

AMERICAN ARTSCAPE

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COVID

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This issue

There is no aspect of American life that hasn't been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, from the ways we learn and work, to the ways we travel and shop, to the ways we interact with our very own families. And with a winter surge underway, recovery is still down the road.

The arts, of course, are no exception to this situation. Nearly every element of the arts and culture landscape has changed since March, including how art is created, consumed, and monetized. The shuttering of venues has had a devastating economic effect: according to an Americans for the Arts survey, an estimated \$14.6 billion have been lost (and increasing every day), and more than 62,000 arts workers have been laid off. Another 50,000 have been furloughed, and a third of arts organizations have had to reduce the salaries of remaining staff.

In order to survive, artists and arts organizations have relied on the very ingenuity and innovation that fuel creativity in the first place. Digital spaces have become rife with experimentation, productions and events have been transformed for outdoor spaces, and the act of creative collaboration has sometimes demanded drastic measures (COVID bubbles anyone?).

In this issue of *American Artscape*, we'll look at the heartbreak and the silver linings, from how arts organizations across the country are faring, to how reopening plans are proceeding, to how the National Endowment for the Arts and our partners have worked together to strengthen the sector during this crisis.

In the coming months, artists and arts organizations will continue to face tough decisions. But at the same time, we at the Arts Endowment are confident that the arts—an intrinsic part of human nature, and typically one of the nation's most booming industries—will prove resilient and prevail. Creativity will not stop. Economic gains will eventually return. The show, as it's said, will go on.

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About the cover: Cincinnati Ballet
company members Jacqueline
Damico Amador and Taylor Carrasco
perform "I Think I Love You" from
Wild Sweet Love, choreographed
by Trey McIntyre. Photo by Hiromi
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Clouds Passing Over

The National Endowment for the Arts in a COVID World

BY MARY ANNE CARTER

When National Endowment for the Arts staff originally began teleworking in March, the plan was that the agency would be working remotely for two weeks. No one could have foreseen that nine months later, we would still be working from our home offices and kitchen tables, responding to calls and emails from grantees, nearly all of whom continue to wonder the same thing: how will we survive?

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a

devastating effect on the arts and culture sectors. Museums, galleries, and theaters were shuttered for months at a time—and many of them are still closed, with no source of income in sight. Festivals and artist residencies have been canceled, events have been postponed, and with so many schools operating virtually, children have lost access to in-school and after-school arts programming. With visitors prohibited at nursing homes and prisons, seniors and inmates have also lost critical lifelines to the arts, further isolating two already isolated populations.

▲ A team from Playwrights Project, an Arts Endowment grantee, prepares lesson packets that will be sent to incarcerated individuals while correctional facilities are under lockdown due to COVID-19. Photo by Cecilia Kouma, Playwrights Project

► Secretary of the Air Force Barbara Barrett (third from left) and National Endowment for the Arts Chairman Mary Anne Carter (fourth from left) at the ceremony celebrating the award of the National Medal of Arts to U.S. military bands with Col. Don Schofield (holding award on behalf of Air Force band members), Chief of Staff of the Air Force Gen. Charles Q. Brown, Jr., Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force JoAnne Bass, and various Air Force band members. Photo by Andy Morataya, U.S. Air Force



And yet, amid this anxiety and uncertainty, I have been in awe at the ways artists and arts organizations have found to continue creating, celebrating, and sharing their art with the American public. The usage of digital platforms exploded seemingly overnight as artists discovered fertile ground for reaching individuals across the country. Museums launched new virtual tours, and book talks began taking place using video conference services. Children and adults can now take art classes, dance classes, and singing lessons online. Organizations launched mail correspondence art projects for senior centers and corrections facilities. And theater, music, and dance productions moved their performance spaces to online stages. I have found few things more moving than seeing artists, isolated in their own homes, coming together onscreen to continue their craft and create beauty.

Other organizations have used this time to look inward, digitizing archives, reviewing strategic plans, and perhaps most importantly, addressing inequities within their organizations and their fields at-large. Many venues may be empty, but few arts organizations in the nation have been idle.

Amid our newly digital world, there has also been an unexpected silver lining: new avenues have been created for people to experience the arts, allowing access as never before. People who may have never walked into a theater and seen a live performance are now watching them online, or taking a dance master class in their living room.

