

ARTS

They want to get back to live shows. But performing arts groups also see future uses for online media.

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Social by nature and design, local theater companies and classical musicians have turned to online and video tools during the COVID-19 crisis as emergency measures for staying connected with their audiences.

While they're eager to sweat again in front of live crowds, they've grasped some new possibilities in electronic media.

The Milwaukee Repertory Theater produced a digital video of "Jacob Marley's Christmas Carol" featuring Lee E. Ernst for viewing during the holiday season. Milwaukee Ballet created "The Nutcracker: Short & Sweet," a 35-minute small-cast video production. Skylight Music Theatre artistic director Michael Unger directed and edited a full-length video musical, "Being Earnest," an adaptation that set Oscar Wilde's comedy in 1960s London.

The Milwaukee Symphony has just opened a season of 16 programs, all performed for online video viewing by subscribers.

Many groups have live-streamed conversations with artists, or produced videos that combine social and artistic elements, such as Milwaukee Chamber Theatre's "Season's Greetings" series.

Expanding video capabilities

Local leaders agree that on the other side of the pandemic, streaming and video on demand will play a role for Milwaukee performing arts groups.

The Milwaukee Symphony invested substantially in wiring and equipment for audio and video recording in its new concert hall, and the Marcus Performing Arts Center is upgrading its fiber-optic cable network and in-house video equipment as parts of its Uihlein Hall makeover. Skylight Music Theatre received a grant from UPAF's Kasey's Fund to upgrade its video recording equipment.

"While digital distribution cannot ever fully encapsulate the magic of live performances, there are numerous benefits to offering digital distribution of live productions and other education/engagement programs," Milwaukee Repertory Theater executive director Chad Bauman wrote in an email message.

"However, only time will tell if these temporary agreements will be extended and terms included in our long-term agreements without prohibitively high costs," he wrote.

Bauman listed some potential advantages of producing work digitally:

Reaching snowbirds. "We could now stream productions directly into their living rooms."

Increased accessibility, including people in rural communities and assisted living centers.

Additional exposure for the artists.

Lower price points, making digital work more accessible.

Additional compensation for artists.

Another revenue stream for theaters.

"All one would need to do is look at examples outside our country to see the incredible value of these innovations, such as NT Live from the National Theater in London," he wrote. "If American theater companies don't catch up, the worldwide digital landscape for performing arts will be dominated by other countries, which are more than happy to export their culture, maximize their viewership and open themselves up to new audiences."

Making granular decisions

But local arts leaders indicated the role of streaming and VOD is going to be a granular decision for each group.

For example, the Milwaukee Symphony is streaming to ticketholders all 16 concerts it plans to perform this season because the pandemic and city health regulations do not yet allow the orchestra to fill the new Bradley Symphony Center with subscribers.

But in a normal year, it would be "cost-prohibitive to go through the expense of a live concert, and then the additional expense of the streaming concert," said MSO president and CEO Mark Niehaus.

"We're going to have to make decisions based on mission and marketplace," he said. From what Niehaus can tell, "there's not an orchestra on this planet that has fully monetized video streaming."

"If creating accessibility to the content for people who can't come to the hall becomes part of our mission, then we will fund our mission, however we have to, because that's what we do," he said.

He sees video concerts as an arm of the MSO's marketing and promotional efforts.

"I think in many ways ... the video streaming of the future is going to be very much like (what) international touring was supposed to accomplish," Niehaus said. Orchestras lose money on tour, but make up for that with sponsorships, he said.

Even more important, much of the MSO's video effort is "going to revolve around educational material, because we are really good at that," Niehaus said. During the pandemic, the MSO has shifted its Arts in Community Education program with schools to a virtual effort, bringing music and other arts to schools throughout the region. Making an educational concert available online has more impact than a subscription classical concert, Niehaus said.

Likewise, Skylight Music Theatre anticipates using streaming and video for much of its educational programming going forward.

"For example, our touring production in the schools of KidsWrites has been all virtual this year," said artistic director Michael Unger in an email message. "We also captured last year's KidsWrites performance and that has been made available to schools as we prepare this year's version."

But Skylight fans won't have video-on-demand versions of musicals such as "Little Shop of Horrors" and "Evita." "For many of the musicals we produce, these stage productions were made into films. As a result, the digital, recording or streaming rights are held by film companies or other entities and not granted to theatre companies," Skylight executive director Jack R. Lemmon said in an email message.

