think it was shared—I honestly don’t know how many times. It was this little tiny video, [so] that someone just walking down the street in Saranac Lake [could say,] ‘I can’t believe I live in the coolest town ever.’.... And then people responding, ‘Oh, I need to visit you in Saranac Lake. It sounds like they’re doing really cool things there.’”

Additionally, through online writing prompts and poems emailed directly to subscribers, ACW attracted “thousands of people, as opposed to hundreds,” Thill says. Especially popular was Spontaneous Storytelling, a series that had Thill improvising three-minute stories based on one-word prompts that had been texted to staff or posted to Facebook Live. Thill explains: “We put [on] no music—we put no money into it, and we turned it into a little telethon.” There was “a little sign behind me that said, ‘Please donate.’” ACW exceeded its goals for the program.

- Like many other arts organizations, the **Lied Center for Performing Arts** faced initial challenges when it moved its programming online, particularly with streaming quality. “During some of our events, when they were at people’s homes or different parts of the country...we ran into quality problems because of their device or the internet connection. The stream wasn’t strong [enough] to have a good solid product,” the Lied Center’s Bill Stephan notes. “We pride ourselves on having the very best experience in the arts for everything we do, so when the artist was fantastic, but if the connection wasn’t good—[if] the audio was muffled a little bit or the visual was blurry—that was disappointing to us. That was something that we struggled with a little bit with the at-home concerts.”

## The Changing Landscape of Digital Engagement

Most arts organizations interviewed agree that careful thought must go toward a digital engagement strategy, given the short- and long-term consequences. But they also recognize the enormous opportunity for extending their reach. Access to an individual or group already fluent with these technologies can free resources for content development.

According to data collected from Americans for the Arts from Sept. 17 to Nov. 3, 2020, over 63 percent of nonprofit arts organizations surveyed have increased their online presence—by livestreaming performances, for example, or enhancing access to other online experiences—in response to the pandemic.

Other survey data and interviews show that while digital offerings are becoming an increasingly important part of doing business as an arts organization during COVID-19, there remains uncertainty in the field about how best to produce regular content on these platforms.

Responding to a survey from the Arts Endowment, nearly a third of national arts service organizations reported difficulties among member organizations in providing virtual arts content as an ongoing strategy. Also, according to data from LaPlaca Cohen and Slover Linett’s “Culture + Community in a Time of Crisis” survey, only 13 percent of respondents claimed having paid for any digital arts content they had used—a finding that underscores the challenge for artists and nonprofit arts organizations in monetizing their offerings.

More recent data present a more nuanced picture. In late October 2020, 70 percent of arts organizations surveyed by the Advisory Board for the Arts (ABA) reported generating revenue from digital content—“mostly from selling digital tickets and soliciting voluntary donations connected to content,” ABA says. But the total revenue share differs widely across organizations. Among the roughly 30 percent of organizations that were *not* generating revenue, 53 percent were using digital content primarily “to stay connected with audiences,” while 47 percent had not yet created or implemented a monetization plan.

Nearly all organizations surveyed by ABA said they were producing more digital content than in the previous year. ABA notes that “content created specifically for digital is by far the most successful digital revenue generator” and that “organizations are having the most success monetizing content on their own website, their YouTube channels, Vimeo, and Facebook.” (Zoom, Marquee TV, and podcasts were also frequently reported platforms.)

Regardless of platform, the lion’s share of revenue realized through digital content came from patrons already within each organization’s circle. According to the ABA report, existing subscribers or members accounted for 65 percent of such revenue, while an overlapping group—“those with some previous affiliation (e.g., past single-ticket buyer)” —made up 55 percent.



Ultimately, the Lied Center succeeded in procuring a grant for a broadcast system, permitting some performances to be webstreamed. Stephan continues: “We’re still figuring out best ways to broadcast and connect with people, because a lot of our older patrons aren’t into watching on their phones and on their computers, and trying to get things on a TV is a bit more of a challenge. So that’s something we’re still finalizing working out, but . . . we’ve got it captured now so we have a way to deliver it to them.” At the time of this interview, the Lied Center had been working on a partnership with the local City of Lincoln Education Channel, which will enable it to provide free programming on the City TV channel in addition to streaming on different platforms.

- **True Concord Voices & Orchestra** established a partnership with Arizona PBS to record a concert of Brahms’s *Requiem*, one of the group’s first performances this fall. The concert was recorded indoors but with no audience in the hall. The concert video is now available online, and True Concord has been promoting it “well beyond Tucson...to get True Concord’s reach out there more,” Music Director Eric Holtan says. The organization has recorded four programs with Arizona PBS and provided limited accessibility to the videos on its ticketing platform (Patron Manager) to encourage audiences to buy and view the concerts during fall 2020. True Concord intends to “re-release” some or all of these programs in the new year.

## Conclusion

The lessons shared by these arts organizations offer strategies, amid historically adverse circumstances, to reengage Americans with the transformative power of the arts. While virtual programs likely will remain an important fixture in the arts for the foreseeable future, they do not replace experiencing the arts in person—as an audience member or as an artist or learner.

Patrons attending a pop-up drive-in film screening by Sidewalk Film Center and Cinema were thrilled to attend the event. Sidewalk Executive Director Chloe Cook notes: “We had a person cry because they hadn’t been out of their house with their kid at that point in almost four months.” American Shakespeare Center’s Managing Director Amy Wratchford cautions that virtual engagement options, while likely here to stay, are “not a replacement for either the live theater experience or the revenue generated by in-person ticket sales.”

The Adirondack Center for Writing observed that writers who participated in its residency program expressed gratitude far exceeding that in previous years. Similarly, Cincinnati Ballet President and CEO Scott Altman described the “overwhelming joy” of dancers working and performing together after months of staying at home. The arts organizations who contributed to this report are leading the way in demonstrating how to reopen safely and to welcome the joy of the arts back into our lives and communities. Regarding Cincinnati Ballet’s dancers, Altman reflects:

“They’d almost forgotten what live applause sounds like. Doing things digitally is very, very different in our art form and in the performing arts.... Performing live in front of an audience and the feeling and the sense of connectivity you have with the immediacy of creation in front of you in the same space is very, very different from a digital presentation.”

# Appendix A—Findings from a Survey of National Service Organizations in the Arts

In September and October 2020, the Office of Research & Analysis at the National Endowment for the Arts surveyed national service organizations (NSOs) in the arts about the reopening strategies of their member organizations. The surveys focused on how arts organizations are reengaging with in-person audiences and visitors in physical spaces.

Due to federal limitations on the number of surveys that can be fielded—and based on results from a survey that the Arts Endowment had sent to 18 NSOs in May/June 2020—the Arts Endowment emailed two batches of surveys to a total of 16 NSOs, for a 100 percent response rate. These organizations were American Alliance of Museums, Association of Art Museum Directors, Association of Children’s Museums, Association of Performing Arts Professionals, Association of Writers & Writing Programs, Chamber Music America, Chorus America, Dance/USA, Film Festival Alliance, League of American Orchestras, LitNet, National Association of Latino Arts and Cultures, OPERA America, Theatre Communications Group, Theatre for Young Audiences/USA, and Young Audiences, Inc.

