

# What Will Philly's Arts Scene Look Like After a Year Without Audiences?

The pandemic forced profound changes to the city's arts and culture sector. What comes next will say a lot about who we are — and what kind of city we want to be.

by **SARAH JORDAN** • 5/22/2021, 8:59 p.m.

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A look back on this year without audiences has changed the Philly arts scene. Photograph by Thanasus/Getty Images

A little over a year ago, I was elbow to elbow with 21,000 fans at the Wells Fargo Center, reveling in the diva spectacle that is a Celine Dion concert.

On the setlist was the wistful classic “All by Myself,” and Dion gave it her signature vocal grandiosity. The fans loved it, oblivious to the fact that the song’s lyrics — *Don’t wanna be all by myself anymore. ... Don’t wanna live all by myself* — would soon echo across our year-plus journey of pandemic-induced isolation. Not long after that late-February concert, just about everything changed, particularly for the performing arts. So now, as I write this, I’m sitting at my desk in a quiet room. I’ve bought a ticket to a two-person Zoom interactive theatrical experience, *Being/With:home*, created by **Nichole Canuso Dance Company**. It’s a new world, and this is how I’m experiencing the arts in the COVID era — virtually and alone, yet connected through technology.

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The hour-long event is led by an unseen “guide” who takes me and a stranger (in Maine!) through a beautifully constructed and gently disarming interaction. My fellow audience member and I — or are we performers? — share stories about our pasts and connect across the distance. We feel safe and are reminded that there’s a world and a future beyond our individual bunkers.

This is what the arts have become in the (hopefully) late stages of the COVID pandemic. It’s like nothing I’d have considered paying to experience in the Before Times. And yet it feels like a gift, like a little seed of hope for humanity and the arts following a year in which hope, especially in the arts, was incredibly fleeting.

**MAKING A LIVING** in the arts has always been a struggle. There’s never enough money. Smaller organizations can get overlooked by funders in favor of those with bigger budgets or more “prestige.” Many artists and cultural workers are severely underpaid but doggedly keep doing what they love. Yet as cities go, Philly’s costs are fairly reasonable, transportation is decent, and we’ve got a healthy appetite for arts. Plus, there’s been a serious commitment from private philanthropy through the years. All in all, Philadelphia’s arts and culture sector in early 2020 was vibrant, even if things weren’t perfect.

Then the lockdown arrived. Nearly everything was immediately postponed or canceled. Contracts were broken; museums shut down. Some workers were furloughed and others were let go, while the “lucky” ones took pay cuts. Operating models were thrown into the dumpster fire of this new reality.

The **Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance**, a service organization supporting the regional arts community, estimates that 2,452 jobs were lost this past year in the region’s arts and culture sector (which doesn’t include the side jobs, like restaurant work, that kept money in people’s wallets and also vanished with the pandemic). The Philadelphia Museum of Art cut more than 100 jobs. The musicians of the Philadelphia Orchestra took pay cuts of 25 percent. The Kimmel Center canceled more than a thousand events and furloughed 137 staff members.

Governments and foundations quickly set up emergency funds. Many philanthropies provided relief funding or made existing assistance more flexible, releasing money early or allowing it to shift to operating needs. To bridge the shortfalls that had no end in sight, organizations also relied heavily on PPP loans — or were they grants? Who knew? Life was confusing.

Yet despite the uncertainty, creative people found creative solutions. The pandemic was the invisible hand forcing change and accelerating innovation and the use of technology to distribute content (the same way your grandparents might have finally figured out this past year how to do online banking or use FreshDirect). This was evident not only in the headfirst dive into Zoom life, but in a radical reimagining of how to make art.

When the old ways of experiencing the arts are hardly possible, it’s thrilling to learn about new, clever ways to connect with audiences. One theater company known for offering inventive shorter plays in unexpected places did just that: Tiny Dynamite’s immersive *A Breath for Us* tells a story about two Black women on the front lines of the civil rights movement by mailing patrons six different packets of correspondence between the two characters. It’s tactile and engaging. Trapeta B. Mayson, our city’s poet laureate, created the toll-free **Healing Verse Poetry Line** (1-855-POEMRX2), which offers callers a 90-second poem. Veteran mural artist and activist Michelle Angela Ortiz and cultural worker Dave Kyu circulated an open-source document on how to paint the streets with giant protest messages — the kind of art that could be read by the news or police helicopters that hovered overhead throughout last summer.