This has presented new challenges of course, as we consider as a field how to retain these new audiences and how we can address equity issues such as who has access to broadband internet. At the same time, my hope is that even when physical spaces reopen, we'll remain committed to the degree of access that digital platforms provide, so that every person in this country can continue to experience and benefit from the arts.

The arts have stepped up in other critical ways to support our country over the past nine months as well. Even as their own bottom lines have evaporated, arts organizations have opened their parking lots as COVID-19 testing centers. Costume designers have switched from making onstage apparel to sewing masks for frontline workers. Countless performances have raised funds for worthy causes such as food banks and purchasing personal protective gear for healthcare workers. It has been incredibly inspiring to witness, and is a reminder of how the arts are one of humanity's greatest tools for good.

At the National Endowment for the Arts, we have been working around the clock to ensure that we are doing everything we can to help the arts community, just as it has been doing the same for us.

In March, the Arts Endowment received \$75 million through the CARES Act to support America's arts and culture sectors, and to save as many jobs as possible. Within less than three weeks, we awarded nearly \$30 million to state arts agencies and regional arts organizations.

These organizations moved equally quickly, and re-granted more than 4,000 awards to local arts organizations throughout their jurisdictions.

The remaining \$45 million that the Arts Endowment received from Congress was awarded through direct grants to nonprofit arts organizations in an effort to retain jobs and cover operating costs. Our usual matching requirement was also waived. The grant application and approval process moved three times faster than our normal timeline, and we announced our CARES recipients on July 1st. In the end, we awarded grants of \$50,000 to 846 organizations throughout the country, providing what we hope was a measure of financial security.

While I am enormously proud of the relief we were able to provide, and the speed at which we were able to provide it, everyone at the Arts Endowment is acutely aware that our supply of funding did not come close to meeting the demand for assistance. We received more than 3,100 eligible applications requesting \$157 million, a sign of how every organization, big and small, urban and rural, is struggling right now. We're hopeful that our agency will be included in any future relief bills that Congress might pass so that we can continue to assist our nation's incredible arts workers.

Of course, our nation's arts and cultural sector has always relied on a diverse ecosystem for support—no single agency can uphold

the arts alone. This is especially true during challenging circumstances. Our partners at state arts agencies, regional arts organizations, and national service organizations, and our friends at private philanthropies, have been critical to the continued survival of America's artists and arts organizations. Whether it is through the distribution or redistribution of relief funds, or providing opportunities for their constituents to stay connected, informed, and cared for, it has been incredibly heartening to see how cultural organizations have worked in tandem to strengthen and support our nation's artistic sector.

So while there are plenty of reasons for anxiety and concern within the arts and cultural sectors, there are reasons for hope and encouragement. In the words of American legend and former National Council on the Arts member Duke Ellington, "Gray skies are just clouds passing over." Together, we will figure out a way to keep moving forward until these gray skies pass. In the meantime, the National Endowment for the Arts will continue to do everything we can to ensure America's arts workers can keep creating, innovating, and finding moments of beauty in every cloudy day.

Mary Anne Carter is chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts.



◀ A scene from the 2020 NEA Jazz Masters tribute concert, which was produced as a virtual event due to COVID-19. Image courtesy of the National Endowment for the Arts



REOPENING 101:

WHAT ARTS GROUPS ARE LEARNING AS THEY
WELCOME BACK AUDIENCES DURING THE PANDEMIC

BY SUNIL IYENGAR AND PATRICIA MOORE SHAFFER, PHD



When Berkshire Theatre Group (BTG) reopened to stage *Godspell* in August 2020, the company drew national press coverage for producing the first U.S. musical that had been cleared by the Actors' Equity Association during COVID times. Now that a few months have passed, BTG Executive Director Nick Paleologos is philosophical. "The risks were pretty obvious. The whole thing could have blown up and it would have been a national disaster," he mused.

Apart from the pandemic itself, several factors combined to threaten the viability of an all-

outdoors production of the musical. Paleologos revisited those challenges during an October 2020 interview—part of a National Endowment for the Arts survey of reopening practices across the nation's arts organizations. Titled *The Art of Reopening*, the resulting report combines data and interviews from nine case study profiles with data from 16 national service organizations (NSOs) in the arts.