Key survey findings are:

1. Most NSOs say that hardly any of their member organizations have reopened—but many **more museums have done so** than performing arts organizations.

- 63 percent report that “hardly any” of their members have reopened yet
- Among performing arts NSOs, 75 percent said hardly any have reopened
- Among museum NSOs, 66 percent said more than 50 percent of members have reopened

2. **Social distancing, safety messaging**, requiring **mask-wearing**, and conducting **sanitization** protocols remain key to successful reopening strategies.

- 69 percent of NSOs identified “enforcing social distances” as an effective practice for member organizations
- 56 percent recommended public messaging about safety precautions being taken at arts venues—the same percent that counseled requiring or handing out masks
- 50 percent picked intensive sanitization measures as an effective practice

NSOs also reported these **effective practices**:

- Simultaneous livestreamed performances (for those not comfortable indoors)

- Holding outdoor performances and events
  - Timed entry/ticketing
3. Many arts organizations have difficulties providing **virtual arts content** as part of a broader reopening strategy.
- 31 percent of NSOs reported this activity as a challenge for their members
  - 25 percent reported intensive sanitization measures as a difficult practice
  - 19 percent cited the difficulty of requiring or handing out masks

NSOs also reported these **key difficulties** for members in reengaging with audiences or visitors:

- Navigating local or state government reopening protocols (e.g., limitations on gatherings)
  - Securing union permissions
  - Audiences/visitors not following safety guidelines
  - Creating one-way flow in buildings not designed to accommodate routing
  - Cost of retrofitting and preparing safe venues for audiences
  - Accessibility issues that can result from reserved/advance ticketing policies
4. NSOs say a top challenge for their members—in working with staff and artists—is to address **issues of morale and social and emotional health** and well-being.
- This difficulty was identified by 69 percent of NSOs
  - Monitoring physical health status was a challenge for 50 percent
  - Transportation to and from venues was a challenge for 38 percent

NSOs also reported these challenges for members in working with **staff and artists** during the pandemic:

- Costliness of regular COVID testing
  - Uncertainty about employment
  - Resistance to compulsory monitoring
  - Reluctance to engage onsite due to safety concerns
5. In addition, NSOs identified a range of **“best practices”** that have been adopted by members seeking to reopen. They include:
- Forming internal reopening groups that work closely with a medical expert or epidemiologist to align their practices with local and state health guidelines
  - Using available health apps for artists



- Launching multichannel communications campaigns

NSOs also reported these **resources** as useful to their member organizations:

- Federal, state, and municipal guidance/guidelines about reopening businesses
- Government funding: CARES Act, Paycheck Protection Program, unemployment insurance
- Industry guides (e.g., American Alliance of Museums' *Considerations for Museum Reopenings*, the *Event Safety Alliance Reopening Guide*, the American Guild of Musical Artists' and the Stage Directors and Choreographers Society's *Return to Stage and Performing Arts Playbook*, and International Association of Venue Managers resources)
- COVID-19 Audience Outlook Monitor
- *Culture + Community in a Time of Crisis: A Special Edition of Culture Track* by La Placa Cohen and Slover Linett Audience Research
- Professional networks

Sidewalk Film Center and Cinema staff members welcome audiences to the 22nd Annual Sidewalk Film Festival. Photo by David Smith, courtesy of Sidewalk Film Center and Cinema







To keep things interesting during the pandemic, the Adirondack Writing Center spray-painted poetry on sidewalks in Saranac, New York, using paint that can only be seen when it is wet. Photo by Nathalie Thill



# Appendix B—Individual Profiles of Case Study Participants

**Name of Organization:** Adirondack Center for Writing (Saranac Lake, New York)

**Background:** For 20 years, the Adirondack Center for Writing (ACW) has served “writers, readers, storytellers, and listeners” of the six-million-acre Adirondack region. “It’s technically a state park,” Executive Director Nathalie Thill explains. “We are the only literary organization that serves the whole region. So there’s this huge geography that we’re dealing with. We’re dealing with a lot of people in very remote areas” and “a lot of topography to get from one town to the other. You go through mountain passes and by lakes and rivers.”

Strong partnerships with nearby groups are staples of ACW’s programming—an asset for the center during the pandemic. “We typically partner with different organizations every time we do programs, so we have strong relationships with not only arts organizations, but...we’ve done programming in ski centers and in hardware stores [and] in bars and in restaurants,” Thill says. “All our presenting is in other spaces. So when COVID hit, because we’re small, I feel like that [factor] served us well.” Prior to COVID-19, ACW offered in-person classes, workshops, readings, a Poets in Unexpected Places series and, with North Country Public Radio, the Howl Story Slam, among other live events. ACW continues to run the Prison Writing Program, with support from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

**Indoor/Outdoor Offerings During the Pandemic:** In the first two weeks of October 2020, ACW conducted its Anne LaBastille Memorial Writers Residency, a highly competitive opportunity for six writers (“three of them are typically regional and three from anywhere in the world”) to stay and write for two weeks in a “giant, beautiful lodge” on Twitchell Lake, Thill says. Given the climate of uncertainty in the wake of COVID-19, ACW decided to compress its application process, but held the program nonetheless. The center also adapted its Prison Writing Program to a distance-learning format—involving mailings and handouts of packets for assignments and completed writings.

Regarding outdoor activities, ACW “spray-painted poems on the sidewalks in town, but we used this paint that you can only see when it’s wet. So it just appears on rainy days,” Thill says. “And for our sort of ‘reveal’ party, one of the poets came and we just threw water balloons on the site...and we had a videographer make a video.” Less successful in 2020 was a bookmobile that traveled to ice-cream stands around the town. “Last year, it was much more embraced,” she recalls. “This year, people sort of looked at it almost with suspicion.... I think they were just scared to get near it. Maybe they were scared to touch the books?”

**Safety Protocols—Notable Features:** Prior to forging ahead with its residency program in 2020, ACW “talked to all the different residencies throughout the region

and asked what they were doing,” Thill notes. “We actually talked to a bunch of colleges and other places that served food and asked what their protocols were. We looked at the New York state guidelines regularly.” The center strongly encouraged all writers-in-residence to get tested a few days before the residency started. All six writers volunteered to do so.

As for the indoor location, Thill learned: “The understanding was, as long as you had a space where each person had their own private bathroom, that you were utilizing 50 percent or less of the space, [then] the physical space allowed people to be separated from each other.” She adds: “We also have a giant dining room table like [in] *Downton Abbey* that we’ve never used before because it’s too big, but we used it this year.” Indoors, masks were worn at all times “unless you were in your own room or in your own workspace.” Hand sanitizer was posted by every door. As resident chef, Thill also wore a mask “and washed my hands compulsively all the time I was cooking,” she said. “It sucks to cook wearing a mask.”

**Virtual/Digital Offerings:** “One of the first things that we did was we had a weekly writing prompt. It’s on social media and our email list, and we have a lot of famous writers at our disposal,” including Julia Alvarez, Steve Stern, Bill McKibben, Chase Twichell, and Mahogany Browne. “So I just asked all of them for a writing prompt.” Thill says. “We knew that people wanted to keep busy, and it’s also very interesting for readers because what they do is post their responses.”