Artists all over Philadelphia were tossing off the shackles of habit and thinking big, or at least different. “We wanted to be innovative, artist-centered, and do unexpected, meaningful work,” David Devan, artistic director of **Opera Philadelphia**, says of the **Opera Philadelphia Channel**, the subscription-based streaming service the company created. Opera Philadelphia invested in top-of-the-line software that can be used on various platforms, such as Apple TV, Roku and Amazon, and acquired high-quality cameras. The channel debuted in October and has garnered national acclaim.

“We weren’t just going to point a camera at the stage,” says Devan. “We made decisions so we could use digital work for a new kind of operatic expression to live as its own thing.” David T. Little’s hour-long, one-man *Soldier Songs* would be a gorgeous, moving piece of art under any circumstances but is extraordinary during quarantine. Filmed under rigorous safety precautions last summer at the Brandywine Conservancy, the opera is disturbing, fresh, and just the start of a lineup that includes newly commissioned work such as **Tyshawn Sorey’s *Save the Boys***, sung by countertenor John Holiday, and **Angélica Negrón’s *The Island We Made***, starring drag performer Sasha Velour.

There’s no doubt that resource-rich organizations were able to take risks and invest in equipment that allowed them to venture off in new directions thanks to established donors, patrons and endowments. “Philly is an incredibly loyal city that supports the arts organizations it cares about,” says Christine Cox, co-founder and artistic and executive director of **BalletX**. When the company had to cancel performances at the beginning of the pandemic, more than 80 percent of its patrons donated their tickets back to the company rather than request refunds: “That’s incredible! When things shut down, it taught us that people will tune in to what they love, so we better make sure we are producing work they love.”

But equally impressive are the small organizations and independent artists familiar with operating in a scarcity model, determined to fulfill core artistic values no matter the scant resources.

**BY MID-JULY LAST YEAR**, most people realized we weren’t in for a brief shutdown. Yet something restorative was happening on a Saturday night at the corner of Montrose and South 9th Street, near the Italian Market. The evening was warm, with a gentle breeze. Mask-wearing onlookers were gathering near the white wall where the frequently defiled mural of divisive former mayor Frank Rizzo had been officially painted over in June. A series of videos, photographs and poetry began to appear, projected onto the wall. The project, **CLEANSE**, was led by artist Michelle Angela Ortiz in collaboration with Paul Farber and Lori Walsechuk and included work by Ursula Rucker, Ricardo Rivera, Laura Deutch, Kevin Nguyen, Gabrielle Peterson and Naomieh Jovin. The goal of **CLEANSE**, made without any institutional funding, was to heal the controversial space and begin

conversations around the ongoing fight for racial justice. The images were meant to honor and celebrate the diversity of people who comprise the neighborhood and told a different, more inclusive story.

“It was so quiet and solemn, it felt like a prayer that night,” says Ortiz. The projection, visible for only one night in a summer marked by outrage and frustration, was an experiment in visual healing. “*CLEANSE* wouldn’t have happened without the pandemic,” says Ortiz. “What it did was give the people a new possibility to reimagine their future.”

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**IF THE COVID PANDEMIC** has revealed the depth of creativity in the arts world, it has also highlighted inequities. Unsurprisingly, white privilege is baked into structures of advancement and access in the arts as well — and this is the year, with racial justice issues capturing the nation’s attention, that many organizations scrutinized their own identities, how they fulfill their missions and whom they serve.

“All the things I knew to be true have been affirmed by the pandemic. White supremacy is alive and well,” says Gabriela Sanchez, co-founder of North Philly’s **Power Street Theatre**. “It lives within the model of the nonprofit sector, which was founded by white men and didn’t center the needs of women or BIPOC groups. It’s always been there. We are all trying to unlearn those ideas.”