Paleologos remembered how the Pittsfield, Massachusetts-based company had "eight weeks of breathing room to actually kind of get our bearings and figure out what we were going to do." In attempting to meet all of Actors' Equity's requirements, BTG Company Manager Alex James became the company's "resident expert...a PhD in epidemiology and disease control," Paleologos quipped.

Despite all the careful planning, the production hit snags before it started. "The stage manager wasn't happy with the way...that the staging was adhering to [safety protocols]," said the executive director, which involved a Plexiglass shield, no physical interaction between actors, and masks whenever actors moved from their assigned places. "We had to go back to the drawing board creatively and, literally, restage the show with only a week to go." Not only that—on opening night, the Massachusetts governor announced a 50 percent cut in capacity for outdoor performances, "effective immediately." Ultimately, BTG rented a tent big enough to accommodate and socially distance about 100 patrons, "which is still a money-loser," Paleologos noted. "I mean, this is not a sustainability model by any stretch."

The company persevered and was rewarded by, among other plaudits, a favorable piece in the *New York Times*' "Arts and Leisure" section, as well as the final review of legendary theater critic Ben Brantley. Stephen Schwartz, composer of *Godspell*'s music and lyrics, even came to town to bless the show.

According to other interviews conducted for the NSO survey, this same sense of whiplash was shared by many arts organizations—certainly many theaters—that reopened their doors in 2020 during the pandemic. "Plan and then be prepared to change every day. Just be prepared for a new challenge and to change and to adapt," urged Rebecca Read Medrano, co-founder and executive director of Washington, DC's GALA Hispanic Theatre.

Some other key findings from the survey of NSOs included the following: many more museums than performing arts organizations

◀ 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

► Zach Williams, Nicholas Edwards, and Tim Jones in the Berkshire Theatre Group's summer production of *Godspell*, which was the first musical in the nation cleared by the Actors' Equity Association for COVID times. Photo by Emma K. Rothenberg-Ware, courtesy of Berkshire Theatre Group



▼ The Lied Center for Performing Arts in Lincoln, Nebraska, safely engaged audiences through its Music on the Move initiative, which brought an outdoor, mobile music stage to neighborhoods throughout Lincoln. Photo courtesy of Lied Center for Performing Arts, at University of Nebraska

have managed to reopen, arts organizations still struggle with identifying and distributing virtual arts content, and arts organizations are concerned with the morale and social and emotional well-being of their staff and artists.

Among U.S. organizations that succeeded in re-engaging with in-person audiences or visitors during the pandemic, there was an exceptional

degree of transparency and a willingness to adapt to public safety and union requirements. A summary of best practices that emerged from the case study interviews is given below.

- 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 and remarked 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 (ACW) in Saranac Lake, New York, described 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 explained. “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.’” Thill



characterized the reaction of locals as, “I can’t believe I live in the coolest town ever!”

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.

True Concord Voices and Orchestra, a professional chamber choir and orchestra in Tucson, Arizona, benefited from guidance provided by a medical doctor who serves on its board. Music Director Eric Holtan explained: “She is presently working at the 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.”

The arts organization also developed a relationship with a company that does COVID testing; the service is overseen by a resident medical 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 reported, dancers now have been able to return to the stage.

American Shakespeare Center (ASC) in Staunton, Virginia, created an “isolation bubble” for its actors, the wardrobe manager, stage manager, and backstage production assistants. They “signed an ‘isolation covenant’ that they worked out within their group to limit interaction,” ASC’s Managing Director Amy Wratchford explained. “They only socialized with each other during the entire rehearsal and run of shows.” 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 said, “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.

▲ Cincinnati Ballet company members Jacqueline Damico and Taylor Carrasco wear masks during class. Photo courtesy of Cincinnati Ballet

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 Altman noted: “[We] certainly 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.”

- 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 Holtan asserted. 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 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,” said Thill. This spirit of reassurance led to generous donations.

- 6. Bring that videographer along for the ride!** *Partnering with a media/technology 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 in Birmingham, Alabama, points to “a learning curve of new technology and platforms” just as financial constraints made it difficult to invest in such options. Confronted with this dilemma, some arts organizations reached out to artists experienced with digital presentation formats or they partnered with teams that could bring 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,” American Shakespeare Center’s Wretchford said. “Both Deep Structure Productions, which is here in Staunton, and Paladin Media Group, which is based in Charlottesville, leapt up to help us [pro bono].” Once ASC launched its SafeStart reopening program, they reached out to both companies and were able to pay them for their services this time. “We also partnered with Marquee TV,” she noted. “We were the first theater in North America to do a livestream with them.”