Thill continues: “We very intentionally put [the prompts] on our website, because—already—social media was so loud and so scary and so alarmist that we just wanted a quiet space.” Another online feature was built around ACW’s program Poem Village, which enables hundreds of poems to be displayed inside the windows of businesses near the center’s offices, creating a “poetry corridor.” During the pandemic, ACW posted slideshows of these poems to its website. Finally, the center launched a Spontaneous Storytelling series, with Thill herself improvising three-minute stories based on prompts that audience members submitted via text or on Facebook Live, which was used to host the program. “We turned it into a little telethon,” she recalls, noting that the total audience for such events was much greater than typically appear in-person. The center also held Zoom hangouts to discuss books, and posted a growing list of recommendations on its website, “since everyone was reading so much during lockdown.”

**Key Lesson(s) Learned:** ACW’s programs kept pace with the changing needs of its public as COVID-19 spread and as the seasons changed. There was “suddenly just this huge spike in engagement from...March to mid-May,” Thill reports, likening this trajectory to “a COVID graph, but a positive one.” After May, she notes, “Once things started opening up and people could be outside, we backed out a little bit, because we felt people’s needs had changed. We stopped doing the Spontaneous Storytelling. We even stopped doing the book Zooms. We still do the writing prompts, and you can find the poems from Poem Village.”

“People’s needs changed, very quickly,” she emphasizes. “For the first two weeks, they needed calm. After that, they needed distraction.... You had to be really aware of the psyche of what people were going through.”



**Name of Organization:** American Shakespeare Company (Staunton, Virginia)

**Background:** American Shakespeare Center's (ASC) Blackfriars Playhouse opened in 2001. It was inspired by Shakespeare's indoor theater of the same name, which burned in London's Great Fire of 1666. ASC specializes in presenting plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, and "classics old and new," according to the company's mission statement. In January each year, ASC tours to Texas before returning to Staunton, Virginia, for its spring season. Normally, ASC hits the road again in September, traveling to Maine and returning for the company's holiday season, which starts in November.

These tours generate up to 250,000 patrons per year. "In normal times, in the 'before' times, we would produce between 14 and 16 shows, up to five in the Actors' Renaissance Season in the winter, three on tour, and up to five during the summer and fall time periods that we usually refer to as our 'marquee season,' and one or two in the holiday season," Managing Director Amy Wratchford says. The company also offers a three-week "immersive" theater camp each summer, quarterly teacher training, a corporate leadership program, and student workshops. Historically, 80 percent of ASC's budget is from earned revenue, she notes.

**Indoor/Outdoor Offerings During the Pandemic:** Greater community engagement and the integration of more digital work already were staples of ASC's strategic plan, which the company unveiled just as COVID-19 broke out in the U.S. The pandemic accelerated both activities at ASC, Wratchford says. With funds from the federal Paycheck Protection Program, ASC launched its SafeStart reopening plan. The company had canceled its

John Harrell and Jessika D. Williams perform in the American Shakespeare Center's production of *Othello*. The performance followed strict safety protocols as part of the organization's SafeStart reopening plan. Photo by Lauren Rogers



national tour and its season at Blackfriars Playhouse. Instead, it took one play from each of its planned seasons—*Othello* and *Twelfth Night*—and decided to offer each in an indoor and an outdoor setting. From weekend to weekend, each play would alternate between the Blackfriars Playhouse and the front lawn of the historic Blackburn Inn, an ASC partner organization.

“We’ve never done outdoor performances in Staunton before,” Wratchford explains. “We have been talking for a while about wanting to get out in the community more,” so the Blackburn Inn partnership gave ASC this opportunity. “They have these beautiful terraced lawns in the front. [O]ur artistic director...went over and said this could be perfect because this one level of the terrace could be the stage and then it drops down to this perfectly sized audience space and then it drops down again. And we had the backdrop of the historic building.”

ASC divided the Blackburn Inn lawn into “eight-by-eight blocks of space with six-foot spacers in between,” to create aisles, she adds. In the blocks nearest to the stage, “folks could bring their blankets and sit,” up to four people per block. In each of the blocks farthest from the stage, patrons could set up two chairs. The company charged \$40 per block, regardless of the number of occupants. Before each show, the inn sold food and drinks outdoors, and there were also live acoustic sets for pre-show entertainment.

For indoor seating at Blackfriars Playhouse, ASC charged its normal base prices, but did not use a dynamic-pricing model as it had in the past. The company met its sales targets for both indoor and outdoor seating. Indoors, ASC had reduced its seating capacity from 305 to 105 seats, and had projected to fill only 60 percent of those, not knowing what the demand would be. This goal was reached, though Wratchford estimates that the theater drew only a third of the revenue it typically earns over the same period. Still, ASC, normally a “destination theater” for people outside the area, attracted more audiences from its regional circumference than in previous years. Moreover, the season drew favorable coverage in the *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *PBS Newshour*.

**Safety Protocols—Notable Features:** Because it worked exclusively with its touring troupe over the summer of 2020—and expects to do so through 2021—ASC is currently non-union, and so was not subject to the requirements of the Actors’ Equity Association, for example. The company reached out to a patron who heads the infectious disease branch at a local community hospital. This expert reviewed a draft SafeStart reopening plan from the theater and also performed a walk-through of the venue. “I don’t think that a week went by [that] we weren’t on the phone or in person with her over the summer as we started rehearsals and then went through production,” Wratchford says. City officials also reviewed the SafeStart plan.

ASC’s expert consultant advised the company on which precautions were necessary and which were likely to prove ineffective. With her counsel, for instance, ASC decided not to invest in electrostatic sprayers because “the virus doesn’t live very long on surfaces,” Wratchford notes. “We were only planning on doing one performance a day in the Playhouse. So [the expert] said we didn’t need to worry about disinfecting the cushions on the benches...or the tapestries on the walls.” Also, under advisement, ASC opted not to install Plexiglass around the box office or to require COVID-19 testing of staff and artists. The latter decision was based on concerns about a potential false sense of security from such tests.

For an initial two-week period, rehearsals for the summer season occurred on Zoom. Most of the troupe already resided in actor housing or in other local housing of their own. The two weeks gave the actors a quarantining period, after which they went to Blackfriars



Playhouse to resume rehearsals. There, the actors rehearsed while wearing masks. Off-stage personnel also wore masks, all the way through production, while actors shed them for the actual performances.

During performances, actors did not socially distance themselves from one another. Instead, ASC created an “isolation bubble” for its actors, the wardrobe manager, stage managers, and backstage production assistants. Because the company uses Shakespearean staging conventions, there is “a significantly smaller group of people backstage than traditionally technical theater would have,” Wratchford notes. Everyone in the bubble signed an “isolation covenant,” and each day the company members filled out an online “symptom-checker” form. Questionable entries were referred to ASC’s expert consultant.

Regarding audience safety, ASC found that their patrons tended to self-police themselves. Timed-entry ticketing was initially planned, but ultimately deemed unnecessary. As for the universal masking requirement, only “a handful of folks” objected, but ultimately consented.