**Theatre Philadelphia’s** executive director, LaNeshe Miller-White, describes the shift in the theater community: “People were fed up and broke and were really calling out issues with inequality in the theater community. So many companies have, whether on their own or because of being called out, made pledges that DEI and anti-racism themes will be added into their programming when they reopen.”

Institutions seem to be taking notice. Last year, students and alumni of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts **revolted** when the administration told staff to keep their PAFA affiliations out of public declarations of support for the Black Lives Matter movement. Eventually the **president stepped down**, and PAFA hired a DEI coordinator. Other landmark institutions took measures to expand diversity within their ranks, including the Philadelphia Museum of Art, whose board instituted an office of diversity, equity, inclusion and access this past summer.

“We live in a city that is 45 percent African American, but do our audiences reflect that? Does our board or staff? No, and it’s wrong,” says Nick Stuccio, president and producing director of FringeArts and founder of the Fringe Festival. Stuccio’s organization is taking a deep look not only at who is invited to perform, but also at the composition of its board and staff, to make sure they’re reflective of the community they live in and serve.

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**ANOTHER AREA** of concern has to do with money and the recognition of the value arts and culture provide to the city’s underserved communities.

While organizations’ budgets were being decimated by the pandemic, so were tax revenues, leaving an estimated \$750 million hole in the city’s annual \$4.9 billion budget. An incredibly small portion of the city budget goes toward the arts, but for many groups that the city funds, the support is mission-critical.

In response to the city’s budget shortfall, Mayor Jim Kenney proposed, among many other things, **eliminating the Office of Arts, Culture and the Creative Economy** (OACCE) and zeroing out the \$3.14 million budget for the Philadelphia Cultural Fund, which provides grants to small organizations. The mostly low-profile, largely neighborhood-based arts and culture outfits that receive those grants unify city neighborhoods and provide very real services and safe spaces — offerings that are all the more essential given the spike in gun violence that’s accompanied the pandemic.

Many people interviewed for this piece argued that while the combined allocations to OACCE and the Cultural Fund amount to a rounding error in the city’s budget, their elimination would send harmful ripples through the communities they serve. (The city eventually moved the OACCE into the managing director’s office and put **\$1 million back** into the Cultural Fund for the current year’s budget — still a significant \$2.14 million loss from its previous funding level.)

“The City of Philadelphia will always support the arts,” says Kelly Lee, chief cultural officer and director of OACCE. About the proposed cuts, Lee explains, “Philadelphia is one of the largest, poorest cities in the country. The poverty rate is 23 percent, and when you have such a high rate, it impacts your budgeting decisions and how best to provide core services in a city with such great need.”

Arts and culture don’t exist in a vacuum. They affect education, public health and social impact programs in every pocket of the city. “The arts are tremendously active as an engine of improvement for social conditions, especially in communities of color,” says Priscilla Luce, interim president of the Cultural Alliance. “If there’s any significant shift in services in these communities, we will see a step back in health and well-being in that community. That’s a critical message.”

There are more than 180 arts and culture programs running every day of the week throughout the city. **Philadelphia Urban Creators**, a farm in North Philly that uses food, art and education to build equity and opportunity, ran a mobile market and neighborhood marketplace during the pandemic, distributing essential goods. **Portside Arts Center** provided kids in the River Wards with a place to get daily schoolwork assistance, socialize with friends, and receive an arts education. **Power Street Theater** organizes “story circles,” social gatherings via Zoom for those in its North Philly community to discuss issues such as gentrification, health and finances. These are just a few of the small organizations that make up the connective tissue of an engaged, vibrant city.

Some in the arts world speculate that with political will, money could be allocated more predictably. Other cities have instituted reliable tax-based support for the arts that bypasses the whims of a city’s general fund — Houston with its hotel occupancy tax, Denver with a sales tax — so why couldn’t we? An **Arts and Culture Task Force** was formed last December by City Councilmembers Isaiah Thomas and Katherine Gilmore Richardson. In February, it announced a \$1 million grant called Illuminate the Arts. It was part of City Council’s **\$25 million New Normal Budget Act** to prioritize recovery for jobs during this pandemic and, as Thomas’s press announcement stated, “send an overdue lifeline to the arts community.” This helps, but it doesn’t move the arts any closer to guaranteed annual funding.