These best practices won’t guarantee an ability to reopen, but they will provide a sound basis for starting the process as more and more arts organizations pivot to the future.

Sunil Iyengar is director of the Office of Research & Analysis at the National Endowment for the Arts. Patricia Moore Shaffer, PhD is deputy director in the Office of Research & Analysis.

► Masked, socially distant audience members watch a performance of *Twelfth Night*, produced by the American Shakespeare Center at the Blackburn Inn and Conference Center. Photo by Lauren Rogers, courtesy of the American Shakespeare Center





A CULTURE OF SURVIVAL

THE PANDEMIC IN THE HOPI NATION

BY REBECCA SUTTON

Bob Rhodes recalled a moment several months ago, when a mentor from Hopitutuqaki, an art school that teaches traditional Hopi art forms, called the school's office in tears. The woman had just received an unexpected \$1,200 check, which represented her salary from the classes she had been scheduled to teach at the school last spring, all of which had been canceled due to COVID-19. Made possible by CARES Act funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, the check proved critical to the woman's overall security. Without the check, "They would've had a hard time," Rhodes said, noting that the sum amounted to a second stimulus check. "That extra \$1,200 made a huge difference to them."

Located in Kykotsmovi, Arizona, the heart of the Hopi Nation, Hopitutuqaki was founded by Rhodes in 2002; he retired as the school's facilitator, or chief administrative officer, in September. Although Hopi culture has endured for well over a thousand years—Oraibi, one of 12 Hopi villages spread across three mesas, is considered the oldest continuously occupied community in the United States—there are aspects that continue to be endangered, most notably its language and several art forms, such as the Third Mesa style of basket weaving. Rhodes started the school to counteract these losses, and to preserve traditional Hopi craft processes.

Today, Hopitutuqaki offers a language-immersion preschool for three- and four-year-

▲ A display of katsina dolls at the Museum of Northern Arizona's Hopi Festival. The closure and cancellation of markets, galleries, and festivals—including the 2020 Hopi Festival—has had a devastating effect on Indigenous artists. Photo by flickr user Al_HikesAZ



▲ A Hopitutuqaiki student learns how to weave a traditional Hopi belt. Photo by Robert Rhodes

▼ An opportunity quilt created by Hopitutuqaiki students. Photo by Robert Rhodes



olds every summer, as well as classes that run from March through October that teach art forms such as moccasin making, basket weaving, garment making, and Hopi food preparation.

With the school's closure throughout the pandemic, the economic and cultural losses have been profound. For the preschool, four-year-olds who missed this summer's classes will have aged out of the program by next year, which means

losing one of the region's primary opportunities for early Hopi language instruction. An estimated 5,000 people speak Hopi today, with younger generations much less likely to speak the language fluently than their elders. According to the 1997 Hopi Language Assessment Project, only 15 percent of youth under 19 spoke Hopi fluently.

"The more you hear it, the more you speak it, the better you can retain it," said Donna Humetewa Kaye, a board member, office manager, and arts mentor at Hopitutuqaiki who teaches sewing and garment making. "The older we get, the less we're able to do that unless we speak it every day and use the language. It was a really big loss not to have the language program this year."

The cancellation of arts classes also disrupted what have become critical ways of passing on traditional knowledge. Although Hopitutuqaiki initially experimented with moving classes to online platforms, the reservation's internet network ultimately

proved too feeble, an example of how internet equity issues have impacted education in newly dire ways throughout the pandemic. "The system is not robust enough to support it," said Rhodes, adding that people were getting dropped off of sessions, were unable to hear the audio, or simply weren't able to log on.

But even if internet connectivity were not an issue, many of the art forms taught at Hopitutuqaiki would be difficult to teach online. "If you're trying to see where somebody was weaving something and did a mistake, then you have to be there," Rhodes said. "It's really difficult unless you're one-on-one." To be able to offer the same kind of visual guidance allowed by in-person learning would require a TV studio-style setup, he said, with specialized cameras and tripods. "We don't have any of that kind of thing. Most of our students would be trying to do it on their phones."