**Virtual/Digital Offerings:** Wratchford acknowledges that before COVID-19, the company’s virtual presence was limited to “the occasional marketing video.” But when the pandemic struck, ASC “immediately” recorded seven shows that already had been produced or were in rehearsal. Those productions were released through Vimeo on BlkFrs TV, she says. This rapid turnaround was enabled with assistance from local filmmakers and film editors: Deep Structure Productions (Staunton, Virginia) and Paladin Media Group (Charlottesville, Virginia), who offered this help for free. After the reopening, ASC paid them to film and edit the organization’s summer 2020 performances so they can be shown on BlkFrs TV when the theater goes dark in January 2021.

Also in the summer of 2020, ASC partnered with Marquee TV. Both *Othello* and *Twelfth Night* were livestreamed and made available on demand. Other virtual offerings include Live @ Blackfriars, a monthly music series that is livestreamed for free on Facebook. (The series did feature at least one ticketed event, streamed through Vimeo.) Likewise, ASC presented—also on Facebook—a free weekly lecture series.

On the education front, ASC turned its summer camp and student workshops into fully virtual experiences, starting with a few schools in March and April 2020. “Our team reinvented the structure quickly,” Wratchford says. “Bringing things like Slack [an online communications platform] to help communication between the campers, because one of the big things about our camp [is] it’s residential—three weeks—just deep-dive Shakespeare stuff. It’s that community that gets built around those like-minded students. That is a huge part of what keeps bringing kids back.”

**Key Lesson(s) Learned:** Wratchford notes that ASC “hardly ever has a tech week, period, because we just don’t have tech in the same way [as] for traditional theater.” For its 2020 summer season, however, the theater had four weeks of tech rehearsals because of the different indoor and outdoor venues and their distinct demands. “So we went from almost no tech, to all of sudden, lights and sound.” For 2021, ASC is considering the production of only one play in the outdoor venue rather than switching between plays on weekends. “We have to share what we’ve learned,” Wratchford urges. “It’s too hard to figure this out and then not share it.” In particular, she credits the Theatre Communications Group and the Advisory Board for the Arts with providing platforms for this knowledge-sharing.

**See Also:** <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/at-this-virginia-theater-the-show-and-the-masks-must-go-on>



**Name of Organization:** Berkshire Theatre Group (Pittsfield, Massachusetts)

**Background:** In 2010, Berkshire Theatre Festival—including the Unicorn Theatre in Stockbridge, Massachusetts— and the Colonial Theatre in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, merged to create the Berkshire Theatre Group (BTG), which produces and presents not only theater, but also music and other performing arts. The Berkshire Theatre Festival dates to 1928; the Colonial Theatre, to 1903. “Our patrons tend to skew older,” Executive Director Nick Paleologos says. “We’d like to cultivate a younger audience, and we work to do that. But mostly, these are second homeowners who live in New York, who come up to the Berkshires. I would say the average age of our audience is over 60.”

Rehearsal for Berkshire Theatre Group’s *Godspell*. It was the first production sanctioned by the Actors’ Equity Association for COVID times. Photo by Emma K. Rothenberg-Ware, courtesy of Berkshire Theatre Group

**Indoor/Outdoor Offerings During the Pandemic:** BTG was an early beneficiary of the Paycheck Protection Program. The organization’s application was processed at “breakneck speed,” giving BTG “eight weeks of breathing room to actually kind of get our bearings and figure out what we were going to do,” Paleologos notes. Ultimately,



BTG made “a strategic decision in mid-April that we’re not going to plan to come indoors, period.”

“Our normal season, which was eight plays, [included] a couple of new plays, a couple of world premieres, and a couple of family shows,” he says. “And there, sitting in the middle of the group, was *Godspell*.”

The musical has been a touchstone of American repertory, touring, and high school and collegial theater productions for more than 40 years. The BTG production, which ran in August and September 2020, became the first live show approved by the Actors’ Equity Association. “We were all kind of taken aback at the way the show landed creatively,” Paleologos says. As an innovation, the cast members began each performance by introducing themselves and addressing the audience from the stage about how COVID-19 had disrupted their lives.

Still, there was ample scope for setbacks. “We rented a [tent] that was big enough to accommodate [and] socially distance about 100 patrons, which is still a money-loser,” Paleologos notes. “I mean, this is not a sustainability model by any stretch.” On opening night, moreover, the Massachusetts governor announced statewide caps of 50 people for outdoor gathering, and so BTG had to pivot accordingly. Fortunately, the weather cooperated. “It gets kind of hot here during the summertime,” Paleologos says. “So even if you’re under the tent—it’s August, you know, it could be 95 degrees or 90 degrees. But again, the gods smiled on us this summer.... We didn’t get killed with hurricanes or thunderstorms or rainstorms. I don’t think we canceled a single performance.”

**Safety Protocols—Notable Features:** Initially, BTG put together “what you could call the ‘greatest hits’ of all the safety protocols that were already out there. It wasn’t like it was rocket science,” Paleologos says. In June 2020, the organization sent a 30-page safety protocol manual to the Actors’ Equity Association for approval. It came back redlined, with questions. According to Paleologos, “Equity’s response to us wasn’t like they discovered something that we forgot. It was just, ‘Give us more of that, keep them further apart, test them more frequently, isolate them more,’ and so more, basically, of what we originally had proposed.”

Ultimately, temperature scans were taken of patrons upon point of entry. No-contact scanners were used to read tickets. Freestanding hand sanitizer stations were available throughout the location, and audiences were required to wear masks. Inside the tent, one-way traffic patterns were marked by arrows on the floor. Similarly, six-foot markers on the floor facilitated social distancing requirements for audience members. The restrooms had separate, one-way-only entrances and exits, and every other urinal and sink was marked as unusable. A doctor or nurse was on-hand for each performance.

For cast and crew, the six-foot social distancing requirement was also upheld, and all props were sanitized between performances. During the show, if actors were singing as an ensemble—or if an actor was singing behind or in front of another actor—“there was a Plexiglas shield that we could artfully move around and make...part of the show,” Paleologos says.

Stage management and company management staff were charged with enforcing the protocols. On stage, “everybody was in a specific spot, and when they moved from one spot to the other, they put their mask on,” he adds. “When they delivered their numbers, they delivered them straight to the audience and they were alone. Any interaction was all air hugs or signing to each other. Nobody touched anybody else, and every prop was specific to every character.”

**Virtual Offerings:** From April through June 2020, in the run-up to *Godspell*, BTG posted videos of classes and music performances for free online viewing. “It wasn’t a revenue-producer,” Paleologos notes. “It was more of an audience engagement mechanism.”

Then, in September 2020, BTG teamed up with the concert pianist, actor, and playwright Hershey Felder for a performance of Felder’s one-man show about George Gershwin, livestreamed from Florence, Italy, where the artist is currently living. A precedent had been set in the spring of 2020. With the outbreak of COVID-19, all of Felder’s shows had been canceled, so he performed a show about Irving Berlin in collaboration with 13 regional theaters, including the BTG. The BTG event was billed as a benefit, with Felder and the organization splitting the box-office proceeds 50/50. For roughly \$55 per household, viewers could access the show live or for a week post-performance. Felder himself produced the show, and handled all technical and logistical details, which worked out well for BTG. On the heels of that success, BTG presented Felder’s Gershwin show, on the same terms. In November, using the same format, BTG livestreamed Felder’s *A Paris Love Story*, featuring the music of Debussy.

**Key Lesson(s) Learned:** Comply fully with state and local government requirements and with union guidelines, Paleologos advises. “They’ll be sticklers, but in the end, it’s better to comply than not have a good solid relationship with your local officials, so that when you need a break on parking or tent permits, or whatever, they’re there and supportive.” One result is that despite the high risk involved with becoming one of the first U.S. theaters to reopen during the pandemic, the example of BTG and *Godspell* appear to have inspired a new wave of donors.

**See Also:** <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/04/podcasts/the-daily/Godspell-theater-coronavirus.html>



**Name of Organization:** Cincinnati Ballet (Cincinnati, Ohio)

**Background:** Since 1963, Cincinnati Ballet has been the cornerstone professional ballet company within its region, known for presenting an array of classical, full-length ballets and contemporary works, regularly with live orchestral accompaniment. The ballet company is recognized nationally and internationally for commissioning world premiere works and exploring unique collaborations with artists as diverse as the Grammy-winning guitarist Peter Frampton and the Ohio-based band Over the Rhine. With a mission to enrich, expand, and excel in the art of dance through world-class performances, a high-caliber academy, and impactful community and education programs, the group is poised to expand its impact with the summer 2021 opening of a new 58,000-square-foot facility: the Cincinnati Ballet Margaret and Michael Valentine Center for Dance. The new space will provide ample room to accommodate the company's growing performance and academy needs, and will increase community engagement.

**Indoor/Outdoor Offerings During the Pandemic:** The Otto M. Budig Academy Summer Intensive continued in-person, albeit with extensive health and safety protocols. This six-week program provided students the opportunity to step into a professional company environment. Cincinnati Ballet President & CEO Scott Altman shares that during the program, "dancers from around the country and the world participated. Students studied with preeminent teachers and dance leaders and took courses in-person, in our studios. To ensure social distancing, some summer intensive classes were offered at several off-site locations as well. We were able to very quickly pivot and establish health and safety policies and procedures that made it possible to run a robust, modified summer intensive program. By the middle of June, the successful program was up and running, providing the same high-quality instruction students would have received if not for the pandemic."

Cincinnati Ballet's first public performance since the onset of the pandemic was *Ballet in the Park*, a free (or "pay-what-you-wish"), socially distanced production at a public park

Melissa Gelfin De-Poli and Arcadian Broad Pas perform a scene from *Don Quixote*, choreographed by Marius Petipa. Photo by Hiromi Platt



held Sept. 25-27, 2020. The program was billed as featuring the “return of our dancers,” and it showcased selections of the company’s favorite solos and pas de deux as well as contributions from members of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra and Cincinnati Opera. More than 1,200 people attended *Ballet in the Park*. Altman described the event as a “really uplifting, wonderful moment.” For the dancers, it was “cathartic” and “filled with a lot of overwhelming joy just to be together.” In early November, the company kicked off its 2020-2021 season with *Cincinnati Made*—a modified, in-person performance held in the ballroom of Cincinnati Music Hall. The smaller venue provided the opportunity for an intimate performance experience, while following strict health and safety protocols, including audience social distancing. The event was ticketed and open to the public.

**Safety Protocol(s)—Notable Features:** For medical guidance, Cincinnati Ballet worked “arm-in-arm” with the American Guild of Musical Artists’ (AGMA) medical team during the late spring and summer. Discussions between AGMA and the Ballet contributed to the development of the *AGMA/SDC* (Stage Directors and Choreographers Society) *Return to Stage and Performing Arts Playbook*, which has become a leading source of reopening guidance for the performing arts. The Cincinnati Ballet also reviewed guidance from city, county, state, and federal sources, and also relied on a medical doctor on its board.

In preparing to return to performing, small pods of dancers took classes in person, while others followed the classes via Zoom. Dancers participated in health checks, had their temperatures taken, and wore masks daily in the studio. Groups of dancers were isolated within the facility and care was taken that their paths did not cross. Altman notes that “restrooms and studios were assigned to smaller groups or ‘pods’ of dancers. Pod A is only using one restroom and taking class and rehearsing in Studio A, while Pod B is using a different restroom and only using Studio B.” Studios were regularly deep-cleaned. Hard surfaces, such as barres and props, were frequently sanitized, and the building’s ventilation system was upgraded to hospital-grade filtration.

**Virtual Offerings:** Like many arts organizations, Cincinnati Ballet was committed to fulfilling its artistic mission despite the pandemic. For the company, these activities included performance, education, and community engagement. The organization was quick to pivot online with its educational programming; by early April, the company was in “full gear” with its offerings. It also began archival releases of choreographic pieces, working “feverishly and fast,” Altman notes, “at seeking additional permissions from our partners for archival recordings of large-scale works that were on our mainstage.”

**Key Lesson(s) Learned:** To guide its reopening process, Cincinnati Ballet consulted with the AGMA medical team but also fully engaged with its own board and staff. The board was consulted and kept fully apprised, and Cincinnati Ballet staff members—from human resources, operations, and administration to the ballet masters and artistic director—assisted with determining operational plans. It was also one of the first companies in the country to have a signed, back-to-work COVID agreement for its dancers.

Altman explains: “[We] certainly never make any unilateral decisions, but certainly in this case, I made sure that all facets of our organization were comfortable moving forward, with each department’s specific needs and concerns addressed. The goal was to continue our mission safely and I believe, given the incredible effort and flexibility of our staff, we’ve succeeded during these extraordinary times. We have maintained a continuum of performance and education offerings that will make the transition back to ‘normal’ seamless, while protecting the integrity of the Cincinnati Ballet brand.”

**See Also:** <https://www.bizjournals.com/cincinnati/news/2020/09/24/with-covid19-protocols-in-place-cincinnati-ballet.html>



**Name of Organization:** GALA Hispanic Theatre (Washington, DC)

**Background:** GALA Hispanic Theatre (GALA stands for Grupo de Artistas Latinamericanos) was established in 1976 to develop and produce Latinx performing arts events, to support Latinx artists, and to offer educational and cultural engagement opportunities for youth and local community members. According to Co-Founder and Executive Director Rebecca Read Medrano, GALA is “really seen as a community center as well as a professional theater.” The organization produces Spanish classical plays for local high school groups and other audiences, and students and teachers at these performances benefit from bilingual study guides. For the theater, “the ideal time is September and October,” Medrano notes. “In the past, [we’ve] reached up to 9,000 high school students [annually] with our Spanish language productions.”

**Indoor/Outdoor Offerings During the Pandemic:** When COVID-19 struck in the U.S., GALA shut down and canceled the second half of its season. The theater had been awarded an Arts Endowment grant to produce Lope de Vega’s *El Perro Del Hortelano* (*The Dog and the Manger*). “We had already invested a lot of time working with our partners in Spain who were originally supposed to come,” Medrano recalls. The grant “probably could have been extended, but we had already applied for another NEA project in 2021, so we didn’t want to give up this project.”