Digital enlarges window of access

First Stage artistic director Jeff Frank speaks weekly with fellow theater-for-young-audiences leaders around the country. They've talked a lot about "the access that the virtual world provides to constituents that haven't had access previously," he said.

"So how do we keep that that window of access open in one way, shape or form?" he asked rhetorically.

During the pandemic, First Stage has tailored its online creations to the possibilities of virtual media, including its seven-week serial "The Quest for Solomon's Treasure" and the interactive "Escape From Peligro Island." Those approaches came from pondering how to use online forms to engage audiences.

"Too often in this world, whether it's (in) theater or not, we stop ourselves before we even begin," Frank said. "That we see limitations as stop signs, rather than parameters for creative thought and problem solving and ways to move forward."

Frank sees First Stage continuing to create 10- to 15-minute digital works that can reach new audiences. Given the complexities of serving both the public and school groups, Frank expects First Stage's transition to post-pandemic life to be a blend of live performances and digital work. For its outreach in school classrooms, it has developed a video catalog of workshops that students and teachers can use.

Milwaukee Opera Theatre producing artistic director Jill Anna Ponasik also sees a future for digital content in reaching new audiences.

"Developing work on video out of necessity has illuminated an accessibility challenge that can be met with video," she said. "I think some populations were kind of discovered that hadn't had their needs met by typical in-person theater."

MOT joined a coalition of small opera companies around the United States to create "Tales From a Safe Distance," an anthology of short operas based on Boccaccio's "Decameron" — a 14th-century collection of tales told by people waiting out the plague. Each company composed and videoed its own work. The 10 parts, including MOT's "Orsa Ibernata," were premiered over four weekends in October, with one ticket price covering everything.

"We learned the complexities of monetizing it and distributing it and the glitches in the system, like just making sure you have a box office that's working, that the user experience is easy and straightforward," Ponasik said.

She noted that as the pandemic continues and people engage more productions on screens, "the stakes are constantly getting higher in terms of what we might define as a quality digital product. So even the things that we might have put up on Zoom or released at the beginning of the pandemic, are ... no longer sufficient."

Community engagement

The Marcus Performing Arts Center sees video during the pandemic primarily as a tool of community engagement, said president and CEO Kendra Whitlock Ingram. But she was pleasantly surprised to see how much traffic some programs racked up.

Virtual Kidz Days at Home performances posted over the summer generated 46,740 views plus 8,490 downloads of related activity books. "There are actually people that are seeing our stuff for the first time ... only because they have access to it through this," she said.

As part of its mission of reaching out to new audiences, the Marcus created video programs for Children's Hospital and Froedtert that could be watched by children and adults in those hospitals.

Thinking ahead, Ingram imagines negotiating permission with a visiting concert performer to livestream their concert to schools and center in rural communities, where distance, cost and weather can all impede coming to downtown Milwaukee.

When it comes to reaching people who may have physical or financial access barriers, many performing artists are willing to collaborate, Ingram said.

However, she pointed out that after the pandemic, both presenters and performers will be in "a recovery mode financially for so many years." So discussions about valuable intellectual property will need to be respectful, she said.

While digital media may become an increasingly powerful tool for local performing arts groups, MSO exec Niehaus says such tools won't make him — or his colleagues — forget why they got into this trade:

"We're never going to replace the live experience," he said. "After the pandemic, we are going to be even more engaged in creating the live personal experience. ... The value of what we do is being illuminated right now because ... we can't do it."

Upcoming digital performances

Visit each individual group's website for info on these online shows coming up soon:

"Liederabend," beginning Feb. 11, Florentine Opera

"Principal Principle," Feb. 15-March 7, Next Act Theatre

"The Crucible," Feb. 19-March 7, First Stage Young Company

"Fortunate Sons" (staged concert reading), Feb. 19-20, Skylight Music Theatre

"The Sound" (with SistaStrings), Feb. 19-28, Milwaukee Opera Theatre

"In the Key of Now: Michael Mizrahi," Feb. 20, Present Music

"Eight Is Enough," Feb. 20, Milwaukee Symphony

"To The Pointe," Feb. 25-March 7, Milwaukee Ballet

"The Island," beginning March 1, Milwaukee Chamber Theatre

"Neat," March 19-April 11, Renaissance Theaterworks

"Ella Fitzgerald: First Lady of Song," April 27-May 23, Milwaukee Repertory Theater

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