The economic fallout from the classes' cancellation has also rippled through every layer of the school's community. With the loss of tuition, Rhodes is unsure whether the school would have survived without the CARES grant, which covered the salaries of the school's two employees—at the time, himself and Kaye—and allowed the school to meet its obligations to the mentors it had already contracted for the season. This was a lifeline for a number of mentors, many of whom make their living as artists. Leia Maahs, managing director of the Tucson-based Southwest Folklife Alliance—another Arts Endowment CARES grantee—noted that in a survey of folk and traditional artists conducted over the summer, 80 percent of respondents described finances as their most pressing pandemic-related concern.

Along with the school's closure, the loss of tourism has been a major economic stressor for mentors and other Hopi artists. In an effort to protect its citizens from the coronavirus, the Hopi Nation has been closed to tourists since March. The move seems to have helped keep case counts relatively low: at the time of publication, there have been roughly 540 cases of coronavirus among members of the Hopi Tribe, despite the community's location in the midst of the Navajo Nation. The Navajo Nation was one of the hardest-hit communities in all of Arizona, which was itself a global coronavirus epicenter over the summer.

At the same time, tourists represent a major source of income for Hopi artists, both on the reservation itself and in nearby towns. "Artists are used to being able to sell things to local

trading posts, and even trading posts in nearby towns, including Phoenix and Santa Fe and Scottsdale,” said Rhodes, who noted that an estimated 60 percent of Hopi earn some or all of their income from the arts. “Those places aren’t buying because they don’t have tourists, and on the reservations they don’t have tourists because the reservations are still closed.”

This has been compounded by the cancellation of in-person markets such as the Santa Fe Indian Market, as well as the cancellation of traditional ceremonies, when artists typically sell ceremonial regalia and other specialty items to participants.

Moving to online platforms has been challenging for many older artists nationwide, Hopi included. In order to succeed in a digital marketplace, “You have to have a website or Instagram or some other way of promoting your artwork,” said Kaye. “Some of our people are old-school, where technology is really a hard thing,” she said, a difficulty that isn’t helped by broadband connectivity issues. There is also a degree of wariness for some, said Maahs, due to how prevalent intellectual property theft has become through the internet. Posting jewelry or katsina dolls online, for example, has made it easy for profiteers to design and sell knockoffs, which are then marketed as “authentic.”

In addition to mentors, the closure of Hopitutuqaki has also had economic outcomes for the school’s students. “When a student takes a class, our research shows that 30 percent of those students go on to produce work that then is either sold or used ceremonially or for family members,” said Rhodes. “It’s an economic boon to them, because if they didn’t have it for ceremonial purposes, they would have to buy it from someplace else. So it either saves them money or makes them money.”

Although the pandemic shows no signs of slowing, Hopitutuqaki’s CARES award has allowed the school to persevere, and to once again begin serving the community. In October, Hopitutuqaki re-commenced classes, offering belt-weaving and basket-weaving in small, socially distanced groups where masks were required and sanitization was frequent. If the classes are able to operate successfully, additional classes might be added to the schedule as well.

While there will continue to be challenges in the coming months, Kaye for one prefers to take the long view, and look for signs of hope. “As Native people, we have survived all kinds of historical traumas and this is just another one,” she said. She had recently visited one of

Hopitutuqaki’s older mentors, who was busy tending her corn, sorting beans, and performing the traditional duties that have patterned Hopi lives for centuries. “There are people that are carrying on. They’re not letting this virus hold them back from taking care of their families and doing what they need to do. Our culture has a lot of survival and, of course, prayer, songs, and storytelling, to remind us of who we are and that not everything is all doom and gloom. We’re going to get through this.”

Rebecca Sutton is the editor of American Artscape.

▼ Pre-COVID, markets like this one in Santa Fe were a major source of revenue for Indigenous artists, Hopi included. Most markets were canceled this year, or were moved to virtual platforms. Photo by flickr user Betsy Weber





New Ways of Thinking about Art

Honolulu Theatre for Youth Takes *The HI Way*

BY CAROLYN COONS

▲ *Filipino Folktales & Fables* by Alvin Chan, which had its world premiere at Honolulu Theatre for Youth in 2018, is a celebration of the many rich cultural traditions of the Philippines. (Front l-r) Sean-Joseph Choo, Christian Quinto, and Matthew Mazzella. (Back) Maki'ilei Ishihara and Junior Tesoro. Image courtesy of Honolulu Theatre for Youth

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, Lily Crumpton, the assistant director of education at the Honolulu Theatre for Youth (HTY), went from working directly with dozens of students to one: her seven-year-old daughter, Olive. Operating out of her one-bedroom apartment, Crumpton turned the drama games she normally used during in-person instruction into digital resources, sometimes using Olive to help demonstrate.