More important to the decision to reopen was the knowledge that “our Latinx artists across the board...were unemployed since March, and finding it difficult to survive,” Medrano recalls. “These are Spanish-speaking artists.... There’s not a lot of work available.” On the other hand, “We decided that the longer we waited to open, the less available these people might be because they have to get jobs at some point,” she reasons. “So, if you’re going to move forward, you want to keep your cast or keep the same artists that [you’ve] been working with—the ones that [you] have contracts with already.”

Once GALA decided to take the plunge, the theater set about finding actors living in or willing to travel to DC. As for a director, GALA hired José Zayas, then living in Oregon. After “we realized he was available, we had to get the consent of the unions,” Medrano says. “He’s a union director and we have all-union designers. So we went through that process.”

While working on the necessary approvals, GALA undertook a long-planned renovation of its space. “We were able to put in a brand-new HVAC [heating, ventilation, and air conditioning] system that has the MERV [Minimum Efficiency Reporting Value] 14 filters, which are the high-end [devices] that museums and schools” are now using, Medrano explains. “It captures down to three-micron particles, [while] I think the health standard is five. So, super-duper. It turns the air over six to eight times every hour.”

A factor that worked in GALA’s favor during the pandemic was the theater’s normal process of streamlining Spanish classical plays to reduce the running time, and minimizing the number of actors (thus also minimizing safety risks). Vega’s play, with a cast of around 23 characters, was brought down to seven, “but that’s typical of what we do” during adaptation, Medrano explains. Also typical is the change in length. “You don’t have a two-and-a-half-hour play; you have an hour-and-twenty-five-minute play without the long, long, long Shakespearean speeches.”

**Safety Protocols—Notable Features:** GALA’s safety guidelines comport with the DC Mayor’s three-phase plan for reopening the city, and with the DC Homeland Security

and Emergency Management Agency's reopening requirements for businesses. Mary's Center, a community health clinic, has served as GALA's health advisor.

Mask-wearing and temperature scans are required of all patrons. Only 50 tickets are available per show, through advance reservations only. Paired seating options are available for purchase on GALA's website, and groups of three or more "who have been quarantined together or live together" may request group seating assignments. Printed programs are still handed out, but by gloved ushers or volunteers. The lobby bar is full service, but only one person per group may come to the bar to order, or a server (wearing gloves and a mask) can take the order to patrons' seats. Performances are presented without intermissions.

Actors are tested weekly and are quarantined in their private homes or apartments and brought together in the rehearsal room. A full tech rehearsal was conducted with the stage designers over Zoom. For the production, GALA installed a Plexiglas barrier to separate actors from the audience. Medrano credits a "very clever set designer who

Ariel Texidó (left) and Carlos Castillo in GALA Hispanic Theatre's production of *El Perro Del Hortelano* (*The Dog and the Manger*). By following strict safety measures, the theater was able to stage the show during the pandemic. Photo by Daniel Martínez





took the theme of the play and the theme of COVID and made them one. The theme of [*El Perro Del Hortelano*] has a lot to do with class divisions, class warfare, the haves and have-nots, so the fact that they're in this glass house separating them really works. It's also a love story—[the Plexiglass barrier] heightens all of the tension and all of the emotions."

**Virtual Offerings:** Beginning in March 2020, GALA offered weekly online Zoom performances "of various individual artists who were taping themselves," Medrano notes. As of November, "We're not there for the total streaming thing yet," she offered. "First of all, to do it well, it's just very expensive, and you still have to have a live performance."

For now, GALA will record and stream *El Perro Del Hortelano* to schools they originally had planned to reach with live performances. "Schools will be able to tune in and we have an interactive system of [a] study guide that they can go to [as] part of the video and pick [it] up...and answer questions," Medrano says. "So it'll be a great substitute for the student matinee and the [after-show] discussions."

As for the general public, subscribers may request to view the streamed version, "and then we'll see how that goes and open it up after we [have] finished our live performances." Medrano acknowledges, "There's so much competition online," although "there is a lack of material in Spanish online, so...I may be proven wrong." In December 2020, GALA made its ninth annual film festival fully virtual, with online talkbacks.

**Key Lesson(s) Learned:** "You've got to start preparing now, even if you're not reopening," Medrano advises. "It's not going to change, so you're still going to have to do these protocols. And I think we were fortunate that we focused on that early on."

**Name of Organization:** Lied Center for Performing Arts (Lincoln, Nebraska)

**Background:** The mission of the Lied Center for Performing Arts is to educate, inspire, and entertain the people of Nebraska through the performing arts. Part of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, the Lied Center is a performing arts facility that opened in 1990. The center's facilities consist of a main stage with 2,210 seats and the Carson Theater, a black box theater used for smaller productions, rehearsals, and classes. The Lied Center primarily hosts touring performing arts productions. The 2020-21 season was planned to include *Step Afrika!*, the *Capitol Steps*, and *Canadian Brass*, and a special Broadway series featuring productions of *Chicago*, *Come from Away*, and *The Band's Visit*. The Lied Center also offers statewide educational programs and classes, and "Lied Learning Online," which features weekly education events that range from musical theater master classes for youth to creative movement for preschoolers.

**Indoor/Outdoor Offerings During the Pandemic:** The Lied Center worked with neighborhood associations and a media sponsor to launch Music on the Move, an outdoor mobile concert series that toured Lincoln neighborhoods during the summer of 2020. The concerts were held Saturday evenings starting in early June. Residents were encouraged to "dance on your balcony, porch, or front yard while local artists perform live." The Lied Center later received a grant to continue this popular series during the fall season.

Audience members wear masks while attending a performance at the Lied Center for Performing Arts in Lincoln, Nebraska. Photo courtesy of Lied Center for Performing Arts, at University of Nebraska



The Lied Center reopened its facilities in July 2020, at first using its black box theater, which allowed greater flexibility for socially distanced seating. The first event presented on the main stage was a screening of Ava DuVernay's film *13th*, followed by a panel discussion, in partnership with TEDxLincoln. The Lied Center has planned a full program for its 2020-21 season.

**Safety Protocols—Notable Features:** As part of the University of Nebraska system, the Lied Center benefited from guidelines for best practices on reopening that had been developed by the University of Nebraska Medical Center. The Lied Center also relied on guidance from the Major University Presenters (MUP), a consortium of 19 university-affiliated performing arts centers and programs that was founded as an informal network in 2002. Many MUP members drew on guidance from medical professionals on their campuses, and shared such guidance via the network.

In addition to requiring social distancing and wearing of masks, the Lied Center has implemented other health and safety measures. The Lied Center opens its house 30 minutes earlier than usual to allow social distancing as patrons take their seats. Refunds are offered right up to showtime, with no questions asked, to encourage patrons not feeling well to stay home. The Lied Center also upgraded its air filtration system to allow the maximum amount of fresh air to filter throughout the building, and added Minimum Efficiency Reporting Value (MERV) air filters to provide the cleanest possible air within the building.

**Virtual Offerings:** Early successes with virtual programming led the organization to launch Lied Learning Online. With the onset of the pandemic in March 2020, the Lied Center canceled its spring live shows. Within two weeks, however, the center went online with live performances. On Friday nights, the Lied Center offered free virtual concerts by a variety of artists, many of whom were Nebraskan. Susan Werner, an award-winning singer-songwriter; Michael Londra, a Celtic tenor; and April Verch, a Canadian fiddler, were some of the artists in the series. The Lied Center paid all the artists and encouraged the audience to make donations to support the program. Audiences for these events ranged from 200 to over 1,000 people.

**Key Lesson(s) Learned:** While some of its early virtual and outdoor programming was not "particularly successful" from a financial perspective, the programs were "extremely successful artistically" while also fulfilling the Lied Center's mission, according to Lied Center Executive Director Bill Stephan. Offering these types of programs was also about doing "the right thing" for the community. "I think contributing, giving back without expecting necessarily...immediate returns in money is a good move to make sure you're staying connected and fulfilling what the community needs," Stephan says. Donors and supporters are more likely to support arts organizations during this period when they are active, providing arts to the community, and fulfilling their mission.

**See Also:** [https://journalstar.com/entertainment/performing-arts/lied-center-leads-nation-in-reopening/article\\_e9de8a1b-e004-5b51-8218-98b4f503e8e3.html](https://journalstar.com/entertainment/performing-arts/lied-center-leads-nation-in-reopening/article_e9de8a1b-e004-5b51-8218-98b4f503e8e3.html)



**Name of Organization:** Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (Houston, Texas)

**Background:** One of the oldest art museums in the state of Texas, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH) hosts nearly 70,000 artworks from U.S. and international artists. The works date from antiquity to the present day. In November 2020, the museum opened a third building on its 14-acre campus to highlight MFAH's modern and contemporary collections. At 170,000 square feet, the Nancy and Rich Kinder Building is "equal to the size of either of our two existing exhibition buildings," Amy Purvis, chief development officer of MFAH, notes. "A lot of our programming, going forward, will be focused on those new installations."

**Indoor/Outdoor Offerings During the Pandemic:** MFAH officially reopened to the public on May 20, at 50 percent of normal capacity, with Thursday visits still free to the public. The museum estimates that visitation rates have remained no higher than 25 percent of pre-COVID-19 levels. In October 2020, for the first time since the pandemic struck, the museum had an exhibition opening, which it conducted outdoors. The event was limited to 50 people and included "Plexiglas screens, pre-boxed food, and beverage protocols," Purvis says.

**Safety Protocol(s)—Notable Features:** Face masks and temperature checks are required, as is social distancing of at least six feet. Staff members who face visitors must also wear gloves and change them on a schedule. The number of entry points has been reduced, and staff have received specific safety guidelines. The café and coat check remain closed, and only credit cards are accepted. Advance timed-entry tickets are recommended to visitors. Hand sanitizer is provided across the museum, and surfaces such as door handles and elevator buttons are cleaned during hours of operation, while restrooms are cleaned and countertops sanitized more frequently. A floorplan is available digitally.

Purvis says of the reopening, "Having the sheer square footage of our facility, a guest can feel like they can safely practice social distancing. You can be 20 feet apart from somebody else if you want to be, especially with our decreased visitor numbers."

**Virtual Offerings:** MFAH has continued to offer screenings of repertory films, but now runs a Virtual Cinema series, charging \$12 for online access to each film with a 48-hour pass. Over the summer, for the same price, online viewers could conduct "armchair travel" to major museums and exhibitions around the world. Meanwhile, MFAH provided free Learning through Art online resources for K-12 students and Teacher Resources for Social Justice. Other virtual offerings included a mobile tour of its Bayou Bend and Beck Collections and virtual programming (including livestreamed panel discussions) around its *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power* exhibition. Throughout this period, MFAH also launched an expanded and redesigned website for its *Documents of Latin American and Latino Art* digital archive.

To arrive at this robust menu, Purvis explains, MFAH "had a lot of internal meetings to figure out how our learning/interpretation and marketing/communications departments can work together to launch virtual programming."

**Key Lesson(s) Learned:** Though the museum attracted news coverage about reopening, MFAH benefited from the experiences of venues that had gone before. "I feel like we went into this with eyes wide open, knowing all of the protocols that we needed to put in place to reopen in the first place. We studied it very carefully from other organizations," Purvis says. "We were not the first in town to reopen. The Houston Museum of Natural Science reopened a week before us, and we were over there every day, looking at everything they did." With reference to fundraising in lean times, Purvis adds, "In talking to colleagues, it

is clear that if you have done the stewardship and you have your donors in your corner, you're going to be okay. It's the organizations that have struggled in this area who are particularly challenged right now."

**See Also:** <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/houstons-museum-of-fine-arts-becomes-first-major-art-museum-in-the-u-s-to-reopen-amid-the-coronavirus/>

A masked staff member walks through the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston's new Nancy and Rich Kinder Building for modern and contemporary art. Photo by Peter Molick, courtesy of Museum of Fine Arts, Houston





**Name of Organization:** Sidewalk Film Center and Cinema (Birmingham, Alabama)

**Background:** Sidewalk Film Center and Cinema is a nonprofit organization dedicated to encouraging filmmaking in Alabama and building audiences for independent film. The organization produces the nationally recognized Sidewalk Film Festival, which showcases the work of more than 250 filmmakers and welcomes 15,000 film lovers to Birmingham annually. Sidewalk also produces SHOUT, Alabama's first queer film festival, organizes a wide variety of educational programs for filmmakers, and holds other events that foster interest in and enthusiasm for independent film. Sidewalk recently opened a film center—a two-screen, 11,500-square-foot independent movie theater in the heart of Birmingham's historic theater district.

**Indoor/Outdoor Offerings During the Pandemic:** Sidewalk has offered both indoor and outdoor programming since the start of the pandemic. A pop-up drive-in series was presented within the city limits of Birmingham, with primarily cult classic or family-friendly outdoor programming. The series began on the third weekend in May

The 22nd Annual Sidewalk Film Festival was held as a drive-in to accommodate COVID-19 safety measures. Photo by Joseph DeScoise, courtesy of Sidewalk Film Center and Cinema



2020 and continued for eight weekends. Executive Director Chloe Cook described enthusiastic audiences for the pop-up series, who cheered the staff for offering this program. Cook described one person who cried “because they hadn’t been out of their house with their kid at that point in almost four months.” The organization received feedback from people who were immunocompromised and had rarely left their house but were able to attend the pop-up and experience “the only sense that [they had] had of anything normal in months.”

Sidewalk also changed the location of its annual Sidewalk Film Festival to a drive-in theater in a nearby suburban community. The festival schedule played out across seven nights on the drive-in’s four screens, presenting about 160 feature-length films and shorts. Onsite tickets were made available for each individual film and were priced based on the number of individuals in each vehicle (maximum charge: \$47 per vehicle). Concessions and bar service were offered by the drive-in. While participation was lower than in previous years, Cook noted that organizing the drive-in festival required fewer volunteers and reduced travel and equipment rental costs compared to its usual location in multiple venues across Birmingham’s historic theater district.

Sidewalk resumed film programming at its film center in late summer following consultation with its staff and board. It now also offers private cinema rentals for groups of up to 20 people.

