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The arts and COVID-19: striving for survival

By Sophie Braccini



Image provided

canceled its entire 2020 season, while Town Hall Theatre had to cancel the last shows of its "Cherry Orchard" production, and reimburse bought tickets.

Cal Shakes decided early-on to entirely call off its 2020 season, a decision that director Eric Ting and his team found incredibly hard to make, but that could not be avoided given the uncertainty of times and months of work that are required to put on a show. Sixty percent of the staff is furloughed while others have reduced their hours.

Local venues like movie theaters are silenced, doors are closed, but local artists have, when possible, moved to the world of YouTube videos, Facebook live, and Zoom sessions to at least stay in the heart and soul of their community, if not to make any kind of decent income. On the night of the last THT "Cherry Orchard" show, with sparse audiences due to social distancing, three cameras were set in the theater and the production was filmed. With that video, THT decided to move online and start a new virtual business model. Artistic Director Susan Hovey said she was pleased with the number of people who purchased tickets for the online show. The theater company also realized how much the community cared when the majority of season ticket holders did not ask for full refunds of their tickets. Cal Shakes was thankful for the same extraordinary support from their patrons.

Another example of online innovation during this trying period of time is Perlmutter's new gift shop called "Small Gifts," which offers a collection of unique objects, paintings or jewelry made by local artists. She also offers the opportunity to potential patrons to simulate displaying art she sells in their own homes to evaluate how it would fit; she invites the community on the first Friday evening of the month for an online party of art discussion, discovery and music.

In spite of the online action, Town Hall Theatre staff has cut their hours - one is now a volunteer. Operating costs are still there, although the landlord is easing the burden of rent. The group has applied to the Lafayette Community Foundation for a grant. That foundation as well as others supporting the arts are expanding their criteria to accept grant requests to fund operating costs. Cal Shakes' also confirmed that the company is applying for such funding.

Both organizations are holding fundraisers, "Day of Giving" on April 21 for THT and "Be a Beacon" for Cal Shakes. The Orinda Theatre, also caught in the grips of a high fixed cost and no revenue paradigm, is asking supporters to buy gift cards to be used at future movie viewings.

Theater summer camps are typically a source of revenue for live theater companies, and both Cal Shakes and THT are offering online theater camps this summer. Cal Shakes Clive Worsley noted that his company is brainstorming with other Shakespeare training groups all over the world to design a curriculum that is both interactive, requires off-screen time and is meaningful. They are now preparing the classes for either online or in-person sessions or a combination of the two, due to the uncertainty of the times. As Perlmutter puts it, all we have now is uncertainty, taking days one at a time.

Everyone remains confident and reasonably optimistic. Worsley believes that in fact this crisis will help people understand the importance of the art in their lives and will spur even stronger support and funding in the future.

To support these businesses, visit: calshakes.org, www.jenniferperlmuttergallery.com, www.orindamovies.com, www.townhalltheatre.com.

The majority of the local art industry has never been known to build opulent profit margins; sheltering in place might well be the final blow for many arts businesses. Community support may make all the difference for these theaters, galleries, and local artists. Many have found online tools to continue connecting with their audience, but generating life-saving revenue is proving more challenging.

One of the first venues to close was Jennifer Perlmutter's gallery at 3620 Mt. Diablo Blvd. in Lafayette. The painter and gallery owner has been benefitting from a larger pop-up space at the corner of Moraga Road and Mt. Diablo Boulevard, so when the order to close up was issued in March she realized that her historic first space could no longer be viable and she closed it with a heavy heart. Following suit, both the Moraga and Orinda movie theaters closed their doors to movie goers. Cal Shakes

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