“To suddenly create a video where you’re getting no response, where you’re talking to a camera, was a journey of learning,” said Director

of Drama Education Dan Kelin, who noted that while it’s been a challenge to make the switch to virtual given his staff’s lack of filming and editing experience, it has also been rewarding. “This was one of the things that I really liked about pivoting to digital work. I think it was a great training tool for my staff: learning to really cut down to the absolute essence of what we’re trying to get at with the work that we do.”

In a normal season, HTY typically produces seven shows and tours one or two productions to neighboring islands. Between its productions, in-school residencies, and youth theater classes, the company reaches approximately 100,000 teachers, students, and families every year.



But restrictions on in-person gatherings and the closure of Honolulu’s schools required all of the theater’s staff to improvise and adapt quickly to changing circumstances, swapping live audiences and classrooms for their iPhones and living rooms. The theater began creating online education resources and conducting virtual classroom visits, allowing young people to continue experiencing the benefits of theater from their homes. In addition, HTY launched production of a 30-minute children’s television series, *The HI Way*, which airs weekly on the Hawai’i News Now stations. The first episode premiered on March 31, just two weeks after the initial shutdown in Hawai’i.

But working through a new business model in television, coupled with the zeroing out of ticket sales, has made it a scary time financially, said Artistic Director Eric Johnson.

According to a November 2020 report from Americans for the Arts, 63 percent of artists, including theater

workers, are now fully unemployed. The rate of unemployment is higher for Black, Indigenous, and artists of color than it is for white artists (69 percent and 60 percent respectively). All of HTY’s company members are people of color, and half have Native Hawaiian ancestry.

Despite these national trends, HTY has managed to keep 23 staff members employed, including all of the staff on the creative and education teams. This is in large part thanks to CARES Act grants HTY received from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Hawai’i State Foundation on Culture and the Arts, and the City and County of Honolulu, totaling \$115,000. These CARES Act grants were used to help cover salaries when funding from a Paycheck Protection Program loan was depleted.

Johnson describes artists and educators as the “bones” of HTY and said he hopes when the dust has settled, other institutions will make structural changes to keep artists employed, making for a more resilient industry.

Since the lockdown began, HTY actor Moses Goods, who is Black and Native Hawaiian, has participated in video conferences with fellow artists across Hawai’i and the country, many of whom are now out of work and struggling to pay bills.

“I remember feeling—and I even expressed it a few times in some of these meetings—I almost felt guilty that I was in a place that I was fortunate enough to still be employed and not have to worry like so many artists were worrying,” he said.

In addition to the economic toll, the physical toll of COVID-19 has also affected Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders disproportionately: they have higher rates of infection than any other racial or ethnic group in not only Hawai’i, but also California, Oregon, Utah, and Washington, according to a study from the University of Hawai’i at Mānoa.

Rather than shield children from this uncomfortable reality, HTY incorporated it into *The HI Way*. “Finding a way to address that topic with children, of course, is always going to be difficult. But that’s the challenge that we have, right?” Goods said. “With HTY, we create art not just to entertain, but we want kids to think about things, and we want to challenge kids to understand the world around them in every aspect, everything that’s going on.”

The HI Way, which is also available on YouTube, has had more than two million views to date, a steep increase from the theater’s normal reach. In many ways, this expanded audience indicates how many families have relied on the arts for guidance—and sanity—during the pandemic.

▼ *Home of the Brave* by Lee Cataluna, created in partnership with La Jolla Playhouse, was inspired by interviews with military children from all branches of service. (Front, from l-r:) Sean-Joseph Choo, and Christina Uyeno. (Back) Jason Lee Hoy, Brandon Karrer, and Claire Fallon. Image courtesy of Honolulu Theatre for Youth





▲ *The HI Way's* puppet star Keoki rides along with Junior Tesoro in the opening credits of the show's second season. Image courtesy of Honolulu Theatre for Youth

"As families were trying to all exist and work in the same space, having something that you knew was high-quality, local content that you could safely put your four-year-old in front of and maybe have a few minutes to do something else felt like an important thing for us to continue to provide," said Managing Director Becky Dunning.