**Safety Protocols—Notable Features:** Audiences maintained social distancing by watching films in their cars during both the pop-up events and the film festival. Staff working at outdoor events maintained social distancing from each other by using walkie-talkies. At the festival, one empty parking space was kept between cars to allow space for attendees to sit outside their cars, although fraternizing with other groups was discouraged. Masks and social distancing were required when visiting the concessions stand at the drive-in; masks were made available at no charge. Hand-sanitizing stations were set up throughout the footprint of the festival. No social activities were held in association with festival programming; filmmaker question-and-answer sessions were held virtually.

Special measures were taken to reopen Sidewalk’s two-screen theater facility. Seat maps were developed to figure out how many seats could be sold while keeping people twelve feet apart on all sides, while also eliminating a scenario where someone would have to walk immediately past another group to get to their seat. For Sidewalk, this precaution meant selling 12 seats per screening in a theater that usually accommodates 98 guests, well below the state requirement of 50 percent capacity. Alternating seat maps were used for each of three daily screenings to ensure that the same seats would not be used more than once in a 24-hour period. Sidewalk also invested in a UV light filtration system on its HVAC units and conducts temperature checks at the door.

**Virtual Offerings:** The day after its physical facility had closed, the Sidewalk staff did a Zoom call to talk through the type of programming it could offer during the shutdown. Sidewalk modified some of its offerings to a virtual format soon after the onset of the pandemic, but also introduced new virtual programming. The organization teamed up with filmmakers to offer online workshops on filmmaking topics, including screenwriting, cinematography, assistant directing, financing, adaptation, and more.

Workshop revenues were split between Sidewalk and filmmakers teaching the workshops. Cook notes that “if we were charging any registration, what we were doing was splitting that 50/50 with the filmmaker or filmmakers in some cases who



were teaching those classes. We did that in response to seeing a lot of our filmmaking friends and colleagues who were suddenly out of work or who perhaps supplemented their normal income as a filmmaker by teaching classes or by working with young people and then seeing all of those opportunities dry up as well.” While the demand for these online workshops has ebbed slightly over time, Sidewalk is interested in maintaining this type of programming in the post-COVID future.

A unique program offered entirely online was the Quarantine Scramble. A quarantine theme was applied to the Sidewalk Scramble, a timed filmmaking competition in which teams are challenged to create a short film within 48 hours. Filmmakers could only submit works from one location, which had to be wherever they were quarantining—whether at home, in their apartment, at their parents’ house, or elsewhere. Films had to be made during the week of March 30 while maintaining all of the stay-at-home restrictions in place at the time. Eighteen films were received in response to the Quarantine Scramble.

**Key Lesson(s) Learned:** Facing reduced revenues and staff layoffs, Cook felt it was important to reopen Sidewalk’s physical movie theater as soon as possible. However, she sought staff consensus on reopening plans prior to taking them to the Sidewalk board. The reopened facilities met local requirements, but Cook says it was important to take “extra precautions above and beyond what was being required of us from a legal standpoint” and to make special accommodations for anyone on staff who was immunocompromised or living with someone in that situation. As of November 2020, the facility has been open for two months without any known cases of staff or patrons having contracted the virus.

**Name of Organization:** True Concord Voices & Orchestra (Tucson, Arizona)

**Background:** True Concord Voices & Orchestra is committed to creating experiences through celebrated masterworks and music of some of today's best composers that move, enrich, and inspire—all in small concert halls and acoustically excellent churches. Formed in 2004 as the Tucson Chamber Artists, True Concord is recognized for innovative programming, including working with emerging and established living composers to create new works for chorus and orchestra. Past collaborative partners have included Arizona Early Music Society, Artifact Dance Project, Tucson Arizona Boys Chorus, Tucson Symphony Orchestra, UA Dance, Arizona Choir, and the University of Arizona Poetry Center.

**Indoor/Outdoor Offerings During the Pandemic:** True Concord's 2020-2021 season presents live concerts in outdoor settings, which are capped at 50 patrons; masks and social distancing are required. The first series of six live concerts—*The Nurturer-Brahms Requiem*—was held Oct. 20-25, 2020, in Tucson. Two small ensemble programs—*English Madrigals, French Songs, and Childhood Stories* and *Monteverdi, Rossini, and Brahms "Temptations"*—were held in late October and early November. Tucson's temperate climate provides a pleasant outdoor setting for concerts during the fall, though Music Director Eric Holtan notes of the first series that it was "the first time I've conducted a concert with one arm the entire time while I kept the other hand on my music because the pages were just blowing like crazy." Performing outdoors, Holtan says, requires flexibility and adaptability.

**Safety Protocols—Notable Features:** During outdoor concerts, face masks and social distancing are required. Audiences are assigned an arrival time to avoid clustering at entrances. There is six-foot spacing between seats for small groups and approximately 12 to 20 feet of spacing between musicians and the audience. Outdoor concerts are held without intermission, and no social activities, including pre-concert talks and post-concert meet and greet events, have been scheduled.

True Concord created a "bubble" to isolate the group's vocalists, most of whom came from out of state, to perform 26 concerts over the course of six weeks. Holtan remarks: "We actually drew some of our inspiration from the NBA and the WNBA and their bubble approach and we thought if we could bring the artists in one time, for a concentrated amount of time, that limits the amount of travel they would have to do...and [if] we isolated them and, of course, tested them and kept them in this bubble, we could be quite productive over a period of four or five weeks." Artists were isolated upon arrival in Tucson for ten days and tested for COVID-19 prior to rehearsals.

**Virtual Offerings:** Another component of this year's season is online video concerts, access to which can be purchased individually or as a discounted package. For these transactions, the True Concord website uses the same platform the organization uses for managing its ticketing and donations. Two ticket levels are offered: single viewer and multiviewer. After an online purchase is made, the patron receives a link to the video concert via email. Access to video concerts is provided for a specified number of days, which varies according to the concert. Video concerts are filmed through a partnership with Arizona PBS; this partner is also assisting with copyright issues for music unavailable in the public domain. Although the production costs can be high, Holtan notes that video concerts have "tremendous potential" and can be a "powerful vehicle to extend our reach to people across the globe."

**Key Lesson(s) Learned:** Although artists had been physically isolated and tested for COVID-19 prior to rehearsals, there was still concern among artists about singing

without masks. Holtan asserts it was “human nature that [the artists] were nervous,” given knowledge about potentially spreading COVID-19 through singing. At early rehearsals, artists wanted to wear masks even though the group’s medical advisor had declared them unnecessary. While mask-wearing made it difficult for the music director to “assess the sound that [the artists] were making in preparation” for the concerts, he acknowledges it was important for the artists’ psychological comfort to wear masks the first few times together. Once artists became more comfortable, the masks came off. It was an important lesson, Holtan explains: artists need more than just the best medical advice; they also need to *feel safe*.

**See Also:** [https://tucson.com/entertainment/caliente/true-concords-bubble-season-kicks-off-with-brahmss-comforting-requiem/article\\_ff042fa-e57e-5a28-90bd-898f13a68693.html](https://tucson.com/entertainment/caliente/true-concords-bubble-season-kicks-off-with-brahmss-comforting-requiem/article_ff042fa-e57e-5a28-90bd-898f13a68693.html)

True Concord Voices & Orchestra performs an outdoor concert of *The Nurturer—Brahms Requiem* in Tucson, Arizona, while both performers and audiences practice socially distancing. Photo by Eric Holtan







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