Thaddeus Squire, the founder of **Social Impact Commons**, who has two decades of experience in nonprofit management, thinks Minnesota — which has a similar political profile to Pennsylvania — may have found a solution that could work here. That state’s 2008 Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment implemented a tax that appealed to conservatives and liberals by, respectively, preserving natural lands and funding the arts. With a wide-open gubernatorial race looming, perhaps a savvy candidate looking to bridge the state’s blue-red divide could make this a campaign issue.

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**WHAT WILL OUR ARTS** scene look like on the other side of a pandemic that has taken so much but also prompted us to examine what we bring with us into the future?

Some organizations will continue with their ventures into the digital world, having realized that online content is both lucrative — it allows them to reach untapped audiences — and democratizing for populations that have historically felt unwelcome in arts and culture spaces. The Barnes Foundation, for example, which had for so long emphasized the primacy of in-person art study, found major success last year when it beefed up its **online curriculum**, enrolling more than 2,800 students. That gamble generated more than \$600,000 in revenue.

The push for diversity will continue, even if change happens slowly. And, no doubt, the arts will have to continue fighting for their financial lives. There's worry that the first half of 2021 may be the breaking point for many organizations that will soon exhaust emergency funds. A recent survey of the local arts scene by the Cultural Alliance found that 41 percent of organizations may not survive beyond this fall. Maybe those organizations that remain will be headed in a better direction, with more diversity and wider access to broader audiences. But we may also have lost the fledgling organizations and independent artists who couldn't survive the financial rigors of the pandemic.

Yet we know the arts will be an essential means to process this universal trauma of lost lives and lost futures — and also the way we'll again channel that special communal energy felt when we experience an enthralling concert, play or dance performance together. Arts build bridges between people and encourage civic engagement. The arts serve communities at a grassroots level, drive the economy, and are a big piece of the halo effect that makes Philadelphia a desirable place to live, work and visit — all of which brings revenue to the city. The arts can help us move forward spiritually, socially and financially. But it's hard to say just how much the arts will actually change.

"I've had this conversation before," says Squire. "It's *Groundhog Day* for me. Last March, I was getting calls from colleagues saying, 'Armageddon has finally happened.' But I had heard all of that before, in 2008. The resistance to deep cultural change in the nonprofit sector is profound, and the willingness, in particular among small organizations, to keep going amidst duress will probably allow many to survive this crisis, as they have before. But this is not necessarily a healthy or positive outcome."

Jennifer Turnbull of **Spiral Q**, whose **dancing mailboxes** became a national viral sensation during Philly's vote count in November, has a different take on the possibility of progress: "Change is hard and not necessarily probable, but it is possible. I've been with Spiral Q since 2007, and I know that this works. We didn't feel listless when the pandemic happened. We took a month to stabilize and then said, 'Let's go! This is what we are here for.'"

It shouldn't have taken a global pandemic to push us all to evolve, but here we are, and we *are* moving in a better, more inclusive direction. More voices and ideas are being heard and realized on stages and in museums, with better access for all. That should be celebrated.

The coming summer, with its promise of gathering outside with friends and family who've been vaccinated, might mark the beginning of a mental shift. Going indoors with strangers still feels like a gamble. Most arts leaders seem to be optimistic that early 2022 might be the real return to venues and the habits we once knew.

As for me this summer, I'll be curious to see things in real life again, like the inaugural show, ***New Grit: Art & Philly Now***, inside the Philadelphia Museum of Art's Frank Gehry Core Project renovation. FringeArt's festival of circus art in June sounds good, too. Maybe Jay-Z's *Made in America* festival will even be back for Labor Day weekend. After more than a year in quarantine conditions, we're all ready to reconnect. To paraphrase Celine Dion, most of us "don't wanna be all by ourselves anymore. ..."

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