The show, which features HTY's ensemble of actors as well as a cast of charismatic puppets, is broken up into short segments, including sketches, original songs, and at-home activities. Most episodes deal with children's new reality, such as social distancing, canceled birthday parties, virtual school, and boredom at home, as well as broader cultural issues that have surfaced during the pandemic, such as racism.

The HI Way doesn't shy away from complex or upsetting topics; rather it confronts them with creativity and, when appropriate, humor. Johnson said art should reflect on and help process difficult moments in our collective experience, whether it's the pandemic, the fight for racial justice, or climate change.

"We have all these stories about the kid hero who single-handedly saved the day and becomes the victor," he said. "But I think now we're seeing that the story that they're seeing play out is that a whole world has to work together and make small changes and think about each other and adjust the way that they have been living in these small, tangible ways."

Johnson said "community-powered stories," in which many people come together to solve problems, are prominent in Native Hawaiian and other Indigenous cultures. These stories have played an important role in *The HI Way*—whether it's encouraging viewers to wear masks or wash their hands regularly to keep the community safe.

► *The Carp Who Would Not Quit* by Reiko Ho and the HTY Ensemble retells traditional fables from Japan and Okinawa. (From l-r) Serina Dunham, Maki'ilei Ishihara, and Junior Tesoro. Image courtesy of Honolulu Theatre for Youth

The ethos of community-based power is also evident in the company's response to the pandemic, through its collaboration with funders, community partners, and, as Goods describes it, the entire HTY family. "That really came into play, because there is a comfort," he said. "Knowing that we're part of not just the team, but a real family."

As the pandemic drags on, Johnson said HTY will continue to look for new ways to innovate and reach audiences, but he still hopes that one day, they will be able to welcome their community back to the theater. "In a way this whole thing has knocked us sideways, but what we found is it also knocked us into the arms of some really exciting collaborators and processes and new ways of thinking about our art that we wouldn't have gotten had this opportunity not come around," Johnson said. At the same time, "On some days we have talked within the company that we we'd trade 100,000 TV views if we could just have 200 people in the theater giggling and laughing."

Carolyn Coons is the staff assistant in the Office of Public Affairs at the National Endowment for the Arts.



Building Hope

MASS Design Group in the Time of COVID

BY PAULETTE BEETE AND REBECCA SUTTON

The leadership team of MASS
Design Group. Photo courtesy of
MASS Design Group



Before March 2020, the major design concerns of most arts organizations had to do with (surprise!) art, and how to best experience it. Lighting, acoustics, visibility of a performance or art object, a space's aesthetic appeal—these were all critical elements in creating a successful arts venue.

But with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, healthcare concerns have become a top priority for every built space in the nation, arts organizations included. How can indoor environments, which we now know can promote COVID-19 transmission, stay true to their original purpose while also protecting public health?

“COVID-19 reveals what many of us have long known: that buildings shape our health and our ability to access health every day,” said Michael Murphy, founding principal and executive director of the Boston-based MASS Design Group, a National Endowment for the Arts CARES Act grantee. “Architecture can play a unique role in contributing to a cure: if spaces can be purposefully designed, they can assist in the prevention, containment, and treatment of infectious disease, including COVID-19.”

MASS Design Group—MASS stands for “Model of Architecture Serving Society”—was founded just over a decade ago as a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization. Initially focusing on healthcare settings, such as the Butaro District Hospital in Rwanda, the practice has since expanded to work in education, affordable housing, and memorials, such as the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, which is the nation's first national memorial to commemorate victims of lynching. As Murphy explained, the group's mission is to

“research, build, and advocate for architecture that promotes justice and human dignity. We believe in expanding access to design that is purposeful, healing, and hopeful.”

When the pandemic struck, MASS Design Group transitioned to telework, video conferencing, and virtual workshops, just like thousands of other offices around the world. But even as the team adjusted to its own new normal, it began to look outward, and started thinking about how it might help other organizations adapt to the COVID-19 era and prompt them to rethink how their spaces could promote and protect the health of their communities.

With its history in healthcare, and with support from a CARES Act grant, MASS Design was well-positioned to take on a leadership role in helping the architecture and design fields begin to incorporate public health thinking. “The generous support and funding from the [National Endowment for the Arts CARES Act grant] helped us to mobilize our expertise by creating a COVID-19 Design Response team to share strategies when retrofitting spaces for infection control,” said Murphy. “After studying the relationship between architecture and human health for a decade, we believed we had something meaningful to contribute.”

As part of the COVID-19 Design Response efforts, MASS Design began to consolidate and disseminate a decade's worth of lessons the organization had learned from various healthcare projects. As Murphy noted, what good is accumulating expertise if it's not to be in service, whether to a client or the global community?

Working with design and healthcare leaders who helped guide the initiative, MASS Design also studied spaces throughout the country where social distancing was a challenge. “Prisons in particular were especially vulnerable, with 86 of the 100 largest outbreaks [taking place] within prisons and jails throughout the U.S.,” said Murphy. “These are environments where social distancing is very difficult, and the guards and people who have been incarcerated are in tight, poorly ventilated spaces for large periods of time. We looked at homeless shelters, hospitals, schools, senior housing spaces, as well as restaurants and hotels.”

As a result of the Design Response team's ongoing work, MASS Design

▼ MASS Design Group has long incorporated elements that mitigate airborne disease transmission into its designs, including at the 150-bed Butaro District Hospital in Rwanda, which employs natural cross-ventilation. Photo by Iwan Baan



has published a collection of case studies, best practices, and lessons learned, all of which are available on the organization's website, free of charge. The compendium has become a critical resource for the design field, both for practitioners retrofitting existing buildings and those contemplating construction of new spaces. The *Wall Street Journal Magazine* and the *New York Times* have both recently featured MASS Design in recognition of its work to re-envision buildings for COVID times.

"The design of our spaces has the power to hurt us or to keep us safe," said Murphy. "From floor layouts, to the choice of materials, to the circulation of air, every decision we make matters. The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly changed our shared perception of what is a safe, healthy space, and demands that we re-imagine how and where we gather in public."

When discussing arts organizations, Murphy acknowledged that it might be some time before audiences can safely gather and experience art as they had before, particularly when it comes to the performing arts. However, he believes that structural improvements to venues, paired with thoughtful use of virtual spaces, could be a recipe for long-term success.

"Looking forward, our recommendations for arts organizations could include providing an airflow strategy that protects staff and visitors, while simultaneously emphasizing a shift towards virtual content production and decentralized educational programming," he said, noting that outdoor public spaces should also be explored for site-specific activities. "We recognize that asynchronous content can never replace the importance of gathering together in-situ to experience art. However, virtual content does create an opportunity to reach new audiences."

Engaging audiences virtually is something MASS Design has already put into practice itself. As part of the organization's CARES Act award, the group was also able to move forward with its 2019 Our Town grant from the Arts Endowment, which involves adapting a decommissioned



underground cistern in Murphy's hometown of Poughkeepsie, New York, into a community cultural facility, in partnership with the City of Poughkeepsie. "The funding helped us continue community conversations about the project, which take more planning without being able to easily meet in person during the pandemic," Murphy said. Like all of the organization's projects, the Our Town project aims to heal, in this case by redressing negative consequences of past urban renewal efforts, many of which aggravated Poughkeepsie's racial and economic divisions.

As the nation continues to weather the coronavirus pandemic, Murphy is hopeful that architecture and design will be recognized—and utilized—as powerful forces in helping society confront and overcome public health and other social challenges, both today and in the future.

"We know that buildings can hurt or they can heal, but architecture is often relegated as a passive backdrop," Murphy said. "If design is deployed as an active agent in the fight against the coronavirus pandemic, we can recapture trust over our public spaces and solve problems. The spatial choices we make today, during this emergency, might make or break our ability to survive both this crisis and the next one."

Paulette Beete is the social media manager in the Office of Public Affairs at the National Endowment for the Arts. Rebecca Sutton is the editor of American Artscape.

▲ Designed by MASS Design Group, the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama—the first national memorial to commemorate victims of lynching—has modified its space to address COVID-19 by installing UV lights to kill bacteria and introducing "no touch" options for certain interactive exhibits, among other safety measures. Photo courtesy of flickr user Ron Cogswell

▼ True Concord Voices